

## Careers

**The Committee for Professional Opportunities for Women (CPOW) sponsored a Career Roundtable Luncheon at the 2011 Annual Meeting in Baltimore, Maryland. The goal was to initiate and facilitate direct communication between early career biophysicists and senior scientists in an informal, relaxed atmosphere. Topics addressed focused on strategies to finding alternative research funding, initiating successful collaborations, receiving appropriate mentoring, and striking the right life-work balance.**

At each roundtable, the discussion was moderated by an invited senior scientist who drew from his or her knowledge and personal experience to offer feedback, answer questions and suggest strategies for overcoming challenges and achieving success. Among the scientists who generously shared their time and expertise were *Edward Egelman*, University of Virginia; *Teresa Giraldez*, Unidad de Investigación HUNSC; *Aldrin Gomes*, University of California, Davis; *Vasanthi Jayaraman*, University of Texas-Houston Medical School; *Dorothy Hank*, University of Chicago; *Robert Oswald*, Cornell University; *Fred Sigworth*, Yale University; and *Shai Silberberg*, NINDS, NIH.

The most relevant points that emanated from these discussions were summarized in an open forum before concluding the luncheon. Those points follow below.

### Successful strategies to obtain funding

The discussion focused on the importance of grantsmanship, gathering effective arguments to demonstrate scientific independence, and strategies for pursuing alternative funding opportunities.

Some of the pointers on the importance of a well-written application were of particular relevance to early career biophysicists who may be particularly wary of freely sharing (yet to be funded) ideas for fear of competition or judgment, or who may expect to assemble an application quickly and obtain funding for the first submission. Moderators reinforced the value of being patient, taking your time to formu-

late ideas and to develop a cohesive research plan, molding the proposal to the mission espoused by the funding agency, and asking scientists outside your lab to critique early drafts.

*Shai Silberberg* explained the many advantages of asking senior colleagues and mentors for *feed-forward* rather than *feedback* on a proposal. This outlook encourages prospective applicants to seek opinions at the earliest stages of application preparation, when ideas and strategies are still malleable and the applicant is still receptive to suggestions. The consensus was that practice makes perfect and perseverance is a necessary attribute of the successful applicant.

When seeking funding for researcher-initiated research projects, scientific independence was identified as a requirement for almost all early career scientists. In this respect a strong case can be effectively made by independent publications, a clear explanation of how the project is different from ideas pursued by previous mentors or collaborators, and, when possible, describing resources, including space, equipment, and personnel already available for the project, for example from institutional funds.

Although obtaining traditional funding was described as highly competitive and challenging and participants were encouraged to pursue alternative funding opportunities, moderators also cautioned of hurdles specific to grants offered by private agencies. Among these hurdles are rules for success may be less clear and less defined, projects funded are smaller and funds are more limited than the traditional NIH grant, and more restrictions may apply on how funds can be used.

### Initiating successful collaborations

The question of how to initiate, establish, and complete successful collaborations arose directly from the perception that multi-PI applications may appear stronger and thus may have an advantage when seeking funding. *Edward Egelman* advised participants to carefully ask themselves whether the collaboration is truly needed and, if so, to clearly articulate from the outset what each scientist would contribute to the project in terms of reagents, techniques, and experiments, and how credit will



### Molly Cule Advice

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be attributed. The goal is to make sure that the collaborator adds rather than detracts from your interest, motivation, and, frankly, your excitement for the work. Participants were encouraged to get to know potential collaborators before committing to common projects, or if personal contact is not feasible, to do the necessary homework and learn ahead of time how productive, trustworthy, and collegial the potential collaborator is known to be.

### Striking the life-work balance

How do you make and keep friends when you work all the time? When can you start a family without jeopardizing your desired career progression? Does nurturing a hobby outside the lab help or hurt your career? Face it: scientist or not, time is limited, and how to best invest it is a personal choice. However, to become a successful scientist, one has to make science a top priority. If you have decided that investing long hours in your work is, most of the time, rewarding, then the right balance will require some trial and error, learning about your own comfort zone and stress tolerance, and may need to be adjusted. Participants were encouraged to assess and adjust often, and strive for dynamic equilibrium.

### Receiving appropriate mentoring

Mentors can be valuable resources when assessing one's options, devising winning strategies, or identifying roadblocks to desired outcomes. Often, junior scientists rely exclusively on their direct advisors, an attitude which unnecessarily limits their options. *Dorothy Hanck* pointed out that a mentor is a senior scientist who knows the ropes and is willing to share his or her knowledge with more junior scientists in the field. She encouraged participants to seek and nurture mentoring relationships outside one's lab, cultivate relationships with senior faculty and scientists, meet with seminar speakers who visit the institutions, and seek career development resources at meetings and conferences. Being open and respectful, asking specific questions, and soliciting advice or suggestions for a particular situation were also mentioned as successful strategies in getting adequate mentoring.

Overall, the luncheon participants had ample opportunity to ask questions, listen in on topics brought up by others, and benefit from perspectives expressed by senior scientists. The informal, supportive atmosphere was conducive to making new acquaintances and meeting people with similar interests and challenges. The consensus was that while a scientific career entails many challenges, asking for and receiving support along the way is possible and desirable. The CPOW luncheon is just one of the many venues for making this happen.

At the 56<sup>th</sup> Annual Meeting in San Diego, CPOW will again sponsor this luncheon, this time to help address some of the concerns and challenges faced by mid-career scientists, such as preparing for promotion, moving one's lab, or marketing one's science. For more information, visit [www.biophysics.org/2012meeting](http://www.biophysics.org/2012meeting).

—*Gabriela Popescu*, CPOW member



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