Maximizing Yield for Attachment-dependent Cells with the Corning® CellCube® System

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Introduction
Scientific progress in the cell and gene therapy field will accelerate clinical cell therapy programs in the coming years6,13. As cell therapy trials advance from pre-clinical research to late-stage trials, cell culture platforms will need to meet increasing demands for cell yield1,15. To meet demand, traditional production methods that rely on planar cell culture vessels will require improvements in scale-out output5,8, which can be quite tedious as a manual process7-9. The challenge, then, becomes establishing an adherent culture platform that can scale from relatively small needs of pre-clinical studies through Phase I/II trials and into Phase III. As a result, the ability to scale-out will ease the transition from process development to manufacturing8,11.

The Corning CellCube system provides a simple, compact, and scalable method for mass culture of attachment-dependent cells (Figure 1). The CellCube module provides a large, stable surface area for the immobilization and growth of attachment-dependent cells. Each CellCube module consists of a series of parallel, polystyrene plates joined to create thin, sealed laminar flow spaces between adjacent plates. CellCube modules are available in three basic sizes (Table 1). The 10- and 25-layer modules are comprised of 10 and 25 culture plates, respectively, while the 100-layer module is made up of four 25-layer modules series. As gas-conditioned culture medium is circulated through the CellCube, design of the modules allows for reliable distribution of nutrients and oxygen with low differential gradients across all cells within the modules.

The Corning CellCube system, coupled with several different digital controllers for medium conditioning, has proven successful for expansion of multiple adherent cell lines, including BHK and CHO4. Furthermore, retroviral vectors have been produced by expansion of a variety of packaging cell lines, such as Phoenix Frape-1 and Frape-316 in the CellCube system, at levels comparable to other culture platforms2,10,12,14,16. In the current study, the CellCube system was used for expansion of two commonly used bioproduction cell lines – HEK293T and Vero. The basic closed system was configured with a peristaltic pump to drive continuous circulation through the CellCube 100-layer module (Figure 2; Corning 3264) and paired with the Eppendorf BioFlo® 120 (controller; Eppendorf B120ACS000) with a BioBLU® 3c single-use bioreactor (SUB; Eppendorf 1386000300) for medium conditioning. The controller simplified oxygenation and pH control of the circulating medium. Medium conditioning in the SUB was sufficient to sustain both HEK293T and Vero cell growth in the CellCube 100-layer module for 5- and 6-day expansions, respectively. Final harvest yields for both HEK293T and Vero cell lines greater than 10 billion cells demonstrate the utility of the CellCube system for mass culture of adherent cell lines with efficient medium usage.

Table 1. Corning CellCube System Scalability from Process Development to Production

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Module</th>
<th>Surface Area (cm²)</th>
<th>Module Volume (L)</th>
<th>Oxygenator and Circulation Loop (L)</th>
<th>Total Volume (L)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>10-layer</td>
<td>8,500</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>2.0*</td>
<td>2.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25-layer</td>
<td>21,250</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>2.0*</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>100-layer</td>
<td>85,000</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2.0*</td>
<td>8.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Starting volume. Circulation volumes are up to discretion of user.
Reagent Setup

For expansion in the Corning® CellCube® closed system, standard medium was supplemented with 1% penicillin-streptomycin (Corning 30-002-CI) and 0.1% EX-CELL® Antifoam (MilliporeSigma S9920C). On the day prior to seeding, a 10L collection bag (Corning 91-200-45) was filled with 8L of warm medium for system equilibration. On the day of harvest, 6L Trypsin EDTA (Corning 25-052-CV) was prepared with 0.1% Poloxamer 188 (Corning 13-901-CI), warmed to 37°C and transferred to a 10L collection bag. In addition, 315 mL of warm FBS was transferred to a clean 10L media bag as a quench for the harvest solution.

Equipment Setup

To adequately condition the medium during the expansion process, the CellCube system was paired with a bioreactor controller system. The Eppendorf BioFLO 120 monitored the medium through parameters measured inside the BioBLU 3c vessel. The entire closed system relied on 2 circulation loops. Loop 1 connected the CellCube return outlet to the BioBLU 3c vessel, while Loop 2 connected the BioBLU 3c to the CellCube inlet and threaded through an external peristaltic pump (Figure 2).

On the day prior to seeding, the closed system was assembled and prepared for equilibration. For base control, a 1L bottle filled with 7.5% NaHCO₃ solution (Corning 25-035-CI) fitted with an aseptic transfer cap connected to a length of pump-grade was connected to an accessory port of the SUB and routed through the controller pump. The CellCube module and SUB were filled with 8L complete medium via gravity-fill through a port in circulation Loop 2 connected to the prepared collection bag. Finally, the SUB and accompanying controller were readied for operation. Importantly, both pH and DO probes were calibrated according to the manufacturer’s operation manual. Following calibration, the controller was set for the parameters listed in Table 3 and circulation was resumed. The entire system was allowed to equilibrate overnight.

