A novel universal support for deoxyribo- and ribonucleic acid synthesis has been developed. The support, constructed from 1,4-dimethoxy catechol, represents an improvement over existing universal supports because of its ability to cleave and deprotect under mild conditions in standard reagents. Because no nonvolatile additives are required for cleavage and deprotection, the synthesized oligonucleotides do not require purification prior to use in biochemical assays. Using reverse phase HPLC and electrospray mass spectroscopy, it was determined that oligonucleotides synthesized on the universal support (UL1) 3'-dephosphorylate quickly (9 h in 28–30% ammonium hydroxide (NH₄OH) at 55 °C, 2 h in 28–30% NH₄OH at 80 °C, or <1 h in ammonium hydroxide/methylamine (1:1) (AMA) at 80 °C). Oligonucleotides used as primers for the polymerase chain reaction (PCR) assay were found to perform identically to control primers, demonstrating full biological compatibility. In addition, a method was developed for sintering the universal support directly into a filter plug which can be pressure fit into the synthesis column of a commercial synthesizer. The universal support plugs allow the synthesis of high-quality oligonucleotides at least 120 nucleotides in length, with purity comparable to non-universal commercial supports and ~50% lower reagent consumption. The universal support plugs are routinely used to synthesize deoxyribo-, ribo-, 3'-modified, 5'-modified, and thioated oligonucleotides. The flexibility of the universal support and the efficiency of 3'-dephosphorylation are expected to increase the use of universal supports in oligonucleotide synthesis.

Introduction

Oligonucleotides are typically synthesized on a solid support such as controlled pore glass (CPG) or polystyrene (PS). The 3'-oxygen of the first nucleoside is preattached to the solid support by a base-labile tether such as a succinate or hydroquinone. These linkers were adopted early in the development of oligonucleotide synthesis because standard phosphoramidite monomers contain a protected 3'-phosphorus which must be removed postsynthesis for the oligonucleotide to be biologically active. Finding a convenient method for complete 3'-dephosphorylation proved difficult. Thus, solid supports are preloaded with the first nonphosphorylated nucleoside to eliminate the need for downstream 3'-dephosphorylation.

Laboratories that produce synthetic oligomers, therefore, must manage a library of solid supports to enable the synthesis of commonly produced oligomers, including standard deoxyribo-, 3'-modified, 5'-modified, and ribooligomers. In addition, many laboratories routinely use several nucleobase protection strategies, so they must maintain large libraries of compatible supports including isobutyryl (iBu), acetyl (Ac), dimethylformamidyl (DMF), phenoxyacetyl (PAC), and tert-butyl phenoxyacetyl.
Managing libraries is difficult and necessitates accurate handling or the use of an automated system so that supports can be tracked and correctly loaded into the appropriate position on a synthesizer. Incorrect loading results in an oligomer with a 3′-error that has reduced or no biological functionality. A universal support is particularly important for use in high-throughput oligonucleotide synthesis where manually loading supports in high-density titer plates is time-consuming, error-prone, and cumbersome. Universal supports are also expected to reduce side reactions that take place on the preattatched nucleoside of standard supports because the universal support does not have a preattatched nucleoside.

The need for a universal synthesis support that increases flexibility and reduces 3′-sequence errors has drawn the attention of several groups. A recent review reported that today’s commercially available universal supports have not met the promise of increased flexibility and error reduction due to inefficient dephosphorylation or the requirement for cleavage and deprotection steps that are incompatible with established production lines. For example, one universal support requires the addition of lithium chloride (LiCl) for efficient dephosphorylation, which must be removed by precipitation or purification prior to use. Another support requires harsh treatment with AMA for 17 h at 55 °C, thus limiting its compatibility with production pipelines that produce material more sensitive to harsh alkali treatment.

