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 and anonymity are assured!

USA-bound?

I will soon finish graduate school in the Netherlands. Originally, I was planning to look for a postdoctoral position in the United States. I have few family ties (no spouse, etc.), and I have heard great things about the support for science in the U.S.; a postdoc there seems like a great opportunity to add to my scientific development. However, with what I have been reading recently about the US position on the war in Iraq, and the tightened security surrounding visas and so forth, now I am not so sure. Is it crazy to accept a job in a country that seems increasingly hostile to foreigners? Particularly if I strongly disagree with the foreign policy of that country?

--Unsure in Utrecht

Your questions have two components: a practical, administrative component related to obtaining a visa and moving to the U.S., and an emotional, "will I be miserable there?", quality-of-life component. Let's look at the practical part first:

Yes, it is definitely more difficult to get a visa nowadays than it was a few years ago. It will undoubtedly take longer to receive your visa, and you will be subjected to increased scrutiny both during the application process and during your entry into the country (fingerprinting, etc.). This increased scrutiny is not applied uniformly; applicants from many Asian and African countries will receive much more scrutiny than those from Western Europe. In addition, expect extra scrutiny if you get a visa and start work in the U.S., but then decide to return home for a vacation: there is a larger chance now that your return might be delayed some sort of administrative tangle, particularly if you need to complete a bureaucratic formality like renewing your passport (best to take care of this before your first departure for the U.S.). Realize, however, that U.S. research institutions rely heavily on foreign graduate students and postdocs to drive forward the research enterprise. So these institutions are all too aware that the tightened regulations on visas for foreign scientists have the potential to damage the progress of U.S. scientific advancement. [Indeed,

many scientific societies have written policy statements arguing against many of the new security procedures; read the Biophysical Society's statement at:

http://www.biophysics.org/pubaffairs/i mmigration.pdf]. As a result, every institution with a decent number of foreign visitors (particularly students/postdocs) will have an office devoted to facilitating the visa application process. In particular, this office will probably generate (or help your future PI generate) a letter in support of your appointment; this letter can be submitted along with your visa application. Provided you do not have a criminal record or anything else in your past that could be regarded suspiciously, support from your future institution can still go a long way towards easing the visa process. Many of these institutional offices have information available online about what sort of support and/or guidance they offer, so if you have already identified potential postdoc labs, it may be worth looking up these offices now in order to get their view on the process.

Once you begin your appointment, this same office may be able to facilitate other administrative processes like setting up a bank account and getting a social security number. In addition, this office should be contacted well in advance of a trip home, so you can check to see what documents you should carry with you on your trip.

This is a bit peripheral to your ques-

tions, but if you do decide to go abroad, keep in mind that moving country, even to a country that welcomes you with open arms and has a foreign policy exactly to your liking, is never an easy business. Imagine taking all the stress of a normal move to a new place in your home country, then add to it the stress of learning a new banking system, new driving laws, a new tax code, new renting polices, new TV shows, new fruits and vegetables at the grocery store, etc., etc. Some people respond well to these challenges, others struggle. You are lucky in this respect because the Biophysical Society has a very helpful article available to help people prepare for inter-country moves, written by Maurits de Planque of the Early Careers Committee. Maurits himself is a veteran of moves to at least three different countries, on two different continents, so he is in an excellent position to write on this topic (view the article at http://www.biophysics.org/ abroad.pdf).

The emotional, "will-I-hate-it-there" component of your questions is more a function of your own personality and outlook. If you go to the U.S. expecting that you will be treated poorly, defensive about your status as a visiting foreigner, and suspicious of peoples' intentions, you probably will hate it, regardless of the reception you receive. If you keep an open mind, however, you will probably be pleasantly surprised.

