How can we help cell biology students follow career paths that are right for them? When I ask students what they want to do with their PhD, I get a range of answers including industry, academia, science communication, government/policy, and others. Regardless of the answer, it’s possible, or even likely, this will change over the course of a graduate career. To help my own students navigate this terrain and ensure that I’m putting my efforts toward their current professional goals, my lab has a biannual career development meeting to reassess where each student thinks he or she currently stands. After identifying firm goals, our next step is to further explore those career options to see if a student’s goals are really aligned with his or her interests and develop skills to help the student be competitive for those career options.

**Career Development Week**

One of the most effective ways I’ve found for this exploration is to have one week set aside each year for all lab members to focus on career development. During our career development week, I typically provide a long list of career development opportunities and activities. To encourage all lab members to participate, I assign points for these activities and give away prizes for students who score the highest.

What kinds of activities are on this list? Some are baseline activities that are generally good for visibility regardless of career path. I encourage lab members to be in control of their own narrative by putting up what they want potential employers to see in an online search. This might include creating a website, joining Twitter, getting an ORCID, or making a Google Scholar profile. Other activities might focus on written communication (e.g., form a peer writing group), oral communication (e.g., prepare an elevator pitch to be used at conferences and at visiting speaker lunches), time management (e.g., block off a fixed amount of time for daily writing/thinking or try the Pomodoro Technique for focused progress), or career exploration (e.g., conduct informational interviews or use Interactive Simulation Exercises for Career Transitions). During the week, students decide which activities to participate in, complete their chosen tasks, and record their progress along with their thoughts about the utility of the exercise. At the end of the week, we have a lab meeting where points are assigned for each activity, scores tallied, and prizes awarded. The point values of the various tasks are not announced beforehand so that the resourceful lab member can’t game the system by participating only in high-scoring activities. I tend to assign higher points to tasks that have disproportionate value or require students to step outside their comfort zones.

**Career Development Activities Directly Benefit Research**

For both students and their advisors, it’s easy to put career development efforts on the back burner. Time spent on these things can feel like time lost from
research. But those concerns are shortsighted. First, it’s advisors’ responsibility to help students identify
and explore career options right for them so they can
align their skillsets and be competitive for those jobs.
Also, many activities directly benefit one’s research efforts. For example, any development of communication
skills (whether written or oral) can help students effectively convey
their science. This can improve manuscript writing, fellowship
applications, oral presentations, and beyond. Also, improvements in these
skills are often accompanied by a boost in confidence
and willingness to engage others in scientific discussion.
Second, by articulating the goal, the actions of the
davisor and the student can be better aligned with less
friction. Further, it’s easier to make progress toward
defined goals that are more concrete than the nebulous
quest to eventually finish a PhD.
Lastly, career anxiety is a reality for most people.
Reducing the stress of that uncertainty can improve
a person’s wellbeing so he or she is not preoccupied
with existential dread. Indeed, at the end of our career
development week, all of our lab members seem
refreshed and have a renewed commitment to their
research.
I think we should want to pursue activities
that empower students even if we didn’t see these
side benefits. However, clearly seeing a net gain
in enthusiasm and productivity might persuade
the reluctant to set aside research time for career
development.

Students Devise Their Own Career
Development Strategies

After several years of doing this activity, I particularly
appreciate the ideas students come up with on their
own beyond the offered list. Some students have
talents that have been under-utilized or have their own
contacts they may be inspired to finally connect with.
Some of my students signed up to be pen pals with
kids in a middle school science class. Communication
skills developed from this activity might be exactly
what is needed for the lab to
effectively engage broad audiences
at large meetings. This activity
could also help lab members explain
the significance of their work in
fellowship applications.
Importantly, career development
week stimulated out-of-the-box
strategies. One student decided not
to shave until a draft of his manuscript was finished,
which he said truly motivated him to keep pushing.
I’ve written about the experience of our career
development weeks to date.2,3,4 In addition to career
exploration, several students participated in outreach
and advocacy activities such as overhauling the STEM
week activities at their child’s school and joining the
Coalition for the Life Sciences to advocate government
policies supporting the biomedical sciences.
My graduate students Brittany Jack and Brae Bigge
summed up one career development week this way:

By focusing on career development this week,
I was alerted to what I was already doing to
advance my career and how much more I
could be doing to advance my career. The most
valuable part of taking the time to focus on
career development is that we are reminded
what our goals are and why we are doing
everything we are doing. Sometimes, the
overall goal gets lost in the day-to-day
activities and I am refreshed when I take the
time to think about 10 years down the road.
What does that look like? How can I make an
impact now on what happens 10 years from now?
—Brittany Jack

While everything we do in graduate school
is supposed to help prepare us for our future career goals, many times we get so caught up in the little things that we forget the bigger goal that we’re working toward. This week gave me the opportunity to step back and remember why I’m doing all of this. I got to work on my website and CV, explore potential career options that I hadn’t previously thought of, and start some reading/writing/idea generating habits that I hope stick!

—Brae Bigge

So if you want to help your students find their own path to success toward their chosen career goals, all while lighting the fire of purpose, I highly recommend starting your own career development week!

Footnotes

4 www.avasthilab.org/2016/08/06/career-development-week-part-ii.

About the Author
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