One promising universal support (Universal Support II) is commercially available. This support does not require nonvola- tile additives for 3′-dephosphorylation; therefore, desalting or other purification is unnecessary. One disadvantage of this universal support is incomplete cleavage of oligonucleotides from the support matrix caused by a side reaction that occurs during dephosphorylation. This side reaction produces a minor (∼20%) phosphorylated, uncleaved species. Though it is possible to compensate for reduced yield by increasing the amount of starting material, larger reagent excesses and increased reaction times for coupling may be necessary to prevent reduced oligo quality. Another problem is that cleaving the linker from the support is favored by an organic base (such as 2–3 M methanolic ammonia), but removing protecting groups from the nucleobases (deprotection) is favored by an aqueous base (such as NH₂OH). Since cleavage and deprotection steps are favored under slightly orthogonal conditions, they cannot be easily combined into a single procedure using a standard reagent such as NH₂OH or AMA.

The catechol-based universal support described in this work has several characteristics that should enable greater incorporation into academic and industrial laboratories: (1) the oligonucleotide and linker cleave from the support quickly (<1 h); (2) dephosphorylation reactions are quantitative in standard cleavage and deprotection reagents; (3) the linker is compatible with a variety of synthesis chemistries, especially the synthesis of DNA, most 5′- and 3′-modifications, and RNA; and (4) the linker enables the synthesis of high-quality oligonucleotides that are functional in biochemical reactions without any postsynthesis cleanup or purification.

Results and Discussion

(a) Initial Strategy. After screening several unsuccessful candidates for a universal support, we chose to produce a dephosphorylator prepared from commercially available catechols. Catechol (1,2-benzenediol or pyrocatechol) and its derivatives, such as catechin and urushiol, are found naturally in woody plants, including mahogany and poison oak leaves. Purified by distillation of catechin, catechols are used industrially as dyeing agents, as a photographic developing chemical, and in electroplating. Investigating catechol derivatives as universal dephosphorylators was not an obvious choice since catechol-based agents such as 3-phenoxyphenolphosphorochloridate 1 (Scheme 1) are known to be highly reactive phosphorysters. Compound 1 reacts with aliphatic alcohols to yield cyclic triesters 2 which are readily hydrolyzed into the corresponding ring-opened phosphate diester 3. The O-hydroxyphenyl esters 3 were found to be stable under acidic and basic conditions, although the catechol groups could be oxidatively removed. Treated with an excess of bromine in a neutral aqueous buffer, the diester 3 is converted to a monoester 4.

Initial attempts to produce a universal linker prepared from commercially available catechols, such as catechol, 3-fluoro-

![Diagram](image-url)
catechol, 3-nitrocatechol, and 3-methylcatechol, confirmed previous observations regarding the base stability of species 3 when tethered to an oligonucleotide. Early results from universal supports based on these compounds were discouraging, showing little or no catechol-mediated 3'-phosphate elimination under standard deprotection conditions. However, investigation into methoxy catechols produced encouraging results.

(b) Reactions with 3-Methoxycatechol and 1,4-Dimethoxycatechol. 3-Methoxycatechol 5 (Scheme 2), when tethered to an aminopropyl support 7, was the first catechol-based compound to show any dephosphorylation. Cleavage and deprotection of oligonucleotides synthesized using this linker tethered to CPG 7 produced ~80% release of 3'-hydroxyligonucleotides in 3 h at 80 °C in NH₄OH.

The first steps in the sequence of events were concomitant and rapid deblocking of the cyanoethyl protection groups and cleavage of the carbamate tether. HPLC analysis showed that the ratio of the two resulting phosphate diesters A and B was roughly 1:1. These compounds underwent an intramolecular cyclization followed by release of 3'-hydroxyligonucleotide 9 and elimination of the cyclic catecholphosphate 10 (Scheme 3). One of the isomers, presumably A, disappeared rapidly (by HPLC analysis) with a proportional appearance of the corresponding 3'-native oligonucleotide 9. After deprotection for 1 h, equilibrium was reached between species A and B, found respectively in about a 2:5 ratio. Complete disappearance of species A and B took 3 h. The faster disappearance of species A led to the next step of investigating 1,4-dimethoxycatechol for a quicker release of native oligonucleotides.

A series of reactions was therefore performed using the 1,4-dimethoxycatechol-based universal linker 14 (Scheme 2). 1,4-Dimethoxycatechol 11 was synthesized from 2,5-dimethoxybenzaldehyde in four steps, according to published literature.

