
Making a Successful Transition to Graduate School

Pat Sokolove, PhD

Deputy Director

Office of Intramural Training & Education, NIH

sokolovp@mail.nih.gov





Areas to Consider

- Science
- Career
- Personal



Personal

You Today



You in Graduate
School



Personal

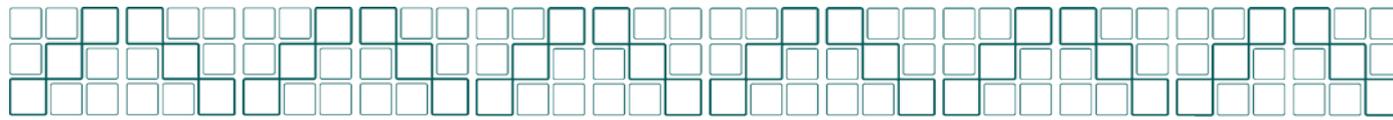
You Today



You in Graduate
School

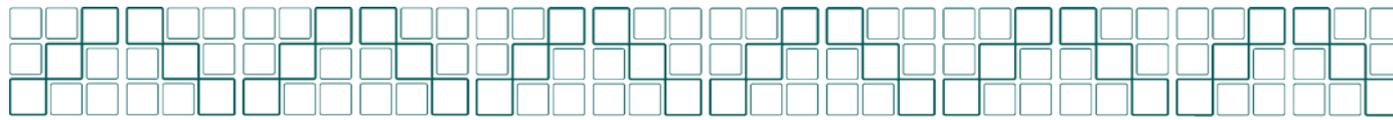
- Mental “map”
- Neighborhood
- Services: bank, cable
- Friends
- Family
- Activities/teams

????



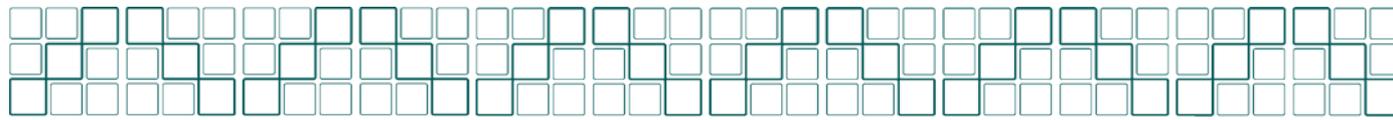
What Do You Do When You're Stressed? Where do You Find Support?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.



How Do You Currently Spend Your Time Outside the “Lab”?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.
- 6.
- 7.
- 8.



Move well in advance of the start of graduate school orientation.

Get personal details out of the way so you can focus on settling into your new program.

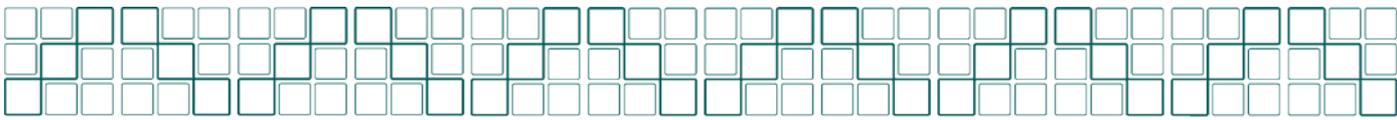


Your Science

You Today



You in Graduate
School



Your Science

You Today



You in Graduate
School

- Research group
- Familiar techniques
- Collaborations
- Core facilities
- SIGs
- Journal club(s)

????



There May Be Bumps Along the Way

	Enthusiastic beginner	Disillusioned learner	Cautious performer	High Achiever
Competence	Low	Some	Moderate	High
Confidence	High	Low	Variable	High
Needs	Direction	Support	Support	Independence



Settling in to Your New Program: Your “to do” List

- Attend ALL orientation/new student events
 - In your department/program
 - Sponsored by the graduate school
 - University-wide
- Meet everyone
 - Faculty
 - The Graduate Program Director
 - Students
 - Administrators



