

Careers

Collaborations

The Committee for Professional Opportunities for Women (CPOW) hosted another successful installment of its Career Roundtable Luncheon at the 54th Annual Meeting in San Francisco. During this program, graduate students, postdocs and early career attendees lunched with seasoned faculty and picked their brains about negotiating the tricky parts of establishing a research career. About a dozen established faculty members from various institutions discussed topics like where to look for the right funding, how to set up collaborations, writing grants, and conflict resolution—all things helpful to know for biophysicists new to the research career.

A popular topic in this session was collaborations: how to establish them successfully, how to decline them, and what to do when they don't work out. Here are some highlights from those discussions.

- **The magic number three.** Ask at least three professors to help you—even if they don't work in your department. Of three, one will say yes. If they aren't interested in collaborating, they'll at least offer some names of potential collaborators. Remember, it's in their best interest to see you succeed; if they can't help personally, they'll steer you toward someone who can.
- **Scratch each other's back.** Collaborating should be mutually beneficial. Be open to another's ideas as you share your work. Open communication is the key to successful collaborating. Learn to trust each other, and only collaborate with people you trust.

If you're looking for a new collaborator, ask friends or a trusted mentor for suggestions.

- **Cut your losses.** Collaborative relationships are like friendships: you choose to hang around with the people who bring out the best in you. Friends who are there when the chips are down are friends worth keeping. It's the same with science. If you jive with the person you're working with, creativity flourishes and great things are accomplished. If there's tension and lack of trust in a collaborative relationship, don't cling to that setup. Let go of that contact as a potential future collaborator. Chalk it up to experience, but ask someone else next time.
- **Just say no.** If you're invited to set up a collaborative project by someone with whom you have no desire to work, say so. Politely and respectfully decline the invitation if the collaboration wouldn't be beneficial to you. Do this even if this person has a direct influence on your career. Instead of unwillingly becoming part of a team, explain that you either don't have the resources or that you have your grad student's project to consider. Helpfully offer to give your input on the research or suggest some names of other potentially good collaborators for the project.
- **It's all friends together.** Biophysics is a small community. Be nice. Be courteous. Don't make enemies. Petty arguments rarely get you anywhere in the moment you're having them, and they could count against you later when you're reaching out to others in the community for help with a project.

- **Read up.** Get your hands on the Burroughs Wellcome Fund's indispensable resource at the Howard Hughes Medical Institute website, *Making the Right Moves: A Practical Guide to Scientific Management for Postdocs and New Faculty*. This handy PDF addresses how to approach a potential collaborator, communication in collaborative relationships, some challenges you might face as an early-career collaborator and general collaboration etiquette. You can find it at: http://www.hhmi.org/resources/labmanagement/downloads/moves2_ch12.pdf.



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