(c) Utilization of the Universal Linker on a Synthesizer. We chose to sinter the support directly into the filter matrix of the reaction column. Sintering the CPG in the synthesis plugs gave several advantages, including improved control over CPG “splashing” out of wells when used on multitwell synthesizers and improved reagent retention for long reaction times due to the high density of the filter matrix. Filters were made from a slurry of aminopropyl CPG 7 and polypropylene powder that were mixed, poured into a cylindrical mold, rapidly sintered at 190 °C, then cooled and demolded. Once the bare CPG was embedded in the filter matrix, 1,4-dimethoxyprocathecol 12 was reacted with embedded aminopropyl CPG 13 which yielded 14 for testing in oligonucleotide synthesis.


To test amenability of the plug and universal support to oligonucleotide synthesis, a 9mer thymidine homopolymer (T9) was synthesized and cleaved from the support at room temperature in standard cleavage/deprotection reagents, NH₄OH and AMA. Complete cleavage (relative to the same oligo synthesized on a standard CPG support) was achieved in about 15 min in AMA. In the milder cleavage reagent (NH₄OH), complete cleavage was achieved in about 45 min. These cleavage times were indistinguishable from those obtained when using a standard long-chain alkyl amine (LCAA) CPG support. A plot of full length product yield versus time is shown in Figure 1.

(d) Characterization of Dephosphorylation Kinetics on the Universal Support. We used another T9 oligonucleotide to empirically determine the rate and extent of dephosphorylation in standard cleavage/deprotection reagents. T9 oligos were synthesized and cleaved from the support at room temperature for 15 min in AMA and for 45 min in NH₄OH, then deprotected in the cleavage reagent in sealed tubes at the times and temperatures indicated in Table 1. If dephosphorylation was not complete, it was clearly identified by an increase of 232 atomic mass units (amu) on a mass spectrometer (MS traces are available in the Supporting Information). Relative abundance of catecholated and dephosphorylated oligonucleotide was determined by measuring the peak amplitude of the two species on LC-MS. Example LC data are shown in the Supporting Information for a cleavage reaction in NH₄OH at 55 °C for 1 and 17 h. Confirmation of the mass of the catecholphosphate T9 homopolymer during the kinetic studies, described in greater detail in the next section, supports the putative structure of 14.

Identity of the T9 oligomer was obtained by electrospray mass spectroscopy. Identity traces showed the predicted monoisotopic half-mass of phosphorylated and dephosphorylated species. Shown in the Supporting Information is the electrospray MS trace showing the monoisotopic half-mass of the T9 homopolymer after dephosphorylation in NH₄OH for 1 h. The expected monoisotopic half-mass for a T9 oligomer is 1337.2 amu and increases to 1453.9 amu for a T9 homopolymer with 3’-catechol.

To fully dephosphorylate the T9 homopolymer, the reaction was carried out in NH₄OH for 45 min, then deprotected by treatment with AMA for 2h. The resulting mass was determined by electrospray MS, giving a mass of 1453.9 amu, consistent with a fully dephosphorylated T9 homopolymer.

FIGURE 1. Time required for complete cleavage of a deoxythymidine T9 homopolymer from the catechol-based universal support.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>reagent</th>
<th>temp (°C)</th>
<th>time (h)</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NH₄OH</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>65</td>
<td>6</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<td>65</td>
<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>80</td>
<td>&lt;1</td>
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TABLE 1. Summary of LC-MS Data Showing the Time Required to Fully Dephosphorylate the T9 Homopolymer
phosphate still attached. Because 3′-phosphorylated contaminants can be identified and quantitated using this method, a profile was easily generated showing the amount of time required to fully dephosphorylate oligonucleotides in common deprotection reagents. A summary of the mass results for each deprotection time point is shown along with the time needed to fully dephosphorylate in the corresponding reagent in Table 1. The time required for dephosphorylation is similar to the time required for complete removal of dG(ibu) protection groups, demonstrating that the universal support will not present a bottleneck during deprotection.