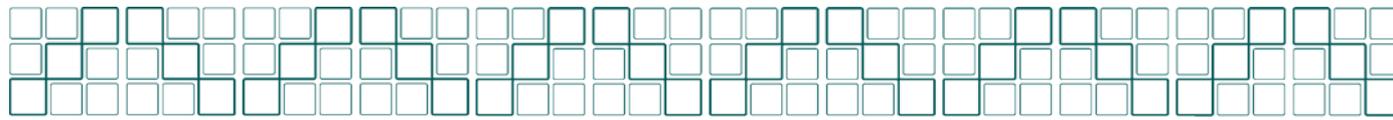
Settling in to Your New Program: Your “to do” List (cont’d)

- Meet with your advisor
- Figure out program requirements; draft a plan for meeting them
- Choose courses
- Begin the search for rotations
- Determine where to find resources
- Find the Career and Counseling Centers



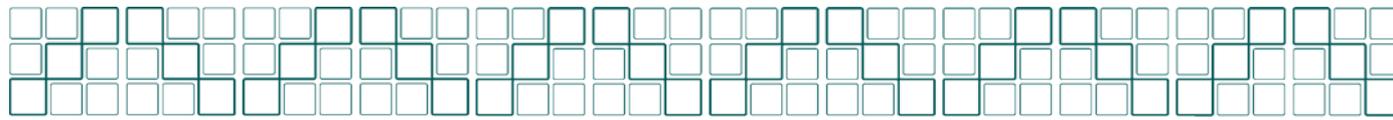
What Grad Students Say About Grad School:

- Lack of structure can be challenging.
- Independence is expected.
- Feedback is infrequent and often very critical.
- Self-directed students succeed; passive students often struggle
- Developing good relationships, knowing who to ask, and identifying support structures early on is KEY.
- Picking the right mentor is the single most important decision you will make.



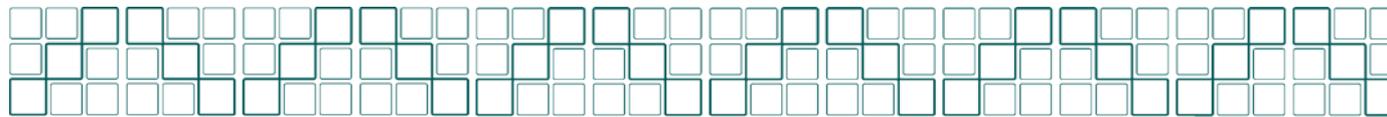
Six Rules For Success

1. Know why you came, where you are going, and what you need to get there.
2. Find good mentors.
3. Take responsibility for your research.
4. Increase your visibility and grow your professional network.
5. Begin developing professional and career skills early.
6. Regularly assess your progress and change course as needed.



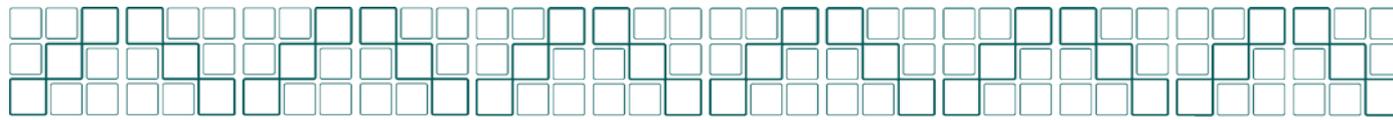
#1: Training Plans

- Can help you identify science, career, professional and personal/family goals
- Can be used for short- and long-term planning
- Can facilitate communication with your mentor and committee
- Should be shared (and #6: re-visited and revised as needed).



#2: Mentors

- Share their knowledge and career experience
- Nurture and support your career
- Provide emotional support and encouragement balanced by honest feedback
- Serve as role models in various ways
- Help you understand critical skills that you must develop to be successful
- Might be good in one area but have blind spots in another



#3: Take Responsibility for Your Research

- Develop a combination of “safer” & high-risk projects.
- Focus your energies on publications.
- Get required courses or training completed early.
- Learn new technologies early.
- Keep an eye out for potential collaborations from the start.
- Take lab meetings seriously.
- Know what everyone else in your lab is doing.
- Engage your committee - early and often!



