

Ask Professor Sarah Bellum

Professor Sarah Bellum answers your questions on navigating the often-uncharted waters of early career development. Professor Bellum is communicated 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. Your privacy and anonymity are assured!

Is It Time to Hit the Road?

Q: *I'm probably about six months away from defending my dissertation. I've got a couple of potential post-docs lined up, but yesterday my advisor sat me down and suggested I do a one-year postdoc here, in his lab, to finish up some side projects that are only just now starting to get off the ground. I'm really torn: I'm interested in the projects, I get along well with my advisor, and I love living in this city. But I have always heard that it is "academic suicide" for a grad student to stay at the same university for a postdoc. Is this really true, and if so, are there exceptions for situations like mine?*

— *Wanderlust-less at Washington*

A: The conventional wisdom says: moving to a new university for your postdoc is good because it exposes you to new ideas, techniques, and experimental challenges. Moving also shows you are adaptable, and can work effectively in new situations with new people. In contrast, staying at the same university (and worse, the same lab) for your postdoc is like living with your parents when you are in your thirties: even if you have a really good reason for doing it, to an outsider, something won't smell quite right.

That being said, there can be many good reasons to stay on for a year to complete a brief postdoc, reasons that will ultimately enhance (rather than detract from) your overall career development.

For example, you might have recently gotten an absolutely groundbreaking, exciting result on a side project while following up on an intriguing result from your core project. If merely confirming that result, plus running some additional controls, will result in a blockbuster publication, by all means, stay a while longer and see the project through. Likewise, if you have a thesis worth of results (and maybe a ho-hum paper or two) but your core project is really just starting to break

wide open, your advisor might suggest you stay on for a year-long postdoc after your defense. By all means, take this opportunity, if it works with your future plans; the addition of a high-quality publication to strengthen your CV will be well worth the time. Just make sure you clarify expectations with your advisor before you commit (read on for more on this).

Alternatively, if your advisor suggests you stay on for a short postdoc not because your project is on the cusp of greatness, but because he needs time to find your replacement (and for you to train the replacement), it's definitely time for you to move on.

Of course, it is rare that reality is so clear-cut, so here are some additional points to ponder when considering your advisor's offer: How different will the postdoc project be from your thesis work? Would this year's experience give you exposure to a new field or technique, possibly one you might be interested in returning to later? Have any of your advi-

sor's previous graduate students stayed on for a short postdoc? If so, how did that turn out? Do you have any reason to expect your experience will be different? Whether an "in-house" postdoc is a common scenario in your lab or not, it is extremely important to be very explicit

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about expectations (your's and your advisor's), responsibilities, and a plan/schedule for the year ahead, both at the outset and at regular intervals throughout the postdoc project. Also look carefully at the situation for postdocs at your current institution: yes, postdoctoral stipends are probably significantly higher than your student stipend, but what health insurance options (and other benefits) are available? The situation for postdocs has improved dramatically over the past ten years, but significant disparities between institutions still exist, so make sure you understand what institutional support is available for postdoctoral researchers.

Would you be "finishing up" these

projects, or merely “working on” them? Realistically, how confident are you that these projects will result in publications in a year’s time? If you do decide to stay for a year-long postdoc with your thesis advisor, I would suggest making concrete arrangements for your “real” postdoc position now, before committing to your advisor. Deciding on a firm endpoint for the year-long postdoc will help maintain your focus, and prevent that year from sliding into two, or more, when experiments and/or writing do not go as fast as you expect.

But perhaps in your situation, the scientific reasons to stay are not so compelling, but you nevertheless feel a tug to stay. Realize that change can be challenging to face, and the changes involved in the transition from graduate research at one university to postdoctoral research on a completely different project, possibly in a different field, at another university that might be entirely

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across the country (or even in a different country!) can be daunting, to say the least. But regardless of how much you like where you live, or how well you get along with your advisor, or how much you like your current project, these alone are lousy reasons to stay in the same place for a postdoc. You owe it to your scientific self to try another environment, physically and scientifically, even though it will require an adjustment period. Make sure general fears of change do not hold you back!

Of course, there will always be individual situations that argue strongly for staying put for a short while, even in the face of non-ideal science. Family situations are perhaps the most common: perhaps you have a significant other who is a year behind you in graduate school, or you currently live near home and your mother is recovering from a debilitating

illness. Other, more long-term scenarios might have you forgo moving altogether: Perhaps you live (and plan to stay) in a poor country with little support for scientific research, and you’re already at the only university with any capacity to do patch-clamp experiments, etc. Perhaps your partner already has a dream job, and is unwilling or unable to find an equivalent position anywhere else. Ideally, these situations would only occur to people who live in large, coastal cities with multiple research universities in easy driving distance, but in reality, sometimes your best option is to stay at your current university.

If you feel you must stay where you are, and you are committed to an academic career at a research-focused university, you would be wise to investigate opportunities to change as many other things as possible for your postdoc. Change your advisor, and department.

No matter what, do your darnedest to avoid a postdoctoral project that plays like a bad movie sequel (“Thesis II: More of the Same”): go out of your way to work on new systems, ask new questions, use new experimental methods. Also realize that when you go on the job market, you will need to explain up front (and probably have your reference letter-writers explain, too) your very good reasons for staying put, and, if you are applying for jobs in other locales, why those reasons no longer apply to your situation.

Incidentally, it is worthwhile to point out that the “suicide” you are referring to here is academic suicide at research-focused universities, rather than general scientific suicide. Other career tracks, including industrial research, patent/legal work, and four-year college teaching, will not place nearly so much emphasis on relocating for postdoctoral research.

Opportunities

American Association of University Women (AAUW) International Fellowships

Up to \$30,000 annually

Deadline: December 1, 2005

<http://www.aauw.org/>

Chateaubriand Fellowship; Office for Science and Technology of the Embassy of France in the United States

Award of \$2,050 to \$4,050 per month, plus travel expenses and health insurance

Deadline: December 31, 2005

<http://www.france-science.org/home/hp.asp?LNG=us>

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Award of \$150,000

Deadline: January 1, 2006

<http://www.knaw.nl/heinekenprizes/>

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