Seeding and Expansion

After overnight equilibration, a medium sample was drawn from the SUB to check the pH. If the offline analysis indicated a difference in pH greater than the BioFlo controller deadband value the pH probe was recalibrated to the offline value. Following recalibration, the seeding process was initiated once vessel pH equilibrated.

HEK293T cells were harvested with 1X TrypLE™ Select Enzyme (Thermo Fisher 12563011) plus 0.1% Poloxamer 188 for 10 minutes at room temperature following 1X Dulbecco’s Phosphate-Buffered Saline (DPBS; Corning 21-031-CM) wash. Vero cells were harvested from Corning® CellSTACK® 10-Stack vessel with Trypsin EDTA for 10 minutes at 37°C.

Materials and Methods

Cell Scale-up

HEK293T Cells (ATCC® CRL-3216™) were thawed in Dulbecco’s Modified Eagle Medium (DMEM; Corning 10-013-CM) plus 10% fetal bovine serum (FBS; Corning 35-010-CV) and plated onto Corning® CellBIND® surface-treated U-shaped 75 cm² flasks (Corning 3290). Cells were subcultured for 2 passages on CellBIND surface-treated flasks before splitting onto Tissue Culture (TC)-treated culture flasks. Once plated on TC-treated flasks, cells were cultured an additional 2 to 3 passages before plating in Corning® CellBIND® surface-treated U-shaped 75 cm² flasks (Corning 430641U)

Vero Cells (ATCC® CCL-81™) were thawed in standard medium, plated onto TC-treated U-shaped 75 cm² flasks (Corning 430641U) and prepared for equilibration. For base control, a 1L bottle filled with 7.5% NaHCO₃ solution (Corning 25-035-CI) fitted with an aseptic transfer cap connected to a length of pump-grade was connected to an accessory port of the SUB and routed through the controller pump. The CellCube module and SUB were filled with 8L complete medium via gravity-fill through a port in circulation Loop 2 connected to the prepared collection bag. Finally, the SUB and accompanying controller were readied for operation. Importantly, both pH and DO probes were calibrated according to the manufacturer’s operation manual. Following calibration, the controller was set for the parameters listed in Table 3 and circulation was resumed. The entire system was allowed to equilibrate overnight.

Table 2. Medium Conditioning Parameters

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parameter</th>
<th>HEK293T</th>
<th>Vero</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Agitation</td>
<td>100 rpm</td>
<td>100 rpm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Temperature</td>
<td>37°C</td>
<td>37°C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pH level</td>
<td>7.40 ± 0.04</td>
<td>7.40 ± 0.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pH control</td>
<td>NaHCO₃, CO₂</td>
<td>NaHCO₃, CO₂</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DO level</td>
<td>30% ± 10%</td>
<td>60% ± 10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DO control</td>
<td>Air, O₂, N₂</td>
<td>Air, O₂ overlay and sparge</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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The closed system circulation was stopped, and then the medium was drained from the Corning® CellCube® module into the 10L collection bag. Following cell enumeration, the collection bag was inoculated with cell suspension to seed both sides of the CellCube 100-layer module (8.5 x 10^4 cm^2) at 5 x 10^3 cells/cm^2 via gravity-fill. The tubing was clamped at both the inlet and outlet, and the CellCube module was rotated vertically with the outlet facing up (Figure 3). Two more rotational seedings were performed to complete the seeding. After seeding, the vessel was returned to the resting position for 30 minutes before circulation was resumed to initiate cell expansion. During the expansion period, daily samples were drawn from the SUB for offline gas, electrolyte, and metabolite analysis with the Nova BioProfile® FLEX Analyzer.

**Harvest**

Control of the SUB was turned off and circulation through the system was stopped. The CellCube module inlet and outlet were disconnected from the SUB and connected to each other to create a loop through the CellCube module. Spent medium was emptied from the CellCube module into a collection bag. The CellCube module was filled with harvest solution via gravity fill. After 5 minutes, half the volume of the CellCube module was emptied in the quench solution, mixed and drained back into the CellCube module. Circulation was resumed for an additional 5 minutes to ensure all cells were dissociated from the vessel. Finally, the circulation loops were reconfigured to recirculate the cell suspension through the pump to break up any remaining cell clumps. Samples were collected from the total harvest for enumeration.

**Results and Discussion**

The CellCube 100-layer module was used as the culture platform for expansion of HEK293T and Vero cell lines with medium conditioning in a SUB (Figure 2). Cells were seeded onto the CellCube module via a single seeding. For the single seeding, pre-equilibrated medium was removed from the CellCube module, inoculated with cells to seed the entire 8.5 x 10^4 cm^2 surface area and returned to the CellCube module. The vessel was rotated into a vertical position to seed the first side of the polystyrene culture plates (Figure 3). Historical data indicated 20- to 30-minute attachment time for HEK293T and Vero cell lines on TC-treated vessels so the initial seeding was chosen as 20 minutes for the first side of the vessel. Each subsequent rotation was incubated for 20 to 30 minutes for a total of two incubations per side. Some cell lines, such as mesenchymal stem cells (MSCs), may need an extended seeding period.