#4: Increase Your Visibility

- Network and collaborate at your university and beyond.
- Present your work on campus and beyond.
- Meet with scientists visiting your university.
- Get involved in your professional society and other relevant organizations.
- Use professional meetings wisely.



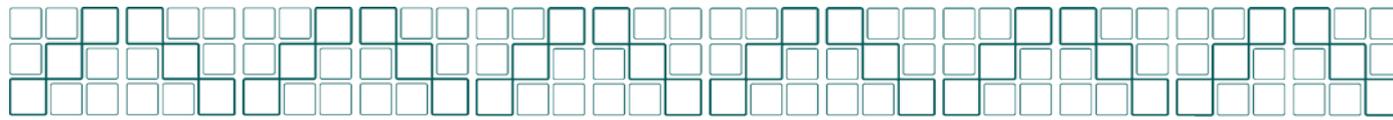
#5: Develop Professional and Career Skills

- Compete for scientific recognition.
- Attend appropriate professional and career development workshops.
- Find teaching and mentoring opportunities.
- Seek out leadership/administrative experiences.
- Talk with departmental and university staff for help finding resources.



Success Depends on Maintaining Relationships

- Become expert at working with mentors and other scientists
- Don't minimize the importance of admin support staff.
- Learn to manage/relate "up" and "down".
- Consider courses in conflict management, active listening, cultural diversity, and team dynamics.

