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Francis Collins

Recipient, 2008 Inamori Ethics Prize

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Francis Collins
Recipient of the 2008 Inamori Ethics Prize

Born on April 15, 1950, Dr. Francis Sellers Collins was raised on a farm in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia, where he was home-schooled until the sixth grade. His father had a PhD in English and his mother was a playwright. During his years in high school and college, Collins aspired to be a chemist. This soon became his life path; in 1970, he earned a BS in chemistry from the University of Virginia and in 1974, he earned a PhD in physical chemistry from Yale University. However, Collins' time at Yale inspired a change in interests to biochemistry, and he soon enrolled at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, earning an MD in 1977 and serving residency there.

Collin's academic career continued on with remarkable success. In 1981, Collins returned to Yale and was named a Fellow in Human Genetics. In 1984, he published the influential work "Directional Cloning of DNA Fragments at a Large Distance from an Initial Probe: A Circularization Method" with Dr. Sherman Weissman. He joined the University of Michigan as professor of internal medicine and human genetics, also in 1984. There, he became known as a "gene hunter," using a technique he called "positional cloning," which is essentially a method for gene identification. His method later proved invaluable in identifying genes for cystic fibrosis, neurofibromatosis, Huntington's disease, and multiple endocrine neoplasia type 1.

Collins' contribution to the Human Genome Project stands out as a major accomplishment, in not only his career, but also to science in general. In 1993, Collins became the director of the National Human Genome Research Institute (NHGRI) at the National Institutes of Health (NIH.) There he directed the International Human Genome Sequencing Consortium and created the division of intramural research. Under his leadership, the Human Genome Project carried out the stated goal of mapping the full human genome and still remains one of the largest exploratory ventures in science. In 2000, Collins was joined by President Clinton and Craig Venter (credited with being one of the first to sequence the human genome) to announce the working draft of the results of the project. That same year Collins and Venter were honored with the "Biography of the Year" title from A&E Network and in 2005 were named two of "America's Best Leaders" by *U.S. News & World Report* and the Harvard Center for Public Leadership. The Human Genome

Project was completed in 2003, but the findings will take scientists years of research to properly analyze.

Collins has always approached genetics and its research from an ethical standpoint, taking into strong consideration the legal and social implications of genetic knowledge. He is a strong advocate against genetic discrimination and a strong supporter of the Genetic Information Nondiscrimination Act. Collins has also made it a priority to have the information uncovered by the Human Genome Research Project freely available to scientists in order to advance research, develop new cures, and expand understanding of genetics.

On July 8, 2009, President Obama nominated Collins as Director of the National Institutes of Health. He was unanimously confirmed and approved by the Senate. As a result of this appointment, Collins included in *The New Republic's* November 2011 list of "Washington's Most Powerful, Least Famous People" and had a guest appearance on the *Colbert Report* to discuss his time at NIH, as well as personalized medicine and stem cell research. At NIH, Collins directs twenty-seven institutes and centers and eighteen thousand people in the institute's efforts. Because of his frustration with the declining efforts in the pharmaceutical industry, Collins led the creation of the National Center for Advancing Translational Sciences at NIH. The center opened in October 2011.

Despite his extensive workweek, Collins finds time to engage his musical talents. He is a guitarist and vocalist for a rock band of NIH scientists and executives called "The Directors," who compose their own music and play at NIH events. At the first day of TEDMED in Washington, D.C. in April 2012, he performed with singer Jill Sobule. Collins' love of music is matched by a love of motorcycles and he can often be seen riding to work on one.

Collins is also an outspoken person about his faith. While many believe religion and science to be at odds, Collins finds that one reinforces the other. In 2006, he published *The Language of God: A Scientist Presents Evidence for Belief*, which outlines his viewpoints. On PBS' *Religion and Ethics News Weekly*, Collins stated, "Watching our own DNA instruction book emerge letter by letter ... provided a profound sense of awe unlike anything I could've imagined. It was, after all, reading the language of God." He later said, "There is no conflict between being an absolutely rigorous scientist and being a person of faith." In 2009, he founded the BioLogos Foundation in order to "contribute to the public voice that represents the harmony of science and faith." He was the president until he was appointed director of NIH.

In recognition of his accomplished life, Collins has received numerous awards and prizes. Collins was nominated to be among USA Science and Engineering Festival's Nifty Fifty Speakers by the National Institutes of Health. Collins received the Kilby International Award in 1993, the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 2007, and the National Medal of Science in 2008, and has been elected to the Institute of Medicine and the National Academy of Sciences.