

Dr. Doug Cyr on “Making the Most of your Postdoc”

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

Doug: Postdoctoral training is designed for fellows to refine and expand upon skills in the areas of analytic thinking, research techniques, public presentation, and professional writing. The overall goal is for fellows to develop the skill set required to pin point novel high impact areas of investigation and then obtain resources to pursue answers to these questions.

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

Doug: The transition for being a Ph.D. student to a postdoc is often challenging because students pursue a defined goal, with in a structured program and the end result is clear. Successful postdoctoral fellows realize that they are in a 3-5 year temporary training position and know that the job market for Ph.D. level workers is highly competitive.

Successful fellows typically define clear goals at the onset of the postdoctoral period and become knowledgeable about what they need to accomplish to achieve their goals. Postdocs who simply treat their training period like a 9-5 job usually have difficulty in finding the job they desire.

*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 on?*

The timeline for accomplishing goals varies amongst disciplines. Yet, postdoc positions are meant to be high intensity periods of study where Fellows develop and implement high impact programs and or complete research projects. Postdocs need to aggressively pursue their career objectives and demonstrate an outstanding record of productivity in every aspect of your training. Search committees always ask what has the person of interest accomplished? Folks who accomplish the most can typically chose amongst a variety of job offers.

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

Doug: For the mentor—postdoc relationships should be symbiotic in nature where both parties benefit from their interactions. In many instances, mentors provide the infrastructure required for postdocs to conduct their studies. Mentors typically direct grant funded research projects and train postdocs in the context of these funded projects. Ideally, the mentor will foster the development of the postdocs experimental, thinking and writing skills, while exposing the postdoc to members of his/her field. In return, the

postdoc is expected to conduct novel high quality research that is published jointly with the mentor. Ideally, the postdoc will develop research interests that are related to the primary focus of the mentor's project, but don't directly overlap, and then initiate work on them as an independent investigator. Yet, postdocs should not expect mentors to provide them with future projects.

*Sibby: How would you advice postdocs on how to find career mentors, other than their faculty mentor?*

Doug: The Faculty is, typically, very open to discussing research and career development issues with students and postdocs. To take advantage of these opportunities fellows should be visible at Departmental seminars and functions and make the effort to engage faculty. Visibility is also important because postdocs will need multiple letters of recommendation to apply for jobs and fellowships. The willingness of faculty to help out is fostered through casual interactions during the course of a postdoc's stay at the University.

Sometimes postdocs encounter problems in the lab or with a faculty mentor, how would you suggest they manage conflict?

Conflicts are always a difficult issue. The simplest thing to do is to openly address the problem with the person you are in conflict with prior to things getting out of control. It is important for you to not lose your composure in the work place. It is best to deal with problems as they arise and not to internalize them.

I have seen many different difficult situations over the years, and I would be happy to help postdocs and mentors address problems that they can't resolve themselves.

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

Postdocs need to remember that they are trainees who need to prove themselves as productive members of their research community. Thus, I would advise Postdocs to make sure that their dissertation is submitted and approved before they arrive on campus. I also think that Postdocs need to be knowledgeable about their new research field and arrive excited and ready to focus on the next phase of their careers.

*Sibby: Any, final words of advice?*

The first piece of advice is to try to have fun while developing your career. Postdoc training is meant to be high intensity, but there is still time to enjoy life. Define short and long-terms goals. Work towards achieving a short-term goal and once a goal is meet, be sure to reward yourself. Then, get back work and focus on achieving your next goal. Before you know it, you will be qualified for the next phase of your career.