(e) Selection of Hydroxyl Protection. Oligonucleotide monomers and supports are typically protected with a dimethoxytrityl (DMT) or monomethoxytrityl (MMT) group. These protection groups are typically favored due to their quick removal in mild acid, thus reducing possible side reactions such as depurination. Another advantage during synthesis is the colorimetric assays that can be performed on the orange (DMT) or yellow (MMT) cation, which is used to monitor reaction progress. In this case, however, both DMT and MMT protection were not suitable because of their lability on the aromatic catechol. Instead, TMS protection was found to be more stable or dephosphorylation is unnecessary, the oligonucleotides may be used directly in biological reactions. It should also be noted that the proposed mechanism for oligonucleotide cleavage from the support (to produce 9 and 17 in Scheme 4) was tested to determine whether cleavage followed the proposed route on the N-alkylphenoxy carbamate or whether cleavage was driven through nucleophilic attack on the adjacent carbonyl. When the N-alkylphenoxy carbamate is replaced with a N,N-dialkylphenoxy carbamate tether, there is little or no cleavage of oligonucleotide, even when treated for up to 16 h at 80 °C in NH₄OH. This gives more evidence in support of the proposed mechanism.

(g) Characterization of Longmer Synthesis on UL1 Support. Due to the emergence of assays that rely heavily on high-quality, long oligonucleotides such as molecular inversion probes (MIPs) and gene synthesis, the linker was tested to determine suitability for the routine production of 40, 80, and 120 nt long oligonucleotides. The oligonucleotides were synthesized on the UL1 support and were compared to another commercially available nucleoside-specific support. Synthesis on the commercially available support was performed using the synthesis cycle recommended by the column manufacturer.


whose reagent consumption was roughly 50% higher than that required by the UL1 universal support. The quality of the oligonucleotides was analyzed by HPLC (chromatograms are available in the Supporting Information). Little or no difference in quality was detected using the two different supports, although comparable quality was achieved on the UL1 universal support with ∼50% lower reagent consumption. Synthesis of 120 nt oligonucleotides required ∼9 h on both UL1 and the standard support.

(h) Synthesis of RNA on UL1 Supports. In general, the synthesis of RNA oligomers presents a special challenge due to the need for protection of the 2'-hydroxyl. In addition to possible steric hindrance during monomer coupling, 2'-protection with 2'-O-tert-butylidemethylsilyl (TBDMS) or triisopropylsilyl-lyoxymethyl (TOM) may also cause problems during deprotection of the nucleobases, resulting in strand cleavage. Several approaches have been taken to alleviate this problem, most notably by substituting aqueous NH\(_4\)OH or AMA with a mixture of NH\(_2\)OH and ethanol (3:1), methylamine, or anhydrous ethanolic or methanolic ammonia. Another approach is to substitute standard nucleobase protection with more labile groups such as acetyl, dimethylformamidyl, phenoxyacetyl, or tert-butyl phenoxyacetyl. This reduces the time required for nucleobase deprotection, making premature removal of silyl protection groups less problematic. The nucleobase deprotection procedure used in our laboratories for routine RNA synthesis represents a successful tradeoff between deprotection time and the quality of finished products. For routine RNA synthesis, we have interchangeably used 2'-TBDMS and TOM-protected monomers and have removed nucleobase protecting groups using NH\(_2\)OH and ethanol (3:1) for 10 h at 55 °C.

Conclusion

Universal supports have moved the industry incrementally closer to adopting universal chemistries. However, the benefits of universal supports have not been fully realized because previously published universal supports require cleavage and dephosphorylation conditions that are cumbersome and/or limit the biological activity of the oligonucleotide. Because no widely adoptable universal support is available, laboratories are still forced to maintain a library of 3'-specific supports, to manually load them onto the correct position of a synthesizer, or to use a robotic liquid handler to load them into synthesis columns. These workarounds can be time-consuming, expensive, and error-prone.

The universal support presented in this paper is compatible with DNA, RNA, most 3'- and 5'-modifications, and phosphorothioate synthesis, without the need for additives to achieve efficient dephosphorylation. Thus, deoxyribo- and ribonucleic acids can be used directly after synthesis without the need for purification. Utilizing the UL1 support will also circumvent quality problems caused by n-branched oligonucleotides since branching is reported to originate from reactivity of the preattached nucleoside on a standard support. UL1 also makes it possible to produce 3'-degenerate oligonucleotides without having to manually add 2, 3, or 4 different 3'-specific supports into synthesizer columns. HPLC traces of oligonucleotides produced on the UL1 show that the oligonucleotides are of comparable purity to the control sequences synthesized on other commercially available synthesis columns (chromatograms are shown in the Supporting Information). The heat-sintered CPG filters also greatly reduced reagent consumption, reduced problems with the support “splashing” during synthesis, increased flexibility in synthesizer setup, and caused less error when loading synthesizer columns.

