Navigating your career can be messy. Too often, we leave career exploration to chance and assume that over time we will simply figure out what we want to do next. However, career exploration is a developmental process, requiring reflection and experiences to develop toward your next step. The linear process we crave may exist for some, but for most of us the path is much less clear or direct. As demonstrated in a video from the University of California, San Francisco (UCSF) Motivating INformed Decisions (MIND) Program, career exploration and decision making—whether as a student, postdoctoral scholar, or mid-career professional—is often a process of trial and error that involves setting hypotheses (about what career step may be a good fit), testing your hypotheses, and adapting your plan. There is no simple formula; we are all unique, with unique strengths, interests, values, personality styles, experiences, and networks, and our career trajectories will each be unique.

At the University of Massachusetts Medical School, we have adapted our core PhD curriculum to guide and support students through this developmental process. We train our students as future professionals: scientists who will move out into the world and contribute in a myriad of ways to the scientific ecosystem and society. Here are some of the strategies we emphasize that can be put into practice regardless of your career stage.

Make time to reflect and to build your own awareness of self.

Consider your strengths, what you enjoy doing, and your values; myIDP or other self-assessment tools may be helpful for this reflection. For any projects you work on—whether in the lab or as hobbies—notice how they align with and shape your skills, interests, and values. As you periodically reflect, you will become more and more aware of your own evolving identity—your sense of self. Celebrate the many elements of YOU that compose your unique self, and the strengths and perspective you bring to any project. This self-awareness will be valuable as you consider next career steps. One exercise to help you explore your identity is to write a tagline for yourself. Describe your professional self in one sentence, without listing your job or how you got into your job. Instead, focus on the lens through which you approach your work, the impact you strive to have, or other factors. Consider adapting your professional social media accounts to describe yourself in this light.

Be curious, have an open mind.

As scientists, we are trained to be critical of any data that comes our way. As you consider next career steps, this critical eye may exacerbate negative impressions of career options, making career exploration frustrating (after all, no career options are perfect!). I have found it helpful to frame career exploration through a different lens: that of curiosity, interest, and fascination. As you meet people, be curious about their own career trajectories, what they do, and how they have navigated. You can track your progress—and continually assess potential fit of each professional role you learn about—via UCSF’s Career Exploration Road Map. Consider writing in a journal as you do so—similarly to how you would document and reflect on your science in a lab notebook. Even if you have a strong sense of what you want to do next in your career, keep an open mind and continue to learn about others’ journeys and roles. This will help you be better informed about the roles in science around you, how
they intersect, and the value they bring to the broader ecosystem.

**Create an Individual Development Plan, with explicit goals for career exploration.**

Among the plethora of important-and-urgent tasks facing us each day, it is easy to continually put off thinking ahead to the next career step. Address this head-on by creating an Individual Development Plan in which you define specific actions you will take to reflect on your future, explore career options, expand your network, sustain your well-being, and further your professional development.

**Talk to people!**

Career exploration does not need to be an isolated process, and in fact it can be greatly beneficial to talk with others. Talk to professionals in a career of interest to learn more about their experiences. As you process what you learn, discuss your interests, doubts, excitement, and concerns with others—your peers, career counselors from your current or former university, a paid career coach, and/or mentors. Talking with others can facilitate your own self-reflection, help you practice different framings of your career identity, inform your career decisions, and help identify strategies to enhance your professional development and wellness.

**Have an innovation mindset.**

Scientists are increasingly following novel paths through their careers, whether taking on a professional role that has rarely existed before or taking a new route into an established type of role (for example, moving directly from graduate student into regulatory affairs, bypassing the typical route of first becoming a scientist in a company setting). As you hear others’ career stories, do not assume you will need to take the same path. Instead, learn more about the rationale and context of their experience by asking: Why did you choose to do training X? In what ways was that training helpful for transitioning into your next role? What types of things did you learn on the job? What are other ways that someone like me could transition into this type of work?

**Prioritize your wellness.**

The process of career exploration may awaken a number of emotions; accept this, give yourself time and space to feel these emotions, and know that this is normal when looking toward a career transition.

Taking a walk or being active, sleeping and eating well, continuing with hobbies, and talking to others (including peers, mentors, and mental health professionals) can bring perspective and balance to your professional work and aspirations.

**Take the plunge!**

"What if I don’t like that type of work?" This is a common concern, and can cause career decision paralysis (that is, pausing in a transition role longer than needed, mostly due to doubt about what to do next). Don’t be afraid to dive in and just try something new. Try it via a job simulation, internship, or volunteer opportunity. Ultimately, you may need to just take a leap of faith, move into a new position, give it some time, and see if it fits. Even if it’s not a perfect fit, you will learn more about yourself and gain unique experience that will contribute to your evolving career identity and experience. I don’t believe that doors ever really close; you can shift across types of work by being strategic and taking steps to align your network, experience, and skills with the new type of work you desire.

It is common for scientists to move through multiple career transitions across their lives. Whether early in your career or already several stages along, looking ahead to your next career transition can be both exciting and unnerving. Be proactive: This is an opportunity to think more intentionally about who you are as a professional and how you see yourself growing and contributing as you navigate the next stage of your career.
Explore Career Options at the ASCB|EMBO Meeting

The annual ASCB|EMBO meeting can be a great opportunity to learn about career options and enhance your professional network. Here are some strategies to maximize this opportunity:

- Review the list of participants, and reach out to a handful ahead of time to inquire about setting up a 30-minute informational interview during the meeting.
- Attend professional development workshops.
- Attend the WICB–COMPASS panel discussion and networking reception “The Art of Self Advocacy” or the WICB mentoring theater. Participate in focused Discussion Roundtables on a number of career development and mentoring topics.
- Bring business cards; they are a good way to help the person you are talking with remember your name. (If you are a student or postdoc, ask your department about obtaining business cards; printing costs are typically minimal).
- Note that many of the exhibitors are scientists themselves. Visit the Exhibit Hall, introduce yourself, and learn more about their role at their organization in addition to their products.
- Attend the poster sessions. These are a great opportunity to learn about the different science and labs that are represented at the meeting and also another way to network.
- Schedule time to meet with one of the career coaches, available onsite to provide one-on-one career advice for conference attendees.
- Keep track of who you meet throughout the meeting. On the flight home, draft a short “it was nice to meet you” thank-you email to each person, referring to one or two parts of the conversation that you found helpful. Consider also connecting via social media.

About the Author

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