About the program

The program offers access to resources and activities in the Academic Learning Transformation Lab and service-learning experiences through the Division of Community Engagement while providing networking opportunities with students and faculty from a wide range of disciplines, as well as discipline-specific areas of study.

Since most courses are one or two credits, students are able to easily add them into their academic program schedules. For students who complete all course requirements, the capstone course is an internship/externship experience during which the student is mentored by a senior faculty member.

PFF courses may be taken individually or as part of the Preparing Future Faculty in the Professions certification module, which places special emphasis on preparing faculty for positions in professional schools.

It is the mark of an educated mind to be able to entertain a thought without accepting it.

-Aristotle

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Tips for Thriving in Your Research Career

Rayna Harris

This blog was inspired by the “NIH and You: How to Survive and Thrive in Your Research Career” Symposium at the 2014 Society for Neuroscience Annual Meeting in Washington D.C. on Saturday, November 15, 2014. NIH Panel Members participating in the symposium discussion included:

Dr. Stephen J. Korn, Director of the Office of Training, Career Development, and Workforce Diversity.

Dr. Nancy L. Desmond, Office Director and Associate Director for Research Training and Career Development.

Dr. Michelle Jones-London, Director of Diversity Training and Workforce Development.

Dr. Alan L. Williard, Acting Deputy Director of NINDS.

#1. When it comes to choosing mentors, be promiscuous!

Choosing the right mentor is one of the most critical decisions grad students and post-doctoral fellows must make (see # 2). However, don’t forget the importance of having multiple mentors during each stage of your research career.

Other mentors will not only nurture and advise you, but they can also fill the voids in your relationship with your primary mentor. For instance, if your principal investigator (PI) is not a statistician, seek the advice of one who is to verify that your results are statistically sound. Or, if your mentor is a single male and you are a soon to be mother, seek the guidance of a female PI with children to discuss work-family balance.

#2. But seriously, choose the right mentor for you

It is important to join a lab where you will be supported in your training and your career; receiving good mentorship support is pivotal for success in your career. When choosing a lab, do your homework first and find out where former trainees have gone. Did they continue down their chosen career path? Do they still have a good relationship with the PI? These are important questions you need to have the answers to.

A good mentor should have the experience and the connections to get you were you want to be!

Once you join a lab, develop a relationship with your mentor that is built on good communication. How, when, and how often you communicate will be different for each mentor-mentee relationship, so find a strategy that works for both of you. Don’t be afraid to talk to your mentor about your goals! Work together to create an individual development plan and revisit it periodically.

For more on this subject, the following articles are highly recommended:


#3. Be a good advisee

It would not be fair to demand quality from your mentor without returning the favor. By being a good advisee, you can actually help your mentor be a good mentor. Be proactive, and ask for your mentor’s time or advice when you need it. This way, both of you can shine!

If you ever find yourself in the unfortunate situation of being in a toxic relationship, swallow your pride and ask for outside help. Talk to your graduate program director, your department chair, or one of your other mentors. These people can either help you work it out with your mentor or can help you find a new lab.

#4. Develop a doable research plan and follow through with it

I recall The Serial Mentor saying that the number one common mistake grad students make is proposing an overly ambitious thesis. Don’t be one of those folks! Propose a doable project. Then do it. Persist even when parts of it fail, and do not take rejection personally.

Stay focused and learn to balance the time and effort you spend on your projects with classes, grant writing (see #8), reading, publishing, exercising, relaxing, and the plethora of other responsibilities you may have.

If you are a post-doctoral fellow, your focus should be to develop a research program that you can take with you! Discuss this early on with your mentor, and don’t join if you suspect that you won’t be able to.
Of course, a healthy dose of ambition is fantastic. Ambition is probably one of the most common shared traits among people who are “the first” to do something. The trick is, though, to not be so overly ambitious that you have little to present in your next job talk or award acceptance speech.