Experimental Section

Preparation of Aminopropyl CPG. Aminopropyl CPG 7 was prepared by reacting CPG (75/200, 1000 Å pore size) with aminopropyltriethoxysilane (APTES) following published procedures.\(^{36}\)

Preparation of Cyclic 1,4-Dimethoxycatechol. 1,4-Dimethoxycatechol 11 was synthesized following published procedures\(^{33}\) from commercially available catechol. Cyclic 1,4-dimethoxycatechol 12 was prepared from 1,4-dimethoxycatechol following published procedures,\(^{37}\) except N,N'-carbonyldimidazole was substituted for phosgene. Product 12 was confirmed on a TLC plate eluted in dichloromethane (DCM). The differential migration of 12 (retention factor \((R_s) = 0.9\)) compared to 11 allowed easy confirmation of the product. The product was also confirmed by RP-HPLC.

Preparation of 100 nmol 1,4-Dimethoxycatechol-Based Cyndrical Frits. Cylindrical frits 13 were prepared by embedding aminopropyl CPG 7 in polypropylene. First, high-density polypropylene (125 g) and aminopropyl CPG 7 (85 g, 10 mol/g, 1000 Å pore size, 75/200 micron particle size) were mixed thoroughly, allowing uniform dispersion of the inorganic material into the thermoplastic resin. The mixture was poured into cylindrical cavities in an aluminum plate and milled to produce the desired size and dimensions. The plate was heated at 190 °C for 15 min and cooled prior to releasing the frits from the mold. The density of the frit prevented reagents from diffusing into the frit prior to application of a pulse of inert gas. Therefore, during coupling and capping steps, where two reagents were added to the frit, a hold step before chamber pressurization allowed premixing of the two reagents prior to entry into the resin.

A 1 L two-neck flask was equipped with a flush-closing PTFE drain valve and was loaded with 1000 100 nmol frits 13 in suspension with 100 mL of DCM. A solution of 200 mg of 1,4-dimethoxyxypocatechol 12 in 10 mL of tetrahydrofururan (THF) was added, and the flask was agitated overnight. A ninhydrin test was used to detect disappearance of a primary amine, and additional 1,4-dimethoxyxypocatechol 12 was added until the primary amine was undetectable. The frits were drained and washed successively with acetonitrile and DCM, then resuspended in a solution of 100 mL of DCM and 0.8 mL of TMS/imidazole. After shaking for 4 h, the frits were drained, washed with methanol, and dried under vacuum.

Prior to synthesis, a blunt-ended steel pin was used to insert the frits into open-ended polypropylene synthesis columns. After completing the synthesis, the frits were removed from the column by applying top pressure on the plug with a steel pin.

Synthesis of Oligonucleotides on UL1 Universal Supports. Synthesis of oligonucleotides was performed on a commercially available 48-position oligonucleotide synthesizer. Empty support columns and 100 nmol synthesis supports 14 were provided by CTGen Inc. Synthesis supports were pressure fit by hand into empty columns, which were then inserted into the carousel of the synthesizer. Deblocking solution, 3% trichloroacetic acid (TCA) in DCM, was used for removal of the TMS protecting group. Two

