This month’s FelCom Career Development seminar explored careers in professional scientific societies. The seminar consisted of several panelists from a range of societies that focus on issues related to science policy, education, outreach, conference organization, and publishing. Each panelist presented his or her background as a research scientist, described the transition into his or her current position, and offered insight to fellows on how to make that transition.

The panel opened with Dr. Chris Pickett, who is currently a Policy Analyst for the American Society for Biochemistry and Molecular Biology (ASBMB). Dr. Pickett received his PhD from the University of Utah and then did a postdoctoral fellowship at Washington University in St. Louis. As a postdoc, he began attending events on Capitol Hill to discuss the importance of funding for biomedical research with policymakers and also started writing a variety of science policy pieces. He advised that the best way to transition from the bench to a career in science policy is to apply for fellowships, such as AAAS. If interested in science policy, get involved by speaking with senators about biomedical research, ask questions about careers or current issues in science policy, pay attention to what is being discussed on Capitol Hill and among researchers, and get as much writing experience as possible. In his current position as a Policy Analyst, Dr. Pickett works on a variety of issues, including funding for scientific research, graduate student and postdoctoral training, STEM education, and science in the media.

Dr. Sherri-Gae Scott, a Grants Proposal Manager for the Federation of American Societies for Experimental Biology (FASEB), took the stage next. Dr. Scott received her PhD in Cellular and Molecular Medicine from John Hopkins University School of Medicine and continued as a postdoc at JHU for 2.5 years. However, she realized early on in her scientific career that bench science was not for her and wanted to transition to the non-profit sector. Dr. Scott currently works for the nation’s largest coalition of biomedical researchers and oversees the fundraising portfolios of over 70 small conferences. She collaborates with academic scientists who serve as conference organizers by identifying new sources of funding and reassessing current ones. In addition to assisting organizers with grant applications and managing accounts, she tries to educate both scientists and non-scientists on how to “turn science into money.” She recommended to those wanting to transition from the bench to the desk to be proactive by writing grants, take on different responsibilities in and out of lab, gain leadership by participating in institutional organizations, and identify one’s weaknesses in order to work on them. In addition to possessing “scientific skills”, such as being analytical and highly organized, to transition to the desk, she emphasized one also needs to have “soft skills”, such as empathy, emotional intelligence, and customer service.

Next, Dr. Katherine Lontok spoke about her career path to her current role as Educational Programs Manager at the American Society for Human Genetics (ASHG). She began with an overview of ASHG, which is the largest professional society for human genetics specialists worldwide. The primary activities of ASHG include providing a forum for sharing human genetics research results, promoting the education of genetics research and its clinical relevance, and advocating for science research policies and support. Her major responsibilities include planning the Annual Meeting’s education
events, serving as a liaison to the Staff and Development Committee, organizing trainee initiatives outside the Annual Meeting, and developing and maintaining genetics education resources. Dr. Lontok earned a B.S. in Molecular and Cell Biology and Genetics from the University of Maryland, College Park, and then pursued a PhD in Biochemistry from the University of California, San Francisco. Her interest in science education developed during her graduate career when she volunteered as a classroom scientist for the Science and Health Education Partnership in San Francisco Public Schools, which ultimately evolved into a paid internship. She was then hired as a Senior Program Specialist at the Smithsonian Institution’s National Science Resources Center (now the Smithsonian’s Science Education Center), where she focused on implementing research-based science education programs in school systems across the nation. Dr. Lontok asserted that a career in science education can be found in many different places, ranging from scientific societies, think tanks, STEM education non-profits, professional development resources, museums, grants administration, and all levels of academia. She advised fellows potentially interested in a career in STEM education to get involved in organizing events, do informational interviews, and create and maintain a good LinkedIn account.

The panel continued with Dr. Ulyana Desiderio, who is a Director of Scientific Affairs in the Department of Government Relations, Practice, and Scientific Affairs at the American Society of Hematology (ASH). Dr. Desiderio opened her session by asking fellows in the audience how many wanted to work at the bench for the rest of their lives. Very few hands were raised, and she reaffirmed that attitudes among students and postdocs have been changing over the years in favor of alternative careers. Dr. Desiderio completed her PhD in Biochemistry from the Johns Hopkins University Bloomberg School of Public Health’s Department of Biochemistry and Molecular Biology. During her fifth year of graduate school, she began to realize that bench science was not the career she desired. She then began looking for fellowships and accepted the Christine Mirzayan Science and Technology Policy Graduate Fellowship at the National Academy of Sciences’ Committee on Population, which is available to US citizens and non-citizens alike. After staying with the organization for a few months upon completion of the Fellowship, she then moved on to her current position at ASH where she provides scientific and technical input for legislative and regulatory issues, scientific programs, and policy development activities to the Society. Although daunting at first, she is very happy with her career move, and is still using her scientific expertise and active in the research community. In order to transition to a career in science policy, she recommended looking for fellowships, reaching out to policymakers, setting up informational interviews, and expanding one’s network.

Dr. Emily Dilger spoke next about her career trajectory and current job as the Public Outreach Manager at the Society for Neuroscience. Dr. Dilger knew from the start that she would never want to be a research scientist; however, her passion for science motivated her to complete a PhD in Neuroscience at Virginia Commonwealth University. During her graduate career, she did a lot of volunteer work and got involved in education and outreach events. In addition, her graduate advisor had connections in the Society for Neuroscience, so she set up numerous informational interviews until she found her current position. As Public Outreach Manager, she runs the Society’s outreach and education programs as well as events for science teachers, high school students, and the general public. Dr. Dilger also manages the organization’s public information website, BrainFacts.org. She reiterated the importance of volunteering and reaching out to the community, looking at job descriptions for positions that might interest you, and
translating your experience as a research scientist on your resume (i.e.- supervising experience, project management, teamwork, organization, motivation).

The seminar concluded with Dr. Ranjini Prithviraj who was formerly a postdoctoral fellow at NINDS. Dr. Prithviraj is currently a Managing Editor at the American Chemical Society (ACS) and oversees three journals. She regularly attends scientific meetings and speaks with scientists about their research and how to get it published. While a postdoc at NINDS, she began to realize that she didn’t want to spend the rest of her life at the bench, and started seeking out writing opportunities. She became actively involved with FelCom and served on the Fellows Editorial Board since she wanted to gain experience publishing. She also did a lot of volunteer work with the Association for Women in Science (AWIS) and wrote synopses on papers for NIH Research Matters to get the writing experience she needed. She highlighted the many resources and opportunities available to NIH fellows and the value of networking. And, importantly, ACS is hiring!

Take-home messages:
1. Get involved in activities/organizations related to the career you might want. The best way to find out if you like something is by doing it, and this will also give you the experience you need to apply for jobs.
2. Set up informational interviews. This is a great way to learn more about alternative careers in science and to network. Also, job openings are not always posted, so talking to people might open up opportunities you didn’t even know were available.
3. Get as much writing experience as you can. If you are interested in science policy, start writing to policymakers about important issues/concerns in biomedical research. If you are interested in becoming an editor for a scientific journal, there are plenty of opportunities for science writing available to NIH fellows (i.e.- The Catalyst, NIH Research Matters, AWIS).
4. Network!