

An open library of human kinase domain constructs for automated bacterial expression

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Kinases play a critical role in cellular signaling pathways. Human kinase dysregulation has been linked to a number of diseases, such as cancer, diabetes, and inflammation, and as a result, much of the effort in developing treatments (and perhaps 30% of all current drug development effort) has focused on shutting down aberrant kinases with targeted inhibitors. While insect and mammalian expression systems are frequently utilized for the expression of human kinases, they cannot compete with the simplicity and cost-effectiveness of bacterial expression systems, which historically had found human kinases difficult to express. Following the demonstration that phosphatase coexpression could give high yields of Src and Abl kinase domains in inexpensive bacterial expression systems [1], we have performed a large-scale expression screen to generate a library of His-tagged human kinase domain constructs that express well in a simple automated bacterial expression system where phosphatase coexpression (YopH for Tyr kinases, lambda for Ser/Thr kinases) is used. Starting from 96 kinases with crystal structures and any reported bacterial expression, we engineered a library of human kinase domain constructs and screened their coexpression with phosphatase, finding 68 kinases with yields greater than 2 mg/mL culture. All sequences and expression data are provided online at <https://github.com/choderalab/kinase-ecoli-expression-panel>, and the plasmids are in the process of being made available through AddGene.

I. INTRODUCTION

Kinases play a critical role in cellular signaling pathways. Perturbations to these pathways due to mutation, translocation, or upregulation events can cause one or more kinases to become highly active and cease responding normally to regulatory signals, often with disastrous consequences. Kinase dysregulation has been linked to a number of diseases, such as cancer, diabetes, and inflammation. Cancer alone is the second leading cause of death in the United States, accounting for nearly 25% of all deaths; in 2015, over 1.7 million new cases were diagnosed, with over 580,000 deaths [2]. Much of the effort in developing treatments (and perhaps 30% of all current drug development effort) has focused on shutting down aberrant kinases with targeted inhibitors.

The discovery of imatinib, which specifically targets the Abl kinase dysregulated in chronic myelogenous leukemia (CML) patients to abate disease progression, was transformative in revealing the enormous therapeutic potential of selective kinase inhibitors, kindling hope that this remarkable success could be recapitulated for other cancers and diseases [3]. While there are now 31 FDA-approved selective kinase inhibitors, these molecules were approved for target-

ing only 13 out of ~500 human kinases, with the vast majority targeting just a handful of kinases; the discovery of therapeutically effective inhibitors for other kinases has proven remarkably challenging.

The ability to probe human kinase biochemistry, biophysics, and structural biology in the laboratory is essential to making rapid progress in the understanding of kinase regulation and the design of selective inhibitors. While human kinase expression in baculovirus-infected insect cells can achieve high success rates [4, 5], it cannot compete in cost or convenience with bacterial expression. While a survey of 62 full-length non-receptor human kinases found that over 50% express well in *E. coli* [4], there is often a desire to express and manipulate only the soluble kinase domains, since these are the molecular targets of therapy for targeted kinase inhibitors and could be studied even for receptor-type kinases. While removal of regulatory domains can negatively impact expression, coexpression with phosphatase was shown to greatly enhance bacterial kinase expression in Src and Abl tyrosine kinases, presumably by ensuring that kinases remain in an unphosphorylated inactive form [1].

The protein databank (PDB) now contains over 100 human kinases that—according to the PDB data records—were expressed in bacteria. Since bacterial expression is often complicated by the need to tailor expression and purification protocols individually for each protein expressed, we wondered whether a simple, uniform, automatable expression and purification protocol could be used to express a large number of human kinases to produce a convenient bacterial expression library to facilitate kinase research and selective inhibitor development. As a first step toward this goal, we developed a structural informatics pipeline to use

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65 available kinase structural data and associated metadata
 66 to select constructs from available human kinase libraries
 67 to clone into a standard set of vectors intended for phospho-
 68 phatase coexpression. Automated expression screening in
 69 Rosetta2 cells found that 68 human kinase domains express
 70 with yields greater than 2 µg/mL, which should be usable for
 71 biochemical, biophysical, screening, and structural biology
 72 studies.