### #5. Learn to cope with failure and develop grit

In addition to technical training, accumulate transferable skills throughout your career. These skills will help you succeed no matter what you choose to pursue and include (but are not limited to) critical thinking, communication, leadership, reasoning, grit, and perseverance.

Empowerment, resiliency, and grit are essential characteristics in a good researcher. Learn to cope with failure and you will have much more success in life. Take control of your academic environment rather than stumbling along after failure. Your mentors are there to help you up when you fall, but you must empower yourself.

### #6. You’ve got to know when to hold ‘em, know when to fold ‘em

This quote is actually from a song about gambling by Kenny Rodgers, but I think the advice really applies publishing goals and whether or not you really want to stay on the tenure track.

Set your aims high. If you aim to publish in top tier journals, then will you have a good chance of publishing in journals ranging from good to the very best. However, don’t spend 6 years trying to get one project into the best journal and then never publish. Ask yourself if publishing small bits early in a solid journal is a better career move or if you really want to hold out for that chance to revolutionize the field with one great piece.

Remember, industry is not easier; it’s just different.

Many of my peers struggle with deciding whether or not to stay in academia. The most common advice I’ve heard is to stick with research as long as you passionately love it and to not quit until you have to. Every minute you spend in academia is useful, so don’t think that you’re wasting your time. If you are considering leaving academia, peruse opportunities as they present themselves and seize the right one when it comes along.

### #7. Network whenever possible and don’t burn bridges

Networking is crucial for career success. You never know when it will be useful or lead to new opportunities.

When you go to meetings, don’t just socialize with people from home. Schedule lunch or coffee with your letter writers to keep them updated or with potential employers to get to know them better. Meet new people at posters or socials or during interactive sessions.

Along those lines, try to keep positive relationships with all your colleagues and don’t burn bridges. Our communities are small, so try to be nice to even to your bad colleagues. You never know you will need something from them or someone they know.

### #8. Talk to your program officer before and after applying for grants

I’ve saved the final tip for the topic of funding. This could probably be a 1000 word blog all by itself, but I’ll keep it short. Visit the National Institute for Allergy and Infectious Disease (NIAID) for more online resources.

Remember, your program officer (PO) is there to help you get funding! I’m sure you have heard that you should call or email them before submitting a grant, but what’s the best approach? The POs say that the best way is to send an email with your Specific Aims page and your Biosketch attached.

Also, contact your PO to discuss interpreting the summary statement of a grant that is not funded. This is especially useful if you have a hard time understanding the essence of the comments or if the reviews are conflicting.

Applying for grants as a grad student or post doc is a great idea because it gives you experience with the whole process and will help you thrive in your research career. However, you don’t need a grant at this stage to get a faculty position. If you have heard this, know that it is a myth! According to Dr. Stephen J. Korn only 15% of new assistant professors had a K99 award.

### Final thoughts

You are capable of more than you know. Choose a goal that seems right for you and strive to be the best, however hard the path. Aim high. Behave honorably. Prepare to be alone at times, and to endure failure. Persist. The world needs all you can give. ~ E.O. Wilson

E.O. Wilson’s advice for thriving in sciencing

There is a pretty good chance you have heard most of this advice before. My mentors (yes I have multiple) and other great scientists have said this over and over again. But, sometimes it’s good to hear things more than once

I hope you found pieces of advice contained herein useful and worth sharing with others. Best wishes in your journey as a research scientist!

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The views expressed in this post belong to the author and are not necessarily those of PLOS.

Rayna Harris studies the neuromolecular basis of social behavior and is involved in several initiatives to enhance training in the life sciences.

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Leaping Over the Hurdles of Procrastination

Posted December 20, 2016 by amandashaver in Early Career Research Community

“This blog post is due when? Now, it’s due now!” I think to myself. I start typing in a fury.

“I can write something beautifully composed and witty in a short time frame, right?” I lie to myself.