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150 µL aliquots were dispensed into each column, followed by a 1 s pressurization at 5 psi with a 60 s hold time after each dispensation to ensure complete TMS removal prior to the first coupling step. TCA was then drained from the column by applying a short (5 s) burst of argon. Next, a single wash was performed with 180 µL of dry acetonitrile. Coupling was performed by a single, near-simultaneous dispensation of 30 µL of 5-benzylthio-1H-tetrazole activator (BTT) and 35 µL of phosphoramidite. Therapure phosphoramidites, 5'-dimethoxytrityl-N-benzoyl-2'-deoxyadenosine-3'-(2-cyanoethyl)-(N,N-diisopropyl)phosphoramidite, 5'-dimethoxytrityl-N-benzoyl-2'-deoxyxycytidine-3'-(2-cyanoethyl)-(N,N-diisopropyl)phosphoramidite, 5'-dimethoxytrityl-N-isobutyryl-2'-deoxyguanosine-3'-(2-cyanoethyl)-(N,N-diisopropyl)phosphoramidite, and 5'-dimethoxytrityl-2'-deoxythymidime-3'-(2-cyanoethyl)-(N,N-diisopropyl)phosphoramidite were purchased in 2 L bottles and dissolved in dry acetonitrile to a final concentration of 50 mM. Coupling was allowed to proceed for 20 s to ensure stepwise coupling efficiencies of at least 99%. Phosphoramidites and BTT were drained from the column. Next, the newly formed phosphate linkage was oxidized to a pentavalent phosphate using 0.02 M iodine in THF/H2O. Concentration of 50 mM. Coupling was allowed to proceed for up to 17 h with measurements taken at 1 h increments from 0 to 8 h, the last time point was checked after 17 h. Deprotection was carried out in NH4OH and then separately in AMA. Samples from early time points were kept frozen at −80 °C until deprotection was complete for all conditions. Oligonucleotides were then lyophilized in a vacuum centrifuge on medium heat, resuspended in 100 µL of diH2O, and quantitated using the method previously described. Samples were analyzed for purity and mass by LC-MS (performed at the Stanford University Mass Spec Core Facility). The mass values obtained for samples run on the mass spectrometer were within 0.1% of the expected values, corresponding to the error typically seen in electrospray LC-MS.

Dephosphorylation kinetics were determined by measuring the relative sizes of peaks that correspond to the phosphorylated and dephosphorylated species over the time course specified above. Relative abundance was measured by peak amplitude, and identity was determined by the monoisotopic half-mass (m/z). Phosphorylated species could also be readily distinguished on RP-HPLC chromatograms since these species have longer retention times than dephosphorylated species.

PCR with Catechol-Synthesized Oligonucleotide Primers. Forward (F Primer_1719_pUC19_384; 5'-GATAC GGGAG GCGT ACCAT-3') and reverse primer (R Primer_2102_pUC19_384; 5'-GATAA CACTG CGGCC AACTT-3') were made on the universal linkers and compared with control primers synthesized on standard supports.

PCR was carried out on a 96-well thermal cycler using the following temperature profile: [94 °C 10 min], 30 cycles of [94 °C 30 s, 55 °C 45 s, 72 °C 2 min], [72 °C 7 min]. The reaction was performed in a total volume of 20 µL using 1× PCR Buffer II, 1.25 mM MgCl₂, 5U AmpliTaq gold DNA polymerase, 1 ng pUC19 plasmid, and 3.2 pmol of each forward and reverse primer. Primers were synthesized in-house at Stanford Genome Technology Center (SGTC) using a commercially available 48-position synthesizer using the chemistry cycle already described. PCR products were analyzed on a nondenaturing 0.9% agarose gel. PCR amplification produced a 384 bp band on the gel. Control primers were purchased from a commercial oligonucleotide house. A 50 bp DNA sizing ladder was used to determine amplicon size.

Acknowledgment. We thank Mr. Bruce Erickson at Certified Scientific Instruments for graciously providing the 48-position oligonucleotide synthesizer. We thank Ms. Lindsay Comeaux and Dr. Allis Chien from the Vincent Coates Foundation Mass Spectrometry Laboratory, Stanford University Mass Spectrometry (http://mass-spec.stanford.edu), for all of the LC-MS analysis. We thank Dr. Lester Roberts and Mr. Paul Va´rva from SGTC for engineering support during this work, and Dr. Kara Juneau and Dr. Henrik Persson from SGTC for helpful discussion about the linker chemistry. Research was supported by the National Institutes of Health (Grant PO1HG000205) and CTGen Inc.

Supporting Information Available: MS traces and LC chromatograms showing identity and purity of dephosphorylated oligos and quality of longerme synthesis on UL1 supports are shown. This material is available free of charge via the Internet at http://pubs.acs.org.