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'The Razor' slices, dices life's basic data

Andrea Jones - Staff
Thursday, February 9, 2006

It weighs a whopping 35 tons, is attached to five miles of winding copper cable, and, researchers hope, will help lead to major medical breakthroughs in the fight against cancer and other deadly diseases.

Jeffrey Skolnick, Georgia Tech's newest star scientist, showed off the "The Razor," Wednesday. It's an IBM supercomputer that will anchor Tech's new \$8.5 million Center for the Study of Systems Biology, which Skolnick will head.

The computer, housed in the BellSouth building in Midtown Atlanta, is the 41st fastest computer in the world, unseating a computer at CalTech by being able to perform more than 8.5 trillion --- that's trillion --- calculations per second, Tech officials said. It is the second fastest computer at a university in the Southeast, trailing only one at Virginia Tech.

Skolnick and his team of 20 scientists, who were recruited to Tech from the University of Buffalo by the nonprofit Georgia Research Alliance in December, will use the powerful supercomputer to analyze complex DNA and proteins to learn more about cancer genes. Their eventual goal is to create more targeted drugs for the disease, he said.

Wayne Clough, the president of Georgia Tech, said the new technology and computational modeling it makes possible are "pushing the frontiers of science."

Tech's recruitment of Skolnick was part of a statewide push to become a leading center of biotechnology.

Systems biology, Skolnick's field, melds the power of computing with the basics of biology. It focuses on how complex living systems interact with one another, essentially, Skolnick says, to "make sense of the mess." The field uses the huge amount of data from the sequencing of the human genome.

Michael Cassidy, the president of the Georgia Research Alliance, which has brought more than 50 scientific scholars to the state, said the new center and its research are "critical to the future health of Georgians and Americans."

Skolnick 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.

Tech's center is funded through grant money from the state, the Georgia Research Alliance and the National Institutes of Health.

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