73 All code and source files used in this project can
 74 be found at <https://github.com/choderalab/kinase-ecoli-expression-panel>, and a convenient
 75 sortable table of results can be viewed at
 76 http://choderalab.github.io/kinome-data/kinase_constructs-addgene_hip_sgc.html.

79 II. METHODS

80 A. Semi-automated selection of kinase construct sequences 81 for *E. coli* expression

82 1. Selection of human protein kinase domain targets

83 Human protein kinases were selected by querying the
 84 UniProt API for any human protein with a domain containing
 85 the string "protein kinase", and which was manually
 86 annotated and reviewed (i.e. a Swiss-Prot entry). The query
 87 string used was:

88 taxonomy:"Homo sapiens (Human) [9606]" AND
 89 domain:"protein kinase" AND reviewed:yes

90 Data was returned by the UniProt API in XML format and
 91 contained protein sequences and relevant PDB structures,
 92 along with many other types of genomic and functional
 93 information. To select active protein kinase domains, the
 94 UniProt domain annotations were searched using the regular
 95 expression ^Protein kinase(?!; truncated)(?!;
 96 inactive), which excludes certain domains annotated
 97 "Protein kinase; truncated" and "Protein kinase; inactive".
 98 Sequences for the selected domains were then stored. The
 99 sequences were derived from the canonical isoform as
 100 determined by UniProt.

101 2. Matching target sequences with relevant PDB constructs

102 Each target kinase gene was matched with the same gene
 103 in any other species where present, and UniProt data was
 104 downloaded for those genes also. The UniProt data included
 105 a list of PDB structures which contain the protein,
 106 as well as their sequence spans in the coordinates of the
 107 UniProt canonical isoform. This information was used to
 108 filter out PDB structures which did not include the protein
 109 kinase domain; structures were kept if they included
 110 the protein kinase domain sequence less 30 residues at
 111 each end. PDB coordinate files were then downloaded for
 112 each PDB entry. The coordinate files contain various meta-
 113 data, including an EXPRESSION_SYSTEM annotation, which

114 was used to filter PDB entries to keep only those which include
 115 the phrase "ESCHERICHIA COLI". The majority of PDB
 116 entries returned had an EXPRESSION_SYSTEM tag of "ES-
 117 CHERICHIA COLI", while a small number had "ESCHERICHIA
 118 COLI BL21" or "ESCHERICHIA COLI BL21(DE3).

119 The PDB coordinate files also contain SEQRES records,
 120 which should contain the protein sequence used in the crystallography or NMR experiment.
 121 According to the PDB documentation (<http://deposit.rcsb.org/format-faq-v1.html>),
 122 "All residues in the crystal or in solution, including residues
 123 not present in the model (i.e., disordered, lacking electron
 124 density, cloning artifacts, HIS tags) are included in the
 125 SEQRES records." However, we found that these records
 126 are very often misannotated, instead representing only the
 127 crystallographically resolved residues. Since expression
 128 levels can be greatly affected by insertions or deletions
 129 of only one or a few residues at either terminus [?], it is
 130 important to know the full experimental sequence, and
 131 we thus needed a way to measure the authenticity of a
 132 given SEQRES record. We developed a crude measure by
 133 hypothesizing that a) most crystal structures would be
 134 likely to have at least one or a few unresolved residues at
 135 one or both termini and b) the presence of an expression
 136 tag (which is typically not crystallographically resolved)
 137 would indicate an authentic SEQRES record. To achieve
 138 this, unresolved residues were first defined by comparing
 139 the SEQRES sequence to the resolved sequence, using
 140 the SIFTS service to determine which residues were not
 141 present in the canonical isoform sequence. Then regular
 142 expression pattern matching was used to detect common
 143 expression tags at the N- or C-termini. Sequences with a
 144 detected expression tag were given a score of 2, while those
 145 with any unresolved sequence at the termini were given
 146 a score of 1, and the remainder were given a score of 0.
 147 This data was not used to filter out PDB structures at this
 148 stage, but was stored to allow for subsequent selection of
 149 PDB constructs based on likely authenticity. Also stored for
 150 each PDB sequence was the number of residues extraneous
 151 to the target kinase domain, and the number of residue
 152 conflicts with the UniProt canonical isoform within that
 153 domain span.

