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. Your privacy is assured!

C: I'm currently in my fifth year of graduate school. I can see the light at the end of the tunnel, so I am starting to think about what to do next. I want to do a postdoc in a field that neighbors one aspect of my grad research. I have not yet spoken with any potential postdoc advisors, but I've identified a few that might be good (based on their publications), and I just found out that my #1 pick will give a talk at a big meeting I am attending next month. My question is, how do I approach this person? My advisor isn't going (and doesn't know this guy, anyway), so I can't rely on her for an introduction. I've tried going up to talk to speakers after their talk is over, but I find it horribly uncomfortable! I'm a rather quiet person in general, and there always seem to be twelve people with much more important questions waiting with me. But this meeting is so large, I am afraid if I don't approach him after his talk, I might not find him again at all.

—Shy in Stony Brook

Ahhh, the unquantifiable importance of networking! Talking with other scientists has value far beyond schmoozing for jobs; the informal chitchat that surrounds scientific meetings is invaluable to science itself. What better way to learn about a new method,

hear what's been tried (but perhaps never published), find out what competing labs are up to, and gather the salient points from all that literature you haven't gotten

around to reading yet? And while many people do not think about it explicitly, learning to talk with other scientists also represents how we take those first steps towards establishing our own place in the community of science. As a result, informal chatting at meetings can be at least as important as assimilating new knowledge from formal talks and posters.

Yet developing the 'people skills' necessary to participate in the broader scientific community are often at odds

with the scientific preparation we receive in graduates school! After all, bench work is pretty solitary stuff; it is possible to go for days speaking only to one's lab mates (or maybe only a bay mate!). Many who are drawn to graduate school are therefore not the types to

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seek out more contact with other people, particularly new people. As a result, many graduate students are not very good at

chatting up new people (they often find cocktail parties filled with strangers to be boring and uncomfortable, too). This situation becomes more pronounced when the 'new people' in questions are not peers (other graduate students), but PIs, particularly scientific hot-shots with big names, high-profile publications, and (it seems) precious little time to chat with scientific nobodies like you!

Unfortunately, this situation can rear its head for the first time when a student

begins preparations to leave the graduate lab and move on to the next posi-Ideally, the student will have already attended a few meetings with the graduate advisor, who provided opportunities for the student to meet some bigwigs who also happen to be old friends. Yet even with these opportunities, unless the student makes a real push to get comfortable with meeting PIs at conferences, the thought of approaching Dr. #1 and introducing yourself (much less opening up the door for rejection, by indicating your interest in a postdoctoral position), can be painful indeed.

So how can you approach Dr. #1 in a way that is as pain-free as possible? My first suggestion would be to contact Dr. #1 (and perhaps some of your other top postdoc contenders) now, while there is still a month or two before the meeting. Send a nice letter on departmental stationery, indicating who you are, what you've been doing in graduate school, what you would like to do next, and that you are writing to inquire about potential postdoctoral openings. Include a CV, and reprints if you've got

them. Highlight why you are interested in their lab, and why they should be interested in you. You can also mention here that you will be at the meeting next month, and could make face-to-face

contact there, but don't rely on this tactic alone. Your point here is to put your name in front of these people, so it sounds familiar the next time it is heard

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But how about

while you are at the meeting? Do you know someone else who knows Dr. #1, and will also be at meeting? Ask this intermediary for an introduction. This works particularly well if you know someone who happens to be an old crony of Dr. #1; maybe you can ask to tag along to a lunch or coffee break and get in some meaningful time to chat.

Professor Bellum completely agrees that talking to speakers after his or her talk is difficult, especially when there is a crowd around. And to be perfectly frank, immediately after the talk the speaker will probably want to talk with people who want to react to the results that were presented, rather than shift gears completely to talk with you about future projects or upcoming vacancies. Why don't you show up extra early for the symposium, while the speakers are arriving and setting up their visual aids? Even if it means skipping the last talk in the previous session, the time alone with Dr. #1 will be well worth it. Obviously, you don't want to bother him while he's wrestling with a recalcitrant slide presentation, but there is often some dead time beforehand, while the A/V people coordinate other speakers' talks, etc. There typically is no questioning crowd around at this point. You may even be encouraged to take the seat next to him, which would provide you with some brief exchanges between talks with which to dazzle him with your brilliance.

Are you presenting a poster or a short talk at the meeting? If you approach Dr.

#1 before his talk, make sure you mention your upcoming presentation and invite him to stop by. Make sure you hand him a card or scrap of paper with your name, institution, the name/num-

ber of your presentation, its location and time, and why he should remember to stop by. By handing over a physical note for him to tuck into his abstract book, you are making it that much more likely that, in the hustle and bustle of a big

meeting, he will remember to stop by.

What if your poster/talk is early in the meeting, before Dr. #1's talk? Again, contact prior to departure can help here. A week or two before the meeting, drop Dr. #1 an email, reminding him who you are and mentioning that you will be

presenting your findings on X at the meeting, you think he will find them quite interesting because of his work on Y, and you would be delighted if he would stop by. Keep it brief, but don't forget to include all title/date/time/location information (do not expect him to look it up himself in the abstract book; you are trying to eliminate as many barriers to his attendance as possible!).

OK, say Dr. #1 has promised to look you up at your poster. How do you make the most of this opportunity? First off, of course, be there, and be on time. Second, spend some time ahead of time thinking about your results in the context of what Dr. #1 cares about. This might mean revising your standard poster patter to highlight certain results or experimental details that you believe he will find interesting. But don't go overboard here: most PIs are interested in hiring postdocs that can add a new dimension to the established background of their lab. So if your work is really tangential to his lab's work, mention what you see as the connection, but leave it as that. Above all, be yourself! Finally, suggest grabbing a coffee or lunch to talk in more detail, either right then or at another time (meeting, say, at your poster, or the ubiquitous message boards). That meeting can provide you with more time to learn about the lab, and a possible postdoctoral position.

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Even with the best-laid plans, realize that you may not manage to hook up with Dr. #1 at the meeting at all. Maybe, after lying in wait in the symposium room, you learn he is ill and was

forced to cancel. A shame, but follow up afterwards by email, saying 'get well soon!' and expressing your hope for a future encounter. Keep him appraised of your progress (reprints, etc.), and let him know of your continued interest in his lab. Perhaps most importantly, remember that no matter how big the wig is that Dr. #1 wears, he is still a human being like the rest of us: he still likes to be treated sincerely and considerately, and he would rather spend his time talking with interesting people than boring people. Good luck!