

AuPS Meeting - Melbourne 2008

Student symposium: Beyond your PhD

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Chair: Stefan Gehrig

Beyond your PhD: Key considerations in planning your post-doctoral career path

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A career in biomedical research might just be one of the most challenging yet also rewarding professional options one could choose to pursue. To be successful as an independent scientist is far from an easy accomplishment, and requires more than merely a certain degree of scientific aptitude and application to the task. With this in mind, it is important to recognise the value of strategic planning throughout one's career development, or put another way, to acknowledge that "fortune favours the prepared".

The completion of rigorous Ph.D. training is an integral component of one's scientific upbringing. However, it is well established that your development in the ensuing period as a post-doctoral researcher typically constitutes the determining factor regarding subsequent appointment as an independent program leader at a university, institute, or commercial entity. Therefore, gaining the opportunity to demonstrate your prowess (and to flourish) as an independent scientist starts with getting the most out of your post-doctoral experience, and making yourself attractive to committees tasked with recruiting the next rising star.

Having identified what you want to pursue/achieve in your career, you need to seek a post-doctoral appointment that will help you realise those goals. This may involve applying for positions that have been advertised, or approaching groups directly to gauge their interest in offering you a position. Each scenario entails different tactics, although there are common guidelines concerning the preparation of your resume, your choice of referees, and your interaction with prospective employers.

With offers in place, differentiating between your options will be based on the weighting you give to a number of key criteria. Again, different criteria apply to every intended career path, but considerations such as prominence and connectedness of the group, its institutional environment, and its history of successful career development are key elements.

Upon choosing a group/destination for your training, establishment of a milestone-driven plan with your mentor will help ensure progress in your development, and realisation of an independent research interest. Additionally, subjecting yourself to regular (and rigorous) review is critical to ensure progress is being made, and perhaps even more importantly, prospective changes in your goals and interests are being identified and pursued appropriately. In this regard, identifying career mentors outside of your direct lab environment can also be extremely valuable.

Expending energy worrying about one's future can be intimidating and seemingly detract from the appeal of following a career in research. However, well-timed strategic planning can readily help you address perceived challenges, and will actually promote your chances of success in realising your goals. A career in science should be fun, planning - especially for your post doc - can help you keep it that way.