156 3. Plasmid libraries

157 As a source of kinase DNA sequences, we purchased three
 158 kinase plasmid libraries: the [addgene Human Kinase ORF kit](#), a kinase library from the Structural Genomics Consortium (SGC), Oxford (<http://www.thescg.org>), and a kinase library from the [PlasmID Repository](#) maintained by
 159 the Dana-Farber/Harvard Cancer Center. The aim was to
 160 subclone the chosen sequence constructs from these plasmids,
 161 though we did not use the same vectors. Annotated
 162 data for the kinases in each library was used to match them
 163 against the human protein kinases selected for this project.
 164 A Python script was written which translated the plasmid
 165 ORFs into protein sequences, and aligned them against the

target kinase domain sequences from UniProt. Also calculated were the number of extraneous protein residues in the ORF, relative to the target kinase domain sequence, and the number of residue conflicts.

4. Selection of sequence constructs for expression

Of the kinase domain targets selected from UniProt, we filtered out those with no matching plasmids from our available plasmid libraries and/or no suitable PDB construct sequences. For this purpose, a suitable PDB construct sequence was defined as any with an authenticity score > 0, i.e. those derived from SEQRES records with no residues outside the span of the resolved structure. Plasmid sequences and PDB constructs were aligned against each target domain sequence, and various approaches were then considered for selecting a) the sequence construct to use for each target, and b) the plasmid to subclone it from. Candidate sequence constructs were drawn from two sources - PDB constructs and the SGC plasmid library. The latter sequences were included because the SGC plasmid library was the only one of the three libraries which had been successfully tested for *E. coli* expression.

For most of the kinase domain targets, multiple candidate sequence constructs were available. To select the most appropriate sequence construct, we sorted them first by authenticity score, then by the number of conflicts relative to the UniProt domain sequence, then by the number of residues extraneous to the UniProt domain sequence span. The top-ranked construct was then chosen. In cases where multiple plasmids were available, these were sorted first by the number of conflicts relative to the UniProt domain sequence, then by the number of residues extraneous to the UniProt domain sequence span, and the top-ranked plasmid was chosen.

This process resulted in a set of 96 kinase domain constructs, which (by serendipity) matched the 96-well plate format we planned to use for parallel expression testing. We therefore selected these construct sequences for expression testing.

A sortable table of results can be viewed at http://choderelab.github.io/kinome-data/kinase_constructs-addgene_hip_sgc.html.

5. Other notes

While much of this process was performed programmatically using Python, many steps required manual supervision and intervention. We hope eventually to develop a fully automated software package for the selection of expression construct sequences for a given protein family, but this was not possible within the scope of this article.

B. Expression testing

For each target, the selected construct sequence was subcloned from the selected DNA plasmid. Expression testing was performed by the QB3 MacroLab (QB3 MacroLab, University of California, Berkeley, CA 94720) [<http://qb3.berkeley.edu/qb3/macrolab/>], a core facility offering automated gene cloning and recombinant protein expression and purification services.

Each kinase domain was tagged with a N-terminal His10-TEV and coexpressed with either the truncated YopH164 for Tyr kinases or lambda phosphatase for Ser/Thr kinases. All construct sequences were cloned into the 2BT10 plasmid, an AMP resistant ColE1 plasmid with a T7 promoter, using LIC (ligation-independent cloning). The inserts were generated by PCR using the LICv1 forward and reverse tags on the primers (LICv1 FW= TACTTCCAATCCAATGCA; LICv1 RV= TTATCCACTTCCAATGTTATTAA). Gel purified PCR products were LIC treated with dCTP. Plasmid was linearized, gel purified and LIC treated with dGTP. LIC-treated plasmid and insert were mixed together and transformed into XL1-Blues for plasmid preps.

