This career development seminar was focused on careers in grants administration. These careers involved the development of grant requests for application (creating grant announcements designed to elicit research proposals), ensuring the grant applications undergo appropriate review, managing grants (making sure that the research is on course to meet the goals of the grant), and analyzing grant reports (determining if the researchers met the goals of the grant).

The panel began with Dr. Ann Lichens-Park, a National Program Leader for Microbial Genomics from the USDA. Dr. Lichens-Park works in a setting at the USDA where she oversees the entire course of a grant’s lifetime. This involves the initial Request For Applications (RFA), which define the type of research and results that the granting institution is looking for, setting up teams to review grant proposals, manage and process grants, and final analysis of a granting program’s success (did the program fulfill the USDA’s goals?). In addition to overseeing grants, she responds to emails about the scope of specific grants and manages the grant review teams. A typical applicant for a position similar to hers is a university faculty member or industry scientist. However, she initially entered the field as a grants specialist (a GS12 position) after training as a post-doctoral fellow at Harvard and at Dartmouth Medical School, with a year off in between to stay at home raising her child. She found a mentor at the Virginia Women’s center that helped her network, apply for jobs, and sell her skills during her job search. After several years of working her way up the ranks, she became a National Program Leader (GS15).

The afternoon continued with Dr. Sheryl Brining, a special assistant at the NIH. Dr. Brining started in the NIH intramural program in the Office of Review, transitioned to peer review and ultimately became Director of the office. She later left that position for her current role at the Office of Research Information Systems (ORIS) within the NIH. She pointed out that many positions are harder to get than they once were as post-doctoral fellows are now competing with professors for the same positions. In order to be competitive for such positions, fellows should take advantage of opportunities such as networking (like joining committees, organizing events), requesting informational interviews, and doing details (a type of internship, described in more depth at http://irp.nih.gov/catalyst/v21i2/details-details-details). For career development, she reiterated the importance of networking, developing skills outside the lab, repurposing your skill set to look ready for a career transition, and requesting a lot of informational interviews with an intent to learn more about other jobs and what they require. One should go on informational interviews with the intention of learning about a career rather than expecting a job offer.
Moving on to a panelist who was recently a fellow herself, Dr. Elizabeth Webber, a Program Analyst in the Division of Extramural Research at NINDS, described her transition from post-doctoral fellow, a shift that occurred just 2 years ago. Her current position involves reading, sorting, and analyzing grant applications as well as attending study sections. She also has to field questions from applicants regarding the scope and other details of grants. Dr. Webber also writes funding initiatives, reviews and analyzes proposals, and ultimately analyzes the outcome of the initiative to answer the question “was the intent of the funding initiative achieved?”. Analyzing grant outcome data to determine whether the initiative’s goals were achieved is one of her favorite responsibilities, as it gives her a direct measurement of the impact she is having.

Shifting the perspective away from the federal government, Dr. Dean Frohlich described his career path within the non-profit sector, initially working for Stand Up to Cancer and currently in a position working for the Conquer Cancer Foundation of the American Society for Clinical Oncology. He transitioned into this career from a post-doctoral fellowship at the NIH (NICAM). In addition to managing the entire life of various grant initiatives, he also needs to write for the lay public, in order to publicize and get donations to fund research initiatives. He routinely reviews grants, initiatives, and organizes review committees, but he also writes and reviews press releases and program announcements. He is currently the only scientist in his section of the foundation. He felt that learning to write well for a lay audience was the most difficult aspect of the transition to grants administration. It was more difficult than he expected, as scientists are typically trained to write for a scientific audience.

The panel concluded with Dr. Jane Chiang, who also works at a non-profit as the Senior Vice President, Medical Affairs and Community Information, within the American Diabetes Association. Her career path took her from an MD in pediatrics, to a pediatric endocrinology fellowship, and later, to a faculty position at UCSF. She then switched careers because she did not feel passionate about what she was doing, and did not feel she was achieving her life’s goal of helping others (despite her clear success, as, in switching careers, she returned a grant she was awarded from the Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation). She then transitioned into industry at Genentech, later to a position within the Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation, and finally to her current position. When giving career advice to fellows, Dr. Chiang noted that although she does not enjoy networking, she feels that building significant relationships (quality over quantity) is vital to change and advance one’s career.

Take-home messages:

1. The speakers agree that funding for government jobs in grants administration has been decreased, so it may be easier to pursue a career at non-profits or private companies. One can check various websites, like the Health Research Alliance or various professional organizations’ websites (like the website for the American Diabetes Association, or American Society
for Clinical Oncology). Also, some jobs cannot be easily identified from the title, so look through all the descriptions, and keep applying. Responses to job applications can be quite slow, particularly from the government.

2. Generally, some elements of their positions that the speakers enjoyed most were: working with interesting people, improving research/making a difference, analyzing data to see the impact of what they are doing, seeing the broad view of cancer research, and watching/managing people’s growth. Negatives included bureaucracy (lots of red tape in large organizations), lack of management training in their industry, writing general reports without a specific audience (non-scientists or experts?), and finally, a pressing need to manage their time.

3. Advice on applying for jobs was quite plentiful. First, set goals and a schedule for informational interviews and applications. Email institute directors, deputy chairs of extramural activities, and similarly-ranked individuals at other companies for informational interviews, and go in with an open mind to learn. Keep trying, learn the details of the jobs, and accept an entry-level position if you find something you think you will really enjoy. Finally, go to career symposia, ask labmates, lab heads, and let it be generally known that you are looking for a job/informational interviews/internships.

4. Details, what are they? They are part-time internships within the government or non-profits that provide an opportunity to gain experience outside of the lab. Details are usually not advertised, so it is best to ask around for available opportunities. The details are unpaid, however, you still maintain your stipend from the lab, therefore, you need permission from your PI before starting a detail.

5. Finally, the last big piece of advice from the panelists was, if you are transitioning away from lab science, you need to do things outside of labwork to show that you are ready for the transition and planning for it. These things should also show that you have skills necessary for the job, such as organizing talks, sitting on committees, writing, and taking management classes.