

Dr. Charles Price on "Making the Most of your Postdoc:"

*Sibby: Charles, what do you see as the purpose or intent of completing a postdoc?*

Charles: In the social science, a postdoc offers an opportunity for a respite between completing a dissertation and taking a full-time job. It's an opportunity to work on building one's vita, especially by writing and submitting work for publication, writing and submitting grant proposals, and by presenting at professional conferences. Lastly, the postdoc offers an opportunity to be more deliberate and methodical in applying for jobs.

*Sibby: As a researcher and faculty mentor, what advice do you have for new postdocs? How can they make the most of their postdoc experience?*

Charles: Make yourself known and regularly present in the department. Show interest in the department's activities, the work of department faculty, and perhaps even graduate students. In addition, work on developing relationships with a few key people ("key" should not be conflated with "big names" or popularity). Ask their advice. Have them review your work. Connect with, and take advantage of building relationships with other postdocs. They are in the same boat as you, but will perhaps have different expertise that can be helpful and illuminating. They may also be helpful at later stages in your career.

Furthermore, make sure your chair knows who you are, why you are there, and that you might like to be a faculty member in the department. Finally, make at least one presentation to your department. Approach it as a "live" job talk.

*Sibby: What goals or expectations should a new postdoc have to get the very most out of their experience? Is there a timeline in terms of approaching and meeting those goals and expectations—to be competitive later as a junior faculty member?*

Charles: Be prepared to accomplish less than you set out in your proposal, but be able to defend why this is the case. Also, work on building relationships during the first six months of your postdoc if it is a two year deal, the first three months if it is a year-long deal. Expect many faculty to not be enthusiastic about your presence, and to not be active in getting to know you. You must make them know you.

Learn what the department wants from you as a postdoc. Don't accept hook, line, and sinker that "We are just glad that you are here. Just focus on your work" unless you really have no interest in the department, whatsoever.

Even if you don't want to work in the department, there might be faculty or students that have something to offer you.

And last, test the job market sooner than later. Getting or having a job offer has the paradoxical effect of increasing the interest of other departments/ universities. If you get a job offer, leak it to the department as soon as possible.

*Sibby: We talk to postdoc often about the "role of the mentor," what is the role of mentor from your perspective? What expectations do mentors have of postdocs?*

Charles: I think mentors should provide insight into the rules and bunk of the academic "game." I also think mentors should help postdocs strengthen their capacity to compete for jobs, grants, awards. Still, mentors should provide useful and constructive feedback to postdocs (both positive and negative). Mentors should help postdocs be able to evaluate themselves in relation to their peers.

It's important for postdocs to understand that mentors may have no expectations of postdocs. Or, mentors may expect postdocs to take the initiative in terms of relationship work, meeting, etc.

*Sibby: What advise would you give to postdocs on how to find career mentors, other than their assigned faculty mentors?*

Charles: Work the grapevine. Ask graduate students which faculty are most helpful and approachable. Then meet them and ask them the same thing, perhaps more diplomatically. Look for converges between your academic specialties, but do not overlook other things that might serve as the basis for a genuine relationship, such as playing tennis or basketball.

Sometimes postdocs encounter problems in their departments or with a faculty mentor, how would you suggest they manage conflict? This tricky, and I have no stock advice. It depends. In some cases an aggrieved postdoc might be best served by approaching his or her Chair in confidence. But what if the Chair is a friend of the faculty person in question, or has less power and influence than the faculty person in question?

Consider meeting with the university's ombudsperson or negotiator.

*Sibby: Are there things new postdocs can do before they arrive on campus?*

Charles: Contact your mentor as soon as you accept your award or appointment. Visit your campus postdoc office and your academic department

before your postdoc begins, and meet your mentor or other faculty during this visit. At this point start trying to get a sense of what resources will be available, what the department life will be like, what kind of support you will find in your department.

*Sibby: Any, final words of advice?*

Charles: Yes, get to know your postdoc cohort.