

## Ask Professor Sarah Bellum

Professor Sarah Bellum answers your questions on navigating the often-uncharted waters of early career development. Professor Bellum was inspired by Ms. Mentor, a column by *Emily Toth* appearing in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, and is written by *Patricia L. Clark*, chair of the Early Careers Committee. Do you have a question for Professor Bellum? Send it to [sarah\\_bellum@biophysics.org](mailto:sarah_bellum@biophysics.org). Your privacy is assured!

**Q** : I'm a graduate student, about half way through my thesis research, and my advisor just announced that he is accepting a job at a university on the other coast. What do I do?

—Feeling Caught

**A** : Moving around is part of academic life, but not a part that is ever anticipated with joyful abandon. And certainly not in the middle of graduate school!

Start off by realizing that at perhaps no other time during your PhD studies does your graduate advisor have a greater chance to make your life miserable by moving to another institution. But it doesn't have to be that way, and thoughtful advisors can make all the difference during the painful process of moving (see below). There are many choices for you to consider at this point, and there are many things you can do to protect yourself, regardless of what you choose.

Now, on to the decisions: Do you stay or do you go? If you stay, do you switch advisors and project, or keep the same advisor and project, and work in relative isolation? Your decision will depend on many factors: how close you are to finishing, how independent you are (or maybe you have a co-advisor who can provide some on-site supervision?), how much you like the project/PI, how much you want to stay at

your current institution and/or geographical location. Do you have a significant other? Do you have aging or ailing family members? Children in excellent school systems? Strong ties to a community service organization? These factors are all part of the moving/staying equation. Your PI may try to sway you one way or the other: keep in mind that a lab's personnel is, on average, cut in half by a move, and your PI might have strong motives for trying to keep together a core group of projects, skills, and/or experience.

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Before you make a final decision, get commitments (preferably in writing) on how the mechanics of the move, and the rest of your graduate training, will be handled. If you are staying behind, but keeping the same advisor and project, how will you keep in touch with your PI? E-mail has made long-distance advising a viable option, but how many times per year will you see him in person? What space and equipment will be designated for your use? If you are moving, how will you find a new place to live?

Thoughtful PIs recognize that relocating students will need their own apartment-hunting trip, and include this as part of their total relocation package. How does the cost of living in the new location compare to your current location, and will your graduate stipend be supplemented, if necessary, to reflect this? Will your possessions be moved for you (they should be!)? If you will remain a student at the first university, who will pay for travel back and forth for thesis committee meetings? How often will they be scheduled? Can they be scheduled immediately before or after the departmental retreat, so you can maintain contacts with other faculty and students in your old department? How will your health insurance be handled? If you will join the graduate program at the new university, will the cumulative exams/original research proposal/etc. that you have already completed satisfy the degree requirements in the new department? Who will serve on your thesis committee?

Your thesis advisor will play a huge role here, and not just for coordinating the move. For example, if you will have ties back to your first university (if you remain enrolled as a student there, say), it is especially critical that (s)he maintain good relationships with former faculty colleagues. Too often, departing

faculty get into fights over what equipment stays/goes, etc., and burn a lot of bridges (bridges that you will need later!) in the process. Sad to say, stories abound of PIs so irritated with their former colleagues that they refuse to go back for their students' thesis committee meetings and defenses. You don't want this to happen to you.

Realize things will get stressful before the move, regardless of whether you decide to stay or go. Unforeseen tensions are likely to crop up between those moving and those staying, especially if there are difficult choices to be made about what equipment should stay behind. Nerves get frazzled, tempers flare. After a certain point, experiments must be postponed so disassembly, packing, and moving can take place; these decisions require cooperation among your labmates, and coordination provided by your advisor.

The stress doesn't end after the move, either. If you decide to move, your first few weeks in your new locale will likely be divided between spending all day in lab, unpacking boxes, and spending all evening at home, unpacking boxes! You may not know anyone

other than your fellow peripatetic labmates, so you will likely lean on and socialize with each other much more than you have in the past. Again, your PI can help a lot here: your advisor has likely met many of the faculty as part of his/her interviewing/negotiating, and can help you enormously by making an extra effort to introduce you and your

labmates to your new colleagues. Before the move, set a deadline (say, two weeks) for doing your first experiment in the new lab. Don't make it anything particularly complicated; maybe just a repeat of something you have done before.

But do your darnedest to get experiments started as quickly as possible. It will reestablish your old routines, identify what reagents are missing (remember it is illegal to move a lot of the nastier chemicals cross-country), and give you a sense of progress not provided by unpacking, no matter how many boxes you unpack!

If you stay behind, you may find yourself suddenly isolated, separated

from the camaraderie and support services of a large, thriving lab. Start building ties now, before the move, to other labs doing similar research in your department. Ask if you can start sitting

in on their lab meetings and journal clubs, so you can maintain a network of colleagues.

Straighten out with your PI how routine ordering will be accomplished.

Moving the lab will undoubtedly be a messy upheaval, and it might put you six months (or more) behind on your graduation schedule. But don't overlook the benefits of the move (yes, I said benefits!): If you stay behind, you are bound to get a speeded-up introduction to scientific independence. Handle it well, and that independence is bound to make you more attractive to potential future employers. If you move, your advisor was likely wooed with a big fat startup package, meaning you can start shopping for the specialized equipment for which your project might just now be hankering. The move may put you in a better environment for your science, or your personal life, or (best of all possible worlds) both!

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## NSF New Funding Opportunity

Frontiers in Integrative Biological Research (FIBR) is a newly established competition for grants (up to five million dollars) to address major challenges in biology. FIBR encourages investigators to identify major under-studied or unanswered questions in biology and to develop innovative approaches to address them by integrating the scientific concepts and research tools of biology, math and the physical sciences, engineering, social sciences and the information sciences.

Applicants are encouraged to focus on the biological significance of the question, to describe the integrative approaches, and to develop a research plan, which is not limited by conceptual, disciplinary, or organizational boundaries. Particularly encouraged are the inclusion of young scientists trained in an interdisciplinary environment or in non-biological disciplines, and partnerships with minority serving primarily undergraduate institutions and community colleges.

The full program announcement can be found at: <http://www.nsf.gov/pubsys/ods/getpub.cfm?nsf02154>.