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David Sheinberg, Ph.D.
Search Committee Chair
Department of Neuroscience
Brown University
Providence, RI

18 April 2012

Dear Dr. Sheinberg and members of the search committee,

I am writing this letter in strong support of Dr. Diana Sarko for the faculty position available at your institution. Dr. Sarko has been a postdoctoral fellow working under my supervision for the past two years, and as a consequence I feel that I am in a good position to comment on her suitability for this position.

Without hesitation, I can say that Dr. Sarko ranks among the top postdoctoral fellows I have interacted with during my career, and that her potential for success in an academic setting is almost limitless. She possesses a winning combination of intelligence, insight, creativity, motivation and compassion. Since joining my laboratory, I have been overwhelmed with Diana's energy and enthusiasm for the research endeavor, for the discovery process, and for communicating science to others. Her work ethic is amazing, and her technical and conceptual insights have driven the lab's research agenda forward. She has voraciously tackled the literature, and not content to stop here, has used these readings as a springboard for building an already-impressive bibliography that extends well beyond the immediate focus of her research question. Perhaps most impressive in our discussions has been her ability to see to the essence of a question, and her facility in manipulating and synthesizing ideas. I speak with Diana as if I am speaking with a peer, an observation that speaks volumes to her maturity and intellect. In addition to these skills, Diana also possesses an engaging personality, one that not only facilitates her interactions with others in the lab, but which extends to the large neuroscience community at Vanderbilt (and beyond). In short, she is fabulously collaborative and collegial. I cannot overemphasize the importance of such "people skills" in the context of her chosen career path, where she will be able to easily serve as the director of her own successful research laboratory and teach with excellence in both biology and neuroscience-based curricula.

In addition to interacting with Diana in the laboratory setting, I have also had the opportunity to see her in a more teaching-oriented setting – specifically in a journal club in Hearing and Multisensory Processes that I co-direct. In these discussions Diana has distinguished herself. She is always well prepared, having not only read the materials being discussed but also having read some of the supporting literature. She is an active and vocal participant, never hesitating to

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ask questions and demonstrating a probing curiosity and keen intellect. When tasked with leading the discussion, Diana distinguished herself by not only providing a polished and professional presentation, but also by raising important issues of methodological or conceptual significance. It is clear from these insightful questions that she thinks as a scientist thinks, not being content to accept the “story” in the absence of the relevant data. This past semester I asked her to deliver a lecture for me in a graduate level course entitled “Systems Neuroscience.” The topic of this lecture was multisensory integration, and Diana did an exceptional job. The feedback from the students was uniformly laudatory, and further reinforced my view of her as having someone with the requisite skills to flourish in an academic setting.

In my laboratory, Dr. Sarko has quickly become a driving force. With only general guidance from me, she has developed a research question and agenda that not only complements the lab’s research focus, but that also extends this agenda into the ethological realm by pushing the laboratory to ask questions (and use stimuli) that are of real world relevance. Although these were questions that I always intended to pursue, it is only with Dr. Sarko’s expertise that my laboratory can now comfortably make this transition. During her time in my lab, I have perhaps been most impressed by her independence. Although she is often in my office seeking advice (something that I greatly appreciate), these conversations are typically very short because she immediately grasps the important issues, and has no difficulty in going back into the lab and implementing the solutions. In short, it is my expectation that Dr. Sarko will become one of the leaders in the research community of her chosen area of interest, and that she will distinguish herself in the teaching arena.

In summary, I recommend Dr. Diana Sarko with strong enthusiasm for this position. In my opinion, she is an exceptional young scientist and educator, and I fully expect her to continue on a path leading her to becoming one of the leading figures in her chosen discipline. Although I recognize that the current call is for someone with computational experiences, I think that Diana’s tremendous breadth of knowledge in comparative, anatomical and physiological approaches, coupled with her recent emphasis in looking at information transfer via changes in response reliability and other measures, make her worth considering seriously for this position. As the Director of a Neuroscience Institute at Vanderbilt, I can tell you that I am delighted to have her as a member of our community, and that our environment is enriched as a function of her presence. If I can offer any additional information in support of this letter, please do not hesitate to contact me via phone (615-936-6709) or e-mail (mark.wallace@vanderbilt.edu).

Sincerely,



Mark T. Wallace, Ph.D.
Professor of Hearing & Speech Sciences, Psychology and Psychiatry
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