

# GCRI: forging transatlantic alliances in science

An ocean may divide them, but the Atlantic is proving to be no barrier to German-American collaboration, thanks to New York's German Center for Research and Innovation. Established in 2010, the centre was founded on the principle that internationalising science and research is the key to competitiveness and sustainable economic growth. *Research Features* met up with GCRI director, **Dr Joann Halpern** to find out more.

**L**ocated in the heart of New York City, the German Center for Research and Innovation (GCRI) serves as a shop window for German scientific excellence, presenting the northern European powerhouse to the American market as a land of research and innovation. Housed in a tall, elegant building on the United Nations Plaza, it also acts as a hub where leaders in science, the humanities, and technology can come together, make connections and, ultimately, work collaboratively.

GCRI's director, Dr Joann Halpern oversaw the creation of the centre, from the seed of an idea, to the buzzing hive of cross-cultural creativity it is today. She spoke to *Research Features* about the centre's mission to foster transatlantic collaboration, and some of the exciting projects that have emerged as a result.

*Could you tell us about the background and aims of the German Center for Research and Innovation?*

The German Center for Research and Innovation (GCRI) New York was established as one of five German Houses of Science and Innovation worldwide. The other houses are located in Moscow, New Delhi,

São Paulo and Tokyo, and are part of the German government's Strategy for the Internationalization of Science and Research. Our primary goals are to present Germany to the North American market as a land of research and innovation; enhance dialogue between academia and industry; create a forum for the initiation and enhancement of transatlantic projects; and provide an information platform for the German research and innovation landscape.

One of the ways we address the aforementioned goals is to convene scientific workshops, symposia, panel discussions, and lectures that examine cutting-edge research and explore solutions to global problems that integrate different understandings of science, the economy and society. These events bring together international experts and partners from research institutions, industry and government. We also organize workshops for postdocs, graduate students and other young researchers to facilitate engagement with German institutions and support them in their careers.

*What is your role within the centre?*

I started working at GCRI in December 2009 and my initial role was – in collaboration with a very small and passionate team – to build

the centre from scratch. It was an exhilarating and sometimes challenging experience. In addition to managing the GCRI team, I am responsible for strategic planning, building and expanding a global network in the science and technology space, developing new collaborations between Germany and North America in academia and industry, establishing the GCRI Foundation, our centre's fundraising arm, preparing board meetings, making decisions about relevant topics for our events, newsletter, and online presence, and giving presentations in North America and Germany on a variety of topics, including entrepreneurship, innovation ecosystems, science diplomacy, funding opportunities and international careers.

*Can you tell us about some of the interesting projects that have emerged as a result of GCRI's work?*

One of our recent projects was the creation of the GCRI Foundation/DAAD-RISE Scholarship for sophomores. Our foundation raised enough money to send five sophomores to conduct research in labs in Germany each summer. The individuals who receive the scholarships are students at universities in the United States or Canada who are majoring in a STEM field. The idea behind the scholarship is to get students interested in Germany and German research early in their studies. Germany has a robust, high-quality research environment, but many undergraduates are not aware of the numerous scientific opportunities Germany has to offer. A summer program enables students to learn more about Germany and start to develop global networks in their field. We also believe that a positive summer experience will encourage them to return later in their careers. These individuals also have the opportunity to share their experiences with classmates once they return to campus. The German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD), which has decades of experience evaluating scholarship applications, has generously agreed to have its experts evaluate the GCRI Foundation-RISE scholarship applications.

A more global outcome of our work is in the field of nanotechnology. A few years ago, in collaboration with our colleagues at the Center for Nanointegration Duisburg-Essen (CENIDE) and the University Alliance Ruhr, we organized an event entitled *Nanovation New York: Discovering the Invisible Frontier*. After an afternoon workshop with representatives from US and German universities, a US-German nanotechnology summer program, ►

Image from the German Center for Research and Innovation's NanoArt exhibition. The show featured art taken directly from the labs of German research institutions. Photo courtesy of the Center for Nanointegration Duisburg-Essen (CENIDE)

**Cross-border cooperation provides not only an expanded knowledge base, but also extraordinary opportunities for scientific advancement**







The German House, located on New York's United Nations Plaza. It includes the German Center for Research and Innovation, as well as other German organizations

## Germany clearly understands that the internationalisation of science and research is the key to competitiveness and sustainable economic growth



From left to right:  
Prof. György Buzsáki  
Dr. Joann Halpern  
Prof. Ursula Staudinger  
Prof. Eric Kandel (Nobel Laureate), at GCRI panel discussion entitled The Aging Brain



Dr Joann Halpern with Germany's president, Frank-Walter Steinmeier. At the time of the photo he was Germany's foreign minister

a graduate student exchange program and a professor exchange program were initiated. That evening we organized a nanotechnology panel discussion followed by the opening of the NanoArt exhibition. Images for the exhibit were provided by a range of German institutions, including CENIDE, several Max Planck Institutes, Nanosystems Initiative Munich, the Technical University of Dortmund and a Leibniz Institute. This exhibition was so popular that it travelled to the University of California, Berkeley, MIT, the Goethe Institute in Chicago, as well as the German Houses for Research and Innovation in Tokyo and Moscow. In addition, over twenty articles were written about the NanoArt exhibit. Here is a link to some of the images that we exhibited: <http://www.germaninnovation.org/news-and-events/photo-gallery/gallery?id=29>

### *Why is the internationalisation of science and research important?*

The internationalisation of science and research is important for a number of reasons. I will address a few of these here. The ability to solve the world's most pressing challenges, such as climate change, securing our future energy supply, and combating poverty and infectious diseases, to name a few, requires a concerted, interdisciplinary

effort among the world's leading researchers. Cross-border cooperation provides not only an expanded knowledge base, but also extraordinary opportunities for scientific advancement. National science systems do not have the capacity or financial resources to undertake the significant investment required for large-scale research facilities. The translation of new scientific findings into new technologies is also significantly enriched through global collaboration. Germany clearly understands that the internationalisation of science and research is the key to competitiveness and sustainable economic growth.

By creating and cultivating a multidisciplinary ecosystem conducive to the cross-fertilization of ideas, the GCRI has been instrumental in fostering partnerships between North America and Germany and encouraging interdisciplinary research publications. Through its web presence and events, GCRI brings together scientists, business leaders, political leaders as well as media representatives to discuss and debate topics of critical importance to the world in which we live.

*In 2004, you co-founded Knowledge Transfer Beyond Boundaries, an NGO with*

### *projects in Cameroon, Nigeria, and Yemen. Why is the sharing of knowledge important to you personally?*

Throughout my life, I have been interested in how supportive, interactive learning environments are created – for students, teachers, professors, employees, managers, NGOs, athletes and others. As a professor, I have made it a priority to create a classroom setting in which my students feel inspired to participate in discussions and share their insights.

Within an organisational context I have found that the sharing of knowledge significantly enhances the productivity and motivation of my team. When employees have easy access to the internal resources and expertise within the organization, they can achieve results more efficiently. In addition, being part of a functional, inclusive and collaborative team boosts enthusiasm and encourages employees to exchange knowledge, breaking down the silo mentality (when several departments or groups within an organisation resist sharing information or knowledge with other individuals in the same organisation) that can have a negative impact on morale.

There are so many different ways to share knowledge - explicitly sending information,

providing access to information created by others and verbal/digital conversations, to name a few. Sharing not only allows new information and knowledge to be produced, but it can also be reused. This, in turn, leads to more informed decision making.



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German Center for Research and Innovation - New York



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