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Your Career Plan ...

Consider the Forest While You're Focused on the Trees

As a young mother and a postdoc, Jane (not her real name) was frustrated. She felt she had just been thrown off her career path and made an appointment to consult with me about how to get things back on track. I'm a career counselor, and after investing five years of research in her postdoc lab, with little data and no publications to show for the 60-hour weeks, Jane had learned that her husband Ron, an industry scientist, was being promoted and transferred to his "dream job." Jane would need to leave her lab to move with her family to another city.

Financially, they'd be fine. Ron's salary increase would more than compensate for the loss of Jane's postdoc income. But after two failed postdoctoral projects, her research was just beginning to produce some exciting data. Now what would she do? Would she have to start over with another lab and another

postdoctoral position in her new city? If not, was she stepping permanently away from the path originally chosen to lead her into a faculty position? Why didn't her mentor warn her that this path would be so difficult in the first place?

Even more frustrating, she had been actively ignoring a nagging feeling that she was losing her passion for the bench. Why hadn't she addressed that issue sooner, before being forced into a career transition? What could she have done to take charge? Could she have prepared herself better for a transition into something more rewarding? Was it too late?

As a career counselor who works every day with graduate students and postdocs in the life sciences, I have learned to identify this common problem ... *Jane was frustrated because she had focused for too long on the "trees." Now, she desperately needed to shift her focus to the "forest."*

Ignoring the Forest

Many scientists in the early stages of their careers fall into the same trap as Jane, focusing so

intently on the trees right in front of their eyes that they simply miss the forest stretching out for miles in front of them. It's true that training in the life sciences demands a certain focus on the trees. Trainees are rewarded for spending long hours in their corner of the lab, conducting experiments, producing papers, and spending each day—year after year—carefully researching

solutions to narrow and specialized problems. Students and postdocs are discouraged from spending "nonproductive" time exploring the forest of their available career opportunities.

Most people coming up in the life sciences overlook this forest because they presume trainees should take the obvious path to reach the traditional goal—a tenure-track research faculty position. Indeed, for decades, this training process reliably produced that outcome! But statistics now show that only

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a small portion of the current trainees in the biomedical sciences will become tenured faculty. So should Jane have presumed that her focus on the trees would lead her so easily to a faculty position? Is a faculty position the outcome that Jane truly desired? What can Jane do now to look past the trees, assess her position, think about her goals and priorities, and then plan her own route through the forest?

Using an Individual Development Plan

In Jane's case, she answered these questions by creating and following an Individual Development Plan (IDP). This career planning tool helped her to:

- Make an honest assessment of her abilities and passions
- Gain a larger view of available career opportunities
- Consider her life plans in the context of her career plans
- Set short- and long-term goals.

After her move, with the help of many mentors and the use of an IDP, Jane leveraged her experience and skills. Using her past leadership and organizational experiences, and her outstanding writing skills, she obtained a new position: directing a cluster of graduate programs in the sciences at a local campus.

IDPs have long been used by corporations, government agencies, and educational institutions. But the concept appears to be fairly new in the field of biomedical research. In 2002, the Training and Careers Subcommittee of the Federation of American Societies for Experimental Biology's (FASEB) Science Policy Committee created an IDP template for use by trainees and their mentors.¹ This and other IDP templates do not replace mentoring, but provide a way for trainees to take a proactive role in their own mentoring process. The trainee can initiate the IDP process.² "Implementation [of the IDP] does not have to be 'top down'," said Phillip Clifford, Professor of Anesthesiology and Associate Dean for Postdoctoral Affairs at the Medical College of Wisconsin, and a member of the FASEB subcommittee

In 2005, the use of IDPs in the life sciences got a boost when Sigma Xi reported results of a national postdoc survey. The results show that postdocs who established a written plan with their advisor early in their postdoc period were more likely to report greater productivity, greater satisfaction and better relationships with their advisor.³ Recently, the Graduate Research, Education and Training Committee of the Association of American Medical Colleges (AAMC) released a set of guidelines for postdocs and their mentors, strongly encouraging the use of an IDP tool.⁴

There are many variations of the IDP process, and none is perfect. Jane used the "Individual Development Plan for Graduate Student and Postdoctoral Trainees,"⁵ incorporating the following five steps:

1. Assess your strengths and weaknesses, your work and life values, and your interests and passions.
2. Carefully consider the assessment items from Step 1 and decide what major changes, if any, need to be made to your current career path.
3. Write out your plan, evaluating past progress along your chosen path, and set detailed goals for the future.
4. Share your written plan with a mentor or colleague, who will help you achieve your goals while holding you accountable to working consistently toward them.
5. Most importantly, repeat these steps each year, to help ensure that you progress toward your overall goals.

I encourage you to use an IDP tool in your own career planning! Over time, the annual review of your own IDP will help you to consider your forest while focusing on the trees.

For more information, talk to your mentors and check out the following links. ■

References

- ¹ FASEB IDP Template. <http://opa.faseb.org/pdf/idp.pdf>.
- ² Haak L. (2002), "A Career Development Plan for Postdocs." www.ScienceCareers.org.
- ³ Davis G. (2006), "Improving the Postdoctoral Experience: An Empirical Approach." <http://postdoc.sigmaxi.org/results/ScientificWorkforceChapter.pdf>.
- ⁴ AAMC GREAT Group, "Compact Between Postdoctoral Appointees and their Mentors." <http://www.aamc.org/research/postdoccompact/>.
- ⁵ UCSF Office of Career and Professional Development, "Individual Development Plan for Graduate Student and Postdoctoral Trainees." <http://saawww.ucsf.edu/career/idp.doc>.

—Bill Lindstaedt

The ASCB 2007 Call for Nominations

Norton B. Gilula Memorial Award

Who is Eligible: An outstanding graduate or undergraduate student who has excelled in research

How to Apply: The student or advisor should submit a one-page research statement, a list of publications, if any, the abstract submitted to the current year's Annual Meeting, and the advisor's letter of recommendation. Duplicate applications from graduate students may be submitted for the Gilula and Bernfield Memorial Awards.

Awards: The winner is presented a plaque. Expenses to attend the Annual Meeting are paid.

Deadline: August 1

Merton Bernfield Memorial Award

Who is Eligible: An outstanding graduate student or postdoctoral fellow who has excelled in research

How to Apply: The student or postdoc or his or her advisor should submit a one-page research statement, a list of publications, a copy of the abstract submitted to the current year's Annual Meeting, and the advisor's letter of recommendation. Postdocs may also submit the recommendation of their graduate student advisor. Duplicate applications from graduate students may be submitted for the Gilula and Bernfield Memorial Awards.

Awards: The winner is presented a plaque and will speak in a Minisymposium at the Annual Meeting and receives financial support to attend the Annual Meeting.

Deadline: August 1

All applications and nominations should be submitted to:

The American Society for Cell Biology
8120 Woodmont Avenue, Suite 750
Bethesda, MD 20814-2762
ascbinfo@ascb.org

For names of prior awardees or more information, visit www.ascb.org, or contact the ASCB at (301) 347-9300, or ascbinfo@ascb.org.