While it is true that most U.S. citizens have never traveled abroad, and therefore have limited firsthand exposure to foreign cultures or politics, there are good reasons why Americans are regarded, on average, as warm, friendly, curious people. It is important to note that this is in direct contrast to how the U.S. is often represented in the foreign media, and underscores that the attitudes of individual Americans towards you has little or nothing to do with U.S. foreign policy. Many Americans will be sincerely curious about how your perspectives and views differ from their own. And many Americans are very conscious of the fact that their not-to-distant ancestors were originally foreigners in the U.S. Notice I wrote, "on average" and "many": sure, there will always be some closeminded jerks (in every country!), but keep in mind that academic institutions in the U.S., as in most countries, are bastions of liberal thinkers, many of who have actively protested against the war in Iraq. So in a sense, you are stacking the deck in favor of finding people sympathetic to your own political views by settling in an academic/research community. I have heard that some foreign students/postdocs try to stack this deck even further by targeting a part of the U.S. with political views that resemble their own: If you are strongly anti-Bush, for example, the voting record suggests you might be more comfortable in a state like Massachusetts than Texas. But given that, regardless of where you wind up, you will be surrounded by a bubble of liberal thinking, I would not exclude Texas (or any other state that voted for Bush) merely for this reason. If anything, I would be much more concerned if your political leanings were pro-war, and pro-Bush; I think you would have a much harder time right now finding a U.S. research university with a community that strongly favors these views.

Something else to consider: What, exactly, are your motivations for wanting a postdoctoral position in the U.S.? The

atmosphere for science is indeed quite different from the atmosphere in Europe. Many excellent U.S. academic labs are quite small, meaning all graduate students and postdocs might report directly to the PI, rather than first to a senior postdoc or research faculty. There can be great opportunities to develop skills as an independent scientist in an environment like this. There is a lot of money available for research, but the competition for awards can be fierce. As a foreigner, you will not be eligible for postdoctoral fellowships sponsored by the U.S. government, but other fellowships opportunities are available through private foundations, and perhaps your home country; take a look Society's funding page (http://www.biophysics.org/opportunities/grants.html) for more ideas. If you want to experience the U.S. scientific environment but are leery of a radical cultural change, aim for an institution in an older U.S. city (Boston, Philadelphia, or even New Orleans or San Francisco); these older cities have a distinctly more "European" feel than newer U.S. cities. On the flip side, if you are looking for a distinctly American experience, consider institutions in newer cities like Chicago, Dallas, Denver, and so forth. Just keep in mind that, since much of the growth in these newer cities occurred after the development of automobiles, you may need a car to get around.

Do keep in mind that larger institutions, and those with larger populations of foreign students/postdocs, are more likely to have larger, more active foreign student associations. These organizations can be a great way to ease the transition to a new country, and meet others who share your upbringing and culture. Just make sure that you do not rely exclusively on these organizations to establish your entire social network. If you play sports, take in a movie, go grocery shopping, get picked up at the airport, hit the bars, and talk on the phone only with other expatriates, you will likely miss out on a fantastic opportunity to learn firsthand

about the culture of a country unlike your own. And ultimately, that appreciation of different cultures might just be the most valuable part of your postdoc abroad.

2005 International Biophysical Congress

Montpellier, France August 27-September 1

This year's International Biophysics Congress will be held in Montpellier, France, home to one of Europe's oldest functioning medical schools. Congress is jointly sponsored by IUPAB (the International Union of Pure and Applied Biophysics), EBSA European Biophysical Societies Association), and SFB (the French Biophysical Society). The theme of the conference is Biophysics In All Its Complexity. Each day will include one plenary lecture and 6 symposia. In addition to 3-4 invited speakers in each symposium, 3-4 abstracts will be chosen for a symposium presentation. Poster sessions will feature wine and cheese, and participants can also attend exhibitor presentations and individual biophysical society meetings during the 5-7 pm duration

All of the updated information about the meeting, including updated speaker list, symposium lists, registration and travel and lodging information, as well as tourist information about the region can be found at the Congress website http://worldbiophysics2005. sfbiophys.org.

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