Expression was performed in Rosetta2 cells grown with Magic Media (Invitrogen autoinducing medium), 100 µg/mL of carbenicillin and 100 µg/mL of spectinomycin. Single colonies of transformants were cultivated with 900 µL of MagicMedia into a gas permeable sealed 96-well block. The cultures were incubated at 37°C for 4 hours and then at 16°C for 40 hours while shaking. Next, cells were centrifuged and the pellets were frozen at -80 °C overnight. Cells were lysed on a rotating platform at room temperature for an hour using 700 µL of SoluLyse (Genlantis) supplemented with 400 mM NaCl, 20 mM imidazole, 1µg/mL pepstatin, 1µg/mL leupeptin and 0.5 mM PMSF.

For protein purification, 500 µL of the soluble lysate was added to a 25 µL Ni-NTA resin in a 96-well filter plate. Nickel Buffer A (25 mM HEPES pH 7.5, 5% glycerol, 400 mM NaCl, 20 mM imidazole, 1 mM BME) was added and the plate was shaken for 30 minutes at room temperature. The resin was washed with 2 mL of Nickel Buffer A. Target proteins were eluted by a 2 hour incubation at room temperature with 10 µg of TEV protease in 80 µL of Nickel Buffer A per well and a subsequent wash with 40 µL of Nickel Buffer A to maximize protein release. Nickel Buffer B (25 mM HEPES pH 7.5, 5% glycerol, 400 mM NaCl, 400 mM imidazole, 1 mM BME) was used to elute TEV resistant material remaining on the resin. Untagged protein eluted with TEV protease was run on a LabChip GX II Microfluidic system to analyze the major protein species present. Samples of total cell lysate, soluble cell lysate and Nickel Buffer B elution were run on a SDS-PAGE for analysis.

We are currently making the library of kinase domain constructs, generated in this work, available for distribution through the plasmid repository Addgene. In the meantime, requests for plasmids can be directed to requests@choderelab.org.

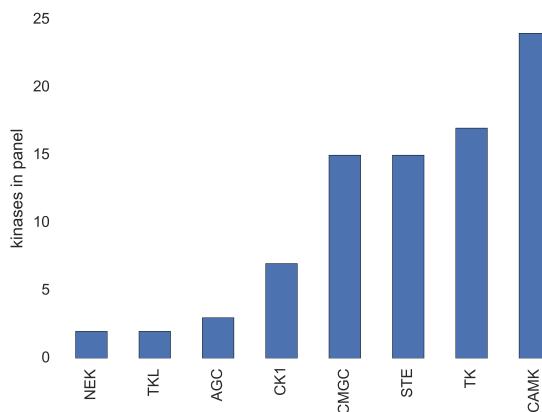


FIG. 1. Distribution of kinases in expression test panel by family. Histogram of the 96 kinases in the expression test panel, separated out by kinase family.