How many times do you approach a writing project thinking that you can pump that piece out quickly? “I can write that paper in 1 to 2 months…Sure, I can have that draft turned in by you Friday.” Sound familiar? I’ve said these phrases to myself and my advisor on several occasions, but those deadlines are rarely met.

Why is that? Why do I, and my peers, continuously do this? I’m organized and motivated, but I rarely meet my writing deadlines. That’s because writing is often my “frog,” my biggest and most important task that I am most likely to procrastinate on if I don’t do something about it.

Brian Tracy’s book, Eat That Frog!: 21 Great Ways to Stop Procrastinating and Get More Done in Less Time, was introduced to me in my grant writing class last year and unfortunately hits very close to home for me. Tracy talks about tackling those nagging tasks, the ones that linger in the back of your mind that you never want to touch, in an effective and satisfying way.

Eat That Frog introduced me to a new way of thinking about my most procrastinated tasks and familiarized me with the breadth of research that has been done on procrastination—these are much needed resources for people like me.

Now your frog may not be writing (my hat goes off to you), but perhaps it is analyzing your data, sorting through your electronic files, organizing your lab notebook, preparing for a presentation, etc. Whatever your frog is (we all have one!), there is hope for us if we can learn to practice eating our frog.

The simple idea is that if you start your day off by doing the worst thing on your list, the rest of the day will be smooth sailing.

There are tons of advice columns and books on how to stop procrastinating and tackle frogs, but I’ve found that most articles come down to just a few simple things:

1. Time travel…no not literally. As humans we are incredibly bad at affective forecasting, predicting how we will feel in the future. This is where “time travelling” comes in. We need to create specific mental images of our future self frequently and accurately, to represent the future as though it were happening in the present. Think about the specific task in a tangible context of your day, and think about how those tasks make you feel. Think about getting that paper accepted a few months down the road, what does that feel like? How did you get there? Work backwards from that point of “manuscript accepted” to the present. What steps do you need to take to get there? Think about killing that departmental presentation you have to give. You have well-analyzed data, articulated thoughts about the flaws in your data set and how to move forward, and you answer the audience questions well. How does that feel? Now, how did you get there? When did you start working on your slide show? How long will it take you to analyze your data well? You get the picture.

2. Gain Emotional Intelligence ‘Eating your frog’ often doesn’t feel great because it makes us feel overwhelmed by the task at hand. Ever sit down at your computer with that flashing cursor on your blank Word document staring back at you mocking you? Yeah, me too….Learn to acknowledge your negative emotions toward the task, but continue to work on your frog. By pushing through these negative feelings, you’re making small progress towards your goal and soon the negative feelings will pass. Maybe before you know it the task at hand will no longer be your frog.

3. Decrease Distractions Working on your least favorite task is already hard enough, so why make it more difficult for yourself? Create an environment that will actually allow you to succeed at your task and help you gain more self-discipline. Set aside a specific time to work on your frog, don’t check your email, or your favorite websites, get off social media, and set realistic goals towards that task on that day. I wake up and write before I do almost anything else. This is when I’m the least distracted and can focus on my own agenda and not everyone else’s.

Find what works for you.

4. Accountability Tell someone your goals. Find someone who will actually help you and push you towards completing your task (even the frogs on your list). Be honest with yourself and your accountability partner on where you are in your progression towards completing the task, and a realistic time frame to complete the task. This is not the time to try and impress your friends with how much you have on your to-do list, you want to truly tackle your frog.

5. Ask for help I don’t know about you, but I don’t like to ask for help often. When I do ask for help it’s usually ten steps later than I should have. If you’re not good at writing, then seek out sources that are and can help you be a better writer. No task in science is completed in isolation, so why should writing be any different?

6. Build Your Willpower Willpower is like a muscle, the more you use it the stronger it will become. That means there is good news for those of you who feel like you have no willpower…have no fear be encouraged, the more you use it the stronger it will become.


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