

# Careers

## Keep Your Eyes on the Prize

### *Notes on Negotiating the Grad Student-to-Postdoc Transition*

The Early Careers Committee again held their ever-popular transitions panel at the 2010 Annual Meeting to a roomful of wide-eyed grad students preparing for the shift to postdoc-hood. Committee Chair *Tharin Blumenschein*, of East Anglia University, guided seasoned faculty *Richard K.P. Benniger* (Vanderbilt University), *Jan Lipfert* (Delft University of Technology, The Netherlands) *Yael Yaniv* (NIH), and industry guest *Edith Arnold* (Stanford University) as they took questions from the audience. They answered anything from how to switch fields entirely to the most important question you never asked your potential PI. The message? Choose a goal and go for it.

### *Not Your Typical Research*

A lab is made up of more than just the PI, so check out the lab as a whole. Before the interview, do your homework. Find out how many members of the lab go on to get faculty positions, learn the lab's publication rates—even contact the lab's alums to get the scoop about their experiences there. The information you dig up will speak for itself, and should say something to you: if the number of postdocs who end up with faculty positions as a direct result of their time in that lab is low, don't think you'll be the exception. Steer clear and look for a lab with a better postdoc-to-faculty track record.

Your investigation might turn up some useful data on another important aspect of the lab: the culture. Every lab has one, and you should use each interview you attend to get a sense of

it. Ask the PI detailed questions about his or her overall view of the lab. As you listen to the answers, think about how you function best and what strengths you would bring to each lab environment. Be open to the fresh possibilities each unique lab culture presents: new collaborators, new projects, new skills to add to your growing repertoire. If you're interested in a European lab but your only lab experience is all-American, consider going for it. The funding system might take some getting used to and you might lose touch with some of your contacts from the States, but keep in mind the conferences you have the opportunity to attend and the papers you'll publish. It's all part of deciding what works for you. To help figure out whether the lab will be a good fit, use the interview. While you're sitting there sweating it, remember that it's also your chance to put them in the hot seat. Ask detailed questions, and ask a lot of them.

### *The Truth about Switching It Up*

Going from academia to industry may be easy, but coming back again is a high hurdle to leap. Connections with former academic colleagues become hard to maintain. You'll go from being a jack-of-all-trades to an expert of one. Getting back into the regular paper-publishing groove can be difficult. That being said, it depends on your field. It might just be a challenge you're ready to accept.

Switching fields within academia or industry is smoother. You already have tried-and-true methods; the trick is to apply them to another field. Patiently give yourself time to acquire any skills you don't have. If you're taking your computational grad training to an experimental field, embrace the learning curve. You can best pick up the skills by doing your own work, and a PI willing to give you the space to develop your own project helps the transition.

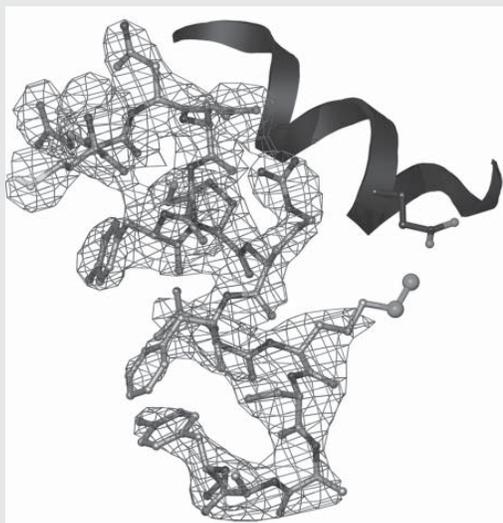
## To Pursue or Not to Pursue a Postdoc?

As you outline your goal, ask yourself: is a postdoc the right course for me? The question may seem obvious, but the answer plays a significant role in structuring your career path. Like anything else in life, the postdoc closes some doors but can open others. If you're aiming for an academic career, a postdoc position only makes sense. If your goal is more industry-centered, you may want to skip it. For most industry jobs, a PhD suffices. On the other hand, a postdoc can help you develop skills attractive to an industry career. Examine the big picture before pursuing a postdoc—and keep your career goal in mind when you do.

## Do What You Love and Love What You Do

Choosing a goal is half the battle. Once you have a clear objective, go for it! Articulate the general idea of your vision to prospective labs or industry employers. Don't describe it too minutely—you don't want to narrow your field of possible funding. Even interviewing with "half-baked ideas" about your objective is ok, as long as you can describe where you want to go with them. Instead of focusing on what you don't know, be confident in the knowledge and skills you do have. Find a place to do the work you want to do, and remember how much you love it—you'll be better at doing something you love anyway.

## 2010 Summer Course in Biophysics



The Biophysical Society 2010 *Summer Course in Biophysics: Case Studies in the Life of Physics* began its third year on May 19, at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. Eleven students from diverse backgrounds were selected for this intense 11-week course, set up to emulate graduate school-level curriculum and demand. Minority Affairs Committee members *Luis Marky* (MAC Chair), *Ibrahim Cisse*, *Barry R. Lentz*, and *Wilma Olson* participated in reviewing the applications.