III. RESULTS

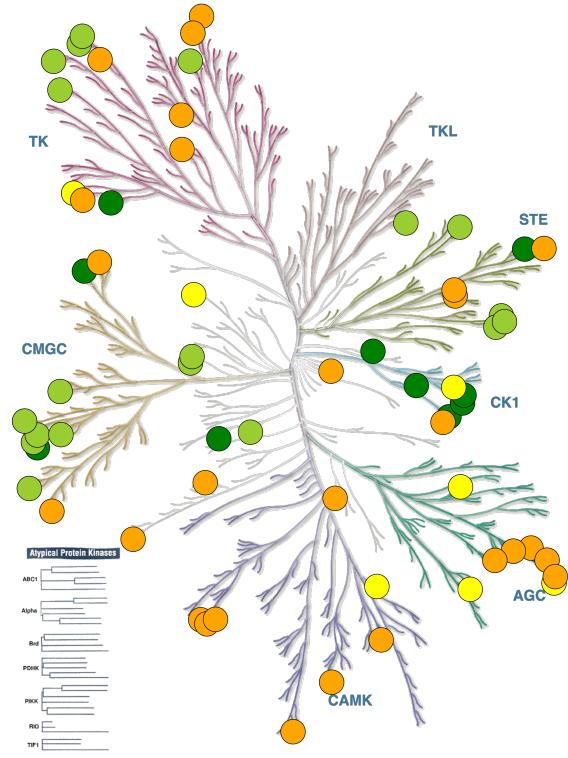
A. PDB mining results

Selecting the kinases and their constructs for this expression trial was primarily on the basis of expected success: these specific kinase constructs were bacterially expressed and purified to a degree that a crystal structure could be solved. While the expression protocols used to produce protein for crystallographic studies were likely tailored to maximize expression for individual proteins, we considered these kinases had a high chance of expressing in our semi-automated expression pipeline where the same protocol is utilized for all kinases. Statistics of the number of kinases obtained from the PDB mining procedure are shown in Figure 1. Surprisingly, the most highly sampled family was the CAMK family, suggesting that other researchers may have found this family particularly amenable to bacterial expression.

B. Small-scale kinase expression test in *E. coli*

A panel containing the 96 kinase domain constructs selected through our semi-automated method, was tested for expression in *E. coli*. From this initial test, 68 kinase domains showed detectable expression (yield of more than 2 ng/ μ l eluate) (Table 1). While the initial panel of 96 kinases was

well-distributed across kinase families, the final most highly expressing (yield of more than 100 ng/ μ l eluate) were not as evenly distributed (Figure 2). The 17 most highly expressing kinases showed relatively high purity after elution, though we note that eluting via TEV site cleavage results in a quantity of TEV protease in the eluate (Figure 3).



"Illustration reproduced courtesy of Cell Signaling Technology, Inc. (www.cellsignal.com)"

FIG. 2. Representation of kinase domain expression results on phylogenetic tree. Dark green circles represent kinases with expression above 250 ng/ μ l eluate. Light green circles represent kinases with expression between 100 and 250 ng/ μ l eluate. Yellow circles represent kinases with expression between 50 and 100 ng/ μ l eluate. Orange circles represent kinases with any expression up to 50 ng/ μ l eluate. Image made with KinMap: <http://www.kinhub.org/kinmap>.

IV. DISCUSSION

Bacterial coexpression of kinases appears to be a viable approach for studying a wide variety of human kinase domain constructs. We hope that other laboratories find these resources useful in their own work.

