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Georgia Tech lands biotech research 'star'

By [ANDREA JONES](#)

The Atlanta Journal-Constitution
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A biotech "rock star" who headed a \$200 million research center at the University of Buffalo is joining the faculty at Georgia Tech and bringing a band of 19 scientists with him.

Jeffrey Skolnick, a scientist in systems biology — a field that uses supercomputers to break down information in the genetic code in a quest to create new drugs — also will bring \$1.5 million in grant funding to Tech.



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Jeffrey Skolnick is widely admired but has been controversial at the University of Buffalo.

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What is Bioinformatics?

"Bioinformatics is an integration of mathematical, statistical and computer methods to analyze biological, biochemical and biophysical data," Georgia Tech says on its Web site. But the site goes on to say, "Bioinformatics is a bright new field. This is exemplified in the lack of a standard definition for the word." Tech offers this sampling of other definitions:

Skolnick's arrival in Buffalo, N.Y., made headlines. The Center of Excellence in Bioinformatics, which he led, was regarded as a symbol of hope for the struggling upstate economy. He was regarded as the academic equivalent of a celebrity.

But his 3 1/2 years at the school were marked by clashes with university officials, and he was known to be looking for a new home for his work.

Gary Schuster, dean of Tech's College of Sciences, called Skolnick, who is 52, an "acclaimed figure" in the highly competitive field of bioinformatics. He said the researcher and his team "will be making important discoveries that will pay off in societal benefits" in the fight against diseases like cancer.

Skolnick is the 51st scholar who has been recruited to the state by the Georgia Research Alliance, a nonprofit corporation made up of business and university leaders that fosters the growth of biotech start-ups.

The group will pay for part of Skolnick's \$2 million endowed chair at Tech, said the research alliance's president, Michael Cassidy. The state will pick up a \$5 million tab for computers and specialized laboratory equipment Skolnick needs for his research. He will be paid a salary of \$225,000 a year, Tech officials said.

Contentious tenure

Recruited to Buffalo by New York leaders including U.S. Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton, Skolnick was called a "superstar" by Gov. George Pataki. He was paid the highest salary of all university employees, \$345,000 annually, the Buffalo News reported. He was even compared to Drew Bledsoe, the quarterback recruited by the Buffalo Bills about the same time.

Soon after he arrived, though, Skolnick was in the news for seeking a university job for his wife. He went through three administrative assistants in eighteen months, the Buffalo newspaper reported, and he ruffled feathers in the university administration by publicly complaining about his supercomputers — made by Dell, a major university partner.

While no one questioned his talents as a scientist, officials from the university eventually took away most of Skolnick's administrative responsibilities, the newspaper reported.

"His tenure's been disappointing in the sense that [he] was trumpeted as a rock star, and there weren't many concerts to attend," New York Assembly Majority Leader Paul A. Tokasz (D-Cheektowaga), told the News last week.

Skolnick said in a telephone interview Tuesday that the university and the city of Buffalo set "unrealistically high" expectations for him. The city hoped the biotech center would bring instant life to an economically depressed area, a feat that proved difficult, Skolnick said.

"There were expectations set that I had nothing to do with," Skolnick said. "I never wanted to be king."

Skolnick said he is looking forward to collaborating with scientists at Georgia Tech, Emory University and the University of Georgia when he arrives in Atlanta in January. He also is planning to start a biotech company using some of the technology he and his team have developed.

Eagerness on all sides

Georgia Tech and other research institutions have placed increasing emphasis on biotechnology in recent years.

"Georgia Tech already has an extraordinary program," Skolnick said. "I am looking forward to being a piece of that."

Skolnick's research focuses on the sequencing of the human genome, using computational data to try to accelerate the discovery of new drugs.

Skolnick will move to Georgia with his wife, Rachel, and their 17-month-old triplets.

He graduated summa cum laude from Washington University in St. Louis and holds a master's degree and doctorate in chemistry from Yale University. Before moving to the University of Buffalo, he directed the Danford Plant Science Center in St. Louis.

Cassidy said Skolnick's research fits strategically with the goals of the Georgia Research Alliance.

"We are very, very confident in Jeff's abilities," Cassidy said. "We are all looking forward to working with him."

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