

Career Development Seminar Summary – FelCom Members: Where are they now?

Laura Prestia, PhD – Technology Transfer Post-doctoral Fellow, NIAID, Technology Transfer and Intellectual Property Office (TTIPO), FelCom Career Development Subcommittee
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For the first panel in the NIH Fellows Committee (FelCom) Career Development Series of Fall 2015, we hosted past FelCom members and discussed their backgrounds, current professions, and helpful career skills they learned during their time at the NIH.

The first panelist to open the discussion was Suman Ranjan Das, PhD. Suman is an Associate Professor in the Infectious Diseases Group at the J. Craig Venter Institute where his lab works on understanding the mechanisms underlying RNA virus evolution. Suman earned his PhD in Virology from the International Center for Genetic Engineering and Biotechnology in New Delhi, India and completed two post-doctoral fellowships, including one as a Fogarty International Fellow here at the National Institute for Allergy and Infectious Diseases. During his post-doc at the NIH, Suman volunteered within the Office of Intramural Training and Education (OITE). Based on his own experience, he stressed the importance of finding the right balance between extracurricular activities and work in the lab. Suman also advised that you should aim to publish earlier rather than later in your post-doc so that you can show your continued progress. As a PI, Suman uses a number of soft skills including communication (English was not his first language and he has had to work on improving this, especially for writing and presenting), collaboration (showing the academic department that you have something new to bring to the table and that you can draw from the current faculty to start collaborations), and respect (critical for working with others). If you aspire to become an academic Principal Investigator (PI), you will need to learn and practice these skills well; many of the duties a PI must complete are administrative.

Next, Anna Hansen, PhD, a Scientist II in Research with the Department of Respiratory, Inflammation and Autoimmunity at MedImmune, presented on her career trajectory. Anna earned her PhD in Immunology from the University of Sydney in 2002. After completing a 2-year post-doc at the Medical College of Georgia, Anna worked as a Senior Hospital Scientist in Research and Development (a clinical translational position). She established a Phase I clinical trial, which gave her valuable industry experience. Afterward, Anna completed another post-doc at the NIH at the National Eye Institute, where she also served on the Immunology Interest Group Committee and as the Animal Ethics liaison for FelCom. Anna highlighted that it was through her broad experiences and particularly networking while at the NIH that led to the acquisition of a Scientist position at MedImmune. Industry scientists can have many responsibilities, from research, development to regulatory roles. In Anna's current position, she generates, analyzes, and presents data and determines the next steps for her research group. Furthermore, she manages internal and external relationships with other labs, so emailing is a big part of her day. To learn more about industry science, Anna suggested to look for industry posters at your next conference and chat with the presenters. To be competitive in this field, focus your skill development on teamwork, curiosity beyond the bench (unmet clinical needs and commercial benefits), communication (presentations skills), and understanding big data.

Our third panelist, Wendy Knosp, PhD, a Health Science Policy Analyst at the National Institute of Dental and Craniofacial Research (NIDCR) Office of Science Policy and Analysis, spoke about her career transition from the bench to science policy. Wendy earned her PhD in Molecular and Medical Genetics from Oregon Health & Science University in Portland, Oregon. Following her graduate work, Wendy completed a senior post-doctoral fellowship at NIDCR where she also assisted in planning the annual NIDCR Fellows Retreat and the NIH Career

Symposium, and served as the NIDCR Basic Science Representative to FelCom. Now, as a Health Science Policy Analyst, Wendy works on legislative issues, initiative development, agency-level reporting, and ad hoc data analyses. Key