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kinase expressed	phosphatase co-expressed	concentration (ng/ μ l eluate)
MK14_HUMAN_D0	Lambda	530
VRK3_HUMAN_D0	Lambda	506
GAK_HUMAN_D0	Lambda	485
CSK_HUMAN_D0	Truncated YopH164	469
VRK1_HUMAN_D0	Lambda	467
KC1G3_HUMAN_D0	Lambda	422
FES_HUMAN_D0	Truncated YopH164	330
PMYT1_HUMAN_D0	Lambda	285
MK03_HUMAN_D0	Lambda	273
STK3_HUMAN_D0	Lambda	257
DYR1A_HUMAN_D0	Lambda	256
KC1G1_HUMAN_D0	Lambda	256
MK11_HUMAN_D0	Lambda	238
MK13_HUMAN_D0	Lambda	238
EPHB1_HUMAN_D0	Truncated YopH164	217
MK08_HUMAN_D0	Lambda	214
CDK16_HUMAN_D0	Lambda	202
EPHB2_HUMAN_D0	Truncated YopH164	188
PAK4_HUMAN_D0	Lambda	179
CDKL1_HUMAN_D0	Lambda	174
SRC_HUMAN_D0	Truncated YopH164	165
STK16_HUMAN_D0	Lambda	155
MAPK3_HUMAN_D0	Lambda	141
PAK6_HUMAN_D0	Lambda	135
CSK22_HUMAN_D0	Lambda	134
MERTK_HUMAN_D0	Truncated YopH164	126
PAK7_HUMAN_D0	Lambda	110
CSK21_HUMAN_D0	Lambda	109
EPHA3_HUMAN_D0	Truncated YopH164	106
BMPR2_HUMAN_D0	Lambda	106
M3K5_HUMAN_D0	Lambda	105
KCC2G_HUMAN_D0	Lambda	100
E2AK2_HUMAN_D0	Lambda	87
MK01_HUMAN_D0	Lambda	84
CSKP_HUMAN_D0	Lambda	76
CHK2_HUMAN_D0	Lambda	61
KC1G2_HUMAN_D0	Lambda	57
DMPK_HUMAN_D0	Lambda	57
KCC2B_HUMAN_D0	Lambda	53
FGFR1_HUMAN_D0	Truncated YopH164	46
KS6A1_HUMAN_D1	Lambda	43
DAPK3_HUMAN_D0	Lambda	30
STK10_HUMAN_D0	Lambda	28
KC1D_HUMAN_D0	Lambda	28
KC1E_HUMAN_D0	Lambda	26
NEK1_HUMAN_D0	Lambda	25
CDK2_HUMAN_D0	Lambda	23
ABL1_HUMAN_D0	Truncated YopH164	19
DAPK1_HUMAN_D0	Lambda	18
DYRK2_HUMAN_D0	Lambda	18
HASP_HUMAN_D0	Lambda	17
FGFR3_HUMAN_D0	Truncated YopH164	17
EPHB3_HUMAN_D0	Truncated YopH164	13
SLK_HUMAN_D0	Lambda	12
KCC2D_HUMAN_D0	Lambda	12
NEK7_HUMAN_D0	Lambda	10
PHKG2_HUMAN_D0	Lambda	10
VRK2_HUMAN_D0	Lambda	9
AAPK2_HUMAN_D0	Lambda	8
AURKA_HUMAN_D0	Lambda	8
MARK3_HUMAN_D0	Lambda	8
KAPCA_HUMAN_D0	Lambda	7
STK24_HUMAN_D0	Lambda	6
VGFR1_HUMAN_D0	Truncated YopH164	4
KCC4_HUMAN_D0	Lambda	3
KCC1G_HUMAN_D0	Lambda	2
KCC2A_HUMAN_D0	Lambda	2
FAK2_HUMAN_D0	Truncated YopH164	2

TABLE I. Expression results by kinase. Yield (determined by Caliper GX II quantitation of the expected size band) reported in ng/ μ l eluate, where total eluate volume was 120 μ l from 900 μ L bacterial culture.

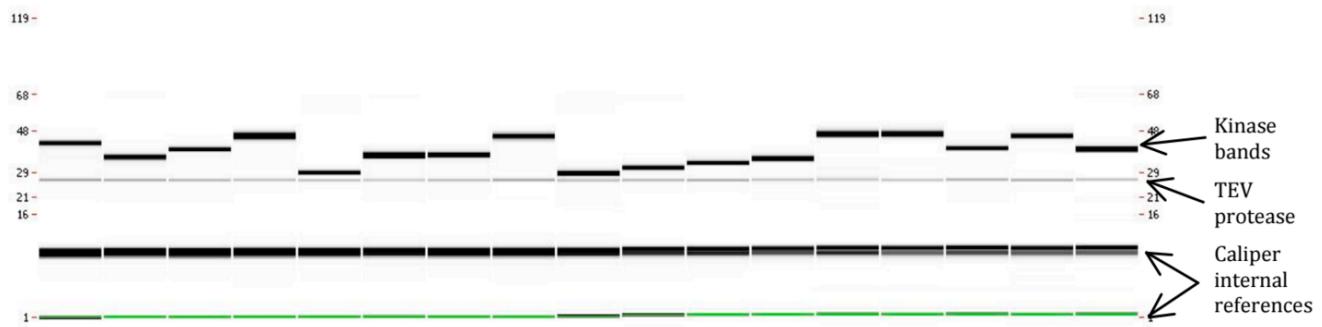


FIG. 3. Synthetic gel image rendering of highest expressing kinases. Caliper GX II synthetic gel image rendering of kinases expressing > 200 ng/ μ l eluate from microfluidic capillary electrophoresis quantitation.