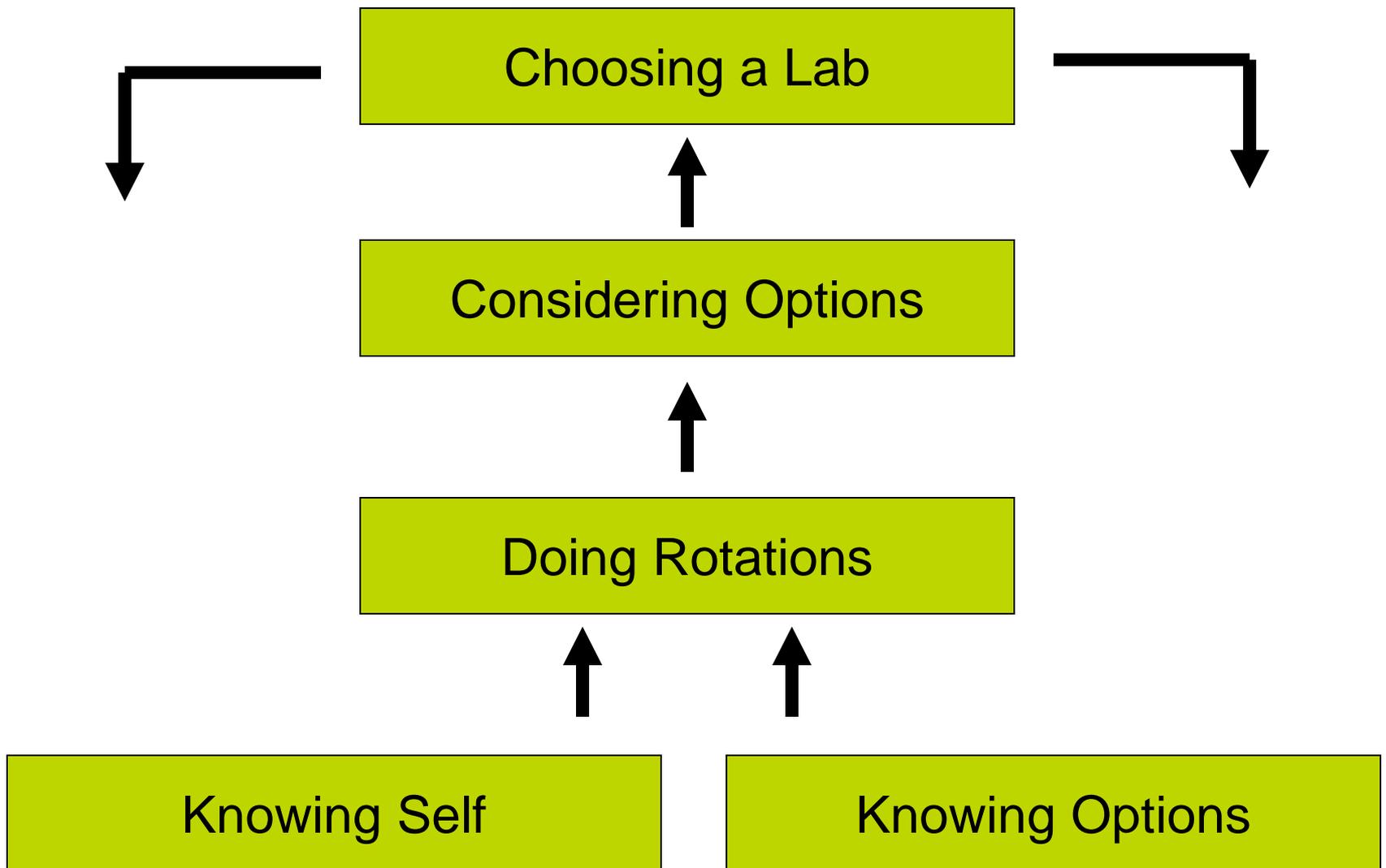


Two Absolute Truths

- Choosing the right dissertation lab will make or break your graduate experience.
- Labs, research groups, and PIs are NOT “one size fits all”.



The Process of Finding a Mentor





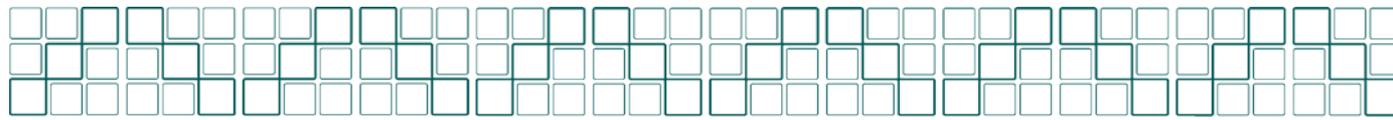
Self Knowledge

- Reflect on previous mentoring relationships and research environments.
- Consider your science goals, including type of work you want to do, techniques you wish to learn.
- Consider your work style and personality.



Knowing Your Options

- Generate a list of possible research groups.
- Set up appointments to talk with the PI; remember -- you are selling yourself AND interviewing the PI.
- Talk to students, postdocs, & research staff in the lab.
- Consider attending a lab meeting to see the lab “in action”.



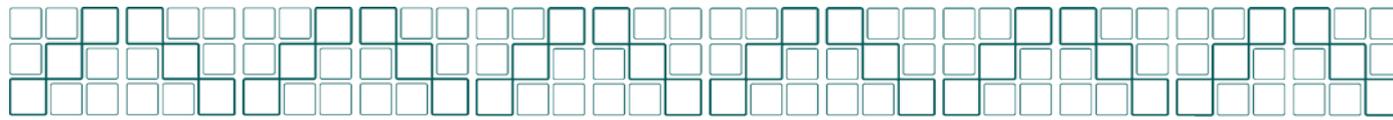
What Matters: Academic/Scientific?

- Funding
- Mentoring track record
- Publication record
- Research area and approaches used
- Lab space, size and composition
- Career level - junior or senior?
- Collaborators and contacts



What Else Matters?

- Communication style
- Temperament and personality
- Level of involvement in students' projects
- Accessibility and approachability
- Management style
- Motivational techniques
- Lab culture and dynamics



Pulling It Together

[https://www.training.nih.gov/
mentoring_guidelines](https://www.training.nih.gov/mentoring_guidelines)