Both HEK293T and Vero cultures expanded in the Corning® CellCube® system with minimal intervention (Figure 4). The controller provided tight control of temperature, pH, and dissolved oxygen which adequately conditioned the circulating medium in the SUB. Daily offline medium analysis was used to monitor pH and dissolved gasses. As necessary, the system pH was recalibrated according to the offline values. In addition, glucose depletion and lactate accumulation were tracked via medium analysis to determine the day of harvest (Figure 5). For the HEK293T cultures, medium glucose levels began to decrease between Day 3 and Day 4 of culture as lactate levels began to rise (Figure 5A). Vero expansion progressed more slowly, with a steady glucose depletion coincident with lactate accumulation from Day 3 through 5 (Figure 5B).
Metabolite concentration proved to be a predictable determinant of cell confluence, as final harvest yields were comparable between different expansion runs for the same cell type. Total HEK293T harvest averaged $1.4 \times 10^{10} \pm 1.4 \times 10^9$ cells with >97% viability (Figure 6A), which corresponds to $1.6 \times 10^5 \pm 1.9 \times 10^4$ cells/cm$^2$ or 33 ± 4X expansion (Figure 6B). Total Vero harvest averaged $1.1 \times 10^{10} \pm 3.6 \times 10^9$ cells with >97% viability (Figure 6A), which corresponds to $1.3 \times 10^5 \pm 4.3 \times 10^4$ cells/cm$^2$ or 26 ± 9X expansion (Figure 6B).

This yield from such a compact footprint is notable, given the number of standard planar culture vessels necessary for production level scale-out to the same surface area (Table 3). For example, the total surface area of four Corning® CellCube® 100-layer modules is equivalent to 20 Corning HYPERStack® 36-layer vessels, up to 54 Corning CellSTACK® vessels, or 400 roller bottles. Using many stacked vessels would require significant incubator space or warm rooms and racks for roller bottle culture. Not to mention, the ergonomic challenge of handling so many culture vessels versus the compact CellCube system. The entire closed system with peristaltic pump, including the controller and SUB required minimal space, such as a 3-foot x 5-foot area in the warm room. Certainly, the total area would vary depending upon the size of the digital controller with SUB chosen for medium conditioning and the peristaltic pump.
Furthermore, the circulation-based Corning CellCube system with medium conditioning uses media more efficiently (Table 3). Based on the 2L circulation volume utilized in this study, four CellCube 100-layer modules would require 32L of medium versus the 78L required for cell expansion in 20 HYPERStack 36-layer vessels. CellSTACK vessels — cultured with 0.1 mL medium/cm² as were the CellCube system expansions presented here — require a similar absolute medium volume. Yet, continuous circulation in the CellCube system ensures adequate gas and nutrient delivery for high-density cultures. In the current study, <0.1 mL medium/cm² was sufficient to sustain both HEK293T and Vero cells for a typical culture period. However, the volume of the source medium could easily be adjusted to suit specific cell requirements. Similarly, the medium could be supplemented or exchanged in the SUB to prolong cell expansion. Our studies show that optimization of media formulations and culture parameters in the smaller CellCube 10-layer module can easily be scaled to the CellCube 100-layer module. Thus, the linear scalability of the CellCube system enables the transition from research through process development to manufacturing.

### Table 3. Corning Scale-up Platform Comparison

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Platform</th>
<th>No. of Vessels</th>
<th>Total Surface Area (cm²)</th>
<th>Media Volume (L)</th>
<th>Media-to-Surface Area Ratio (mL/cm²)</th>
<th>Required Equipment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Corning CellCube 100-layer module</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>340,000</td>
<td>32*</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>Controller, oxygenator, warm room</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corning HYPERStack 36-layer vessel</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>360,000</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>0.22</td>
<td>Incubators</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corning CellSTACK 40-chamber</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>356,160</td>
<td>38 to 45</td>
<td>0.11 to 0.13</td>
<td>Incubators or warm room, manipulator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corning CellSTACK 10-chamber</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>343,440</td>
<td>38 to 45</td>
<td>0.11 to 0.13</td>
<td>Incubators or warm room</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roller bottle</td>
<td>400</td>
<td>340,000</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td>Racks, warm room</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Starting volume. Circulation volumes are up to the discretion of user.

### Conclusions

- Pairing the Corning CellCube 100-layer module with the BioFlo® 120 controller to condition the medium and regulate pH and dissolved oxygen resulted in optimal conditions for HEK293T and Vero cells during 5- or 6-day expansion, respectively.
- Recirculating 2L of medium in the BioBLU® 3c single-use bioreactor sustained both HEK293T and Vero cell growth for expansion without the need for perfusion exchange.
- Offline sampling to monitor glucose and lactate aided expansion and harvest timing.
- Incorporating Poloxamer 188 into the harvest solution enhanced cell recovery and reduced cell clumping.
- The Corning CellCube 100-layer module provides high density yields of HEK293T and Vero cells, for a total harvest greater than 10¹⁰ cells.
References