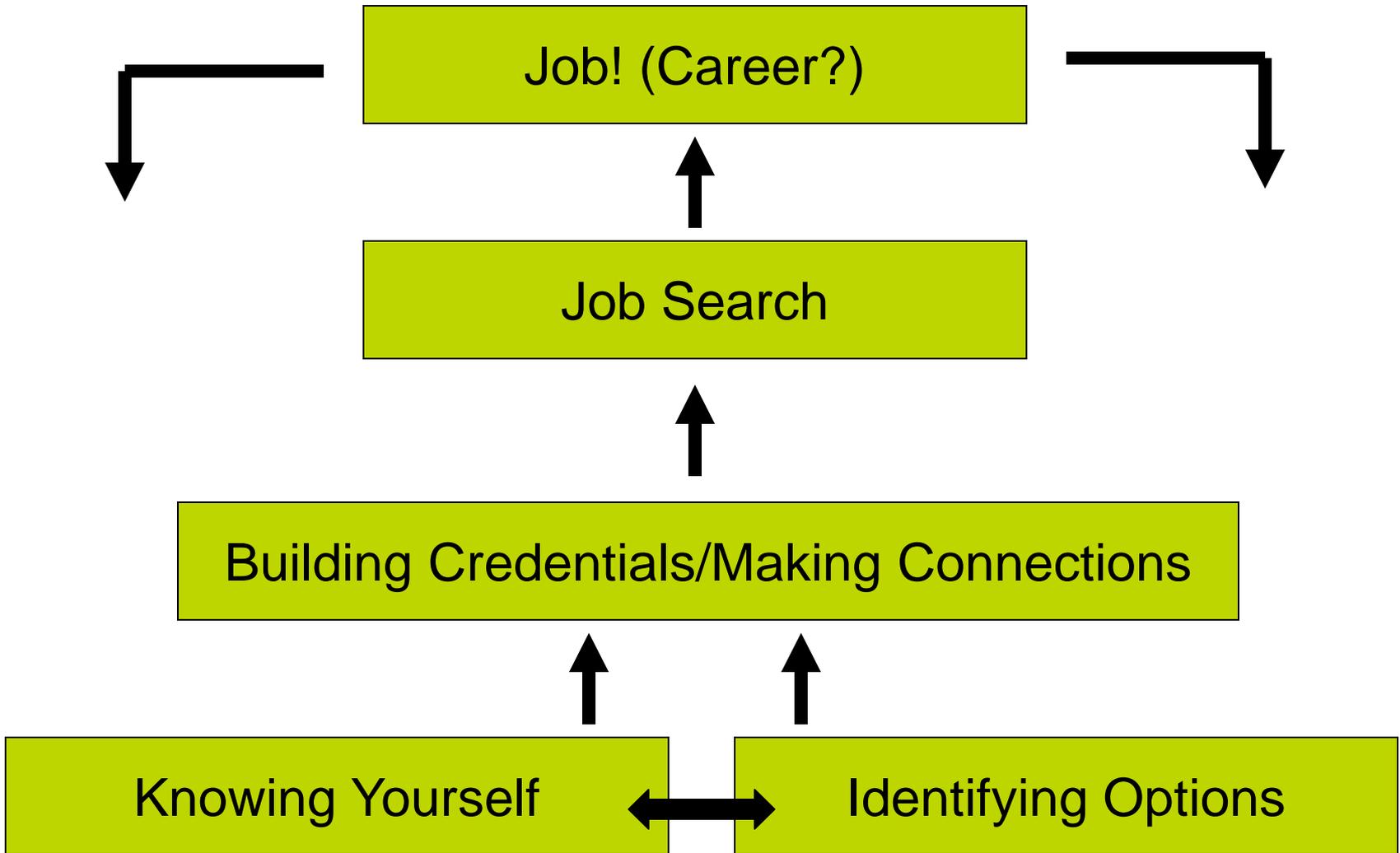
Your Career

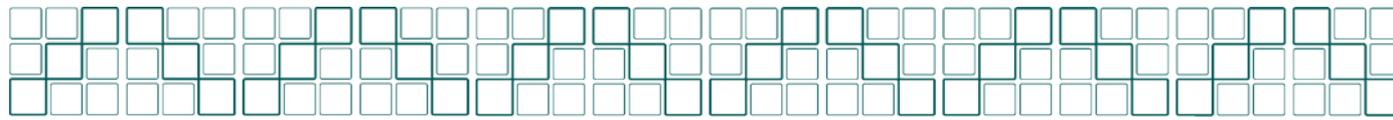
Building a successful career will require

- Planning
- A lot of hard work
- Continuous re-evaluation



Elements of Career Planning





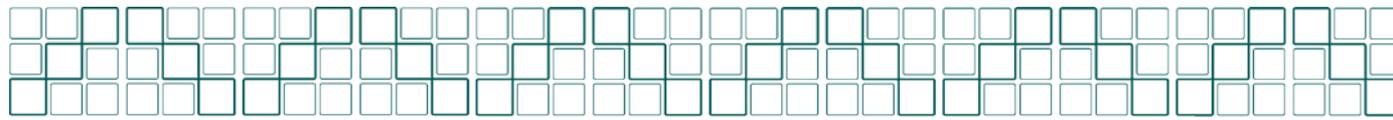
It's Never Too Early to Begin Planning Your Career

- Begin with knowing yourself.
- Identify your
 - Interests
 - Skills
 - Values
- Use the results to decide what career options to explore



Interests

- Did you think about this when selecting a graduate program?
 - Topic
 - Techniques
- What if you are still uncertain? Or if you become uncertain?
 - Umbrella program? Use coursework and rotations.
 - Consider completing the Strong Interest Inventory and the MBTI (Myers Briggs Type Indicator)



Skills for Success

■ Science Skills

■ Professional Skills



Skills for Success

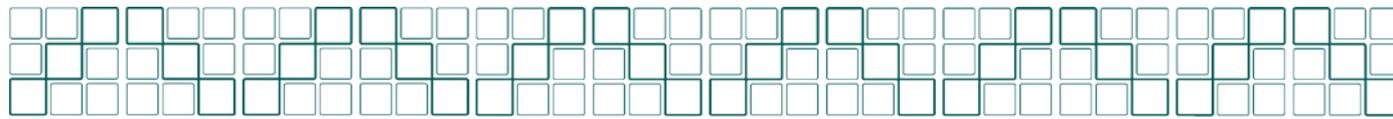
■ Science Skills

- Technical Competence
- Problem Solving
- Collaboration
- Project Management

■ Professional Skills

- Communication
- Teaching and Mentoring
- Leadership/Management
- Career Planning
- Self-assessment
- Stress Management
- Time Management
- Using Diversity Well

What skills do you have? Which do you need to acquire?



Values

What matters most to you in a job?



Values

What matters most to you in a job?

- Advancement
- Balance
- Challenge
- Community activities
- Competition
- Excitement
- Financial reward
- Flexibility
- Fun
- Helping others
- Independence
- Location
- Physical challenge
- Recognition
- Security
- Teamwork



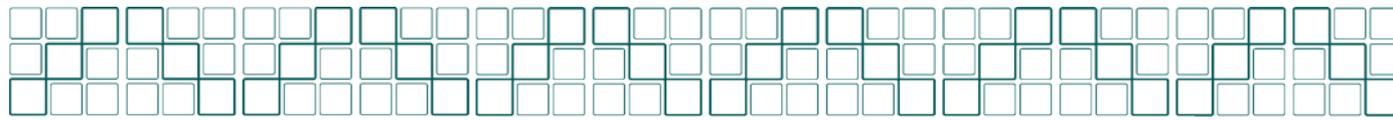
Identifying Career Options

- Read
- Attend career exploration workshops: see the OITE “How to” series videocasts*
- Network
- Conduct informational interviews*
- Try out career options
 - Volunteer
 - Intern



Career Steps You Can Take Now

- Network
 - Meet seminar speakers
 - Use professional meetings to build your network
- Present talks whenever possible
- Attend to all sections of your CV/résumé
- Begin working on a career plan



Take care of yourself – we need
you to stay in science!



Good Luck!

- Feel free to contact me with questions:
sokolovp@mail.nih.gov .
- Check out the OITE Web site:
www.training.nih.gov .
- Explore careers using the “How to” series. Go to Prior Events on the OITE Web site (<https://www.training.nih.gov/events/prior>) and search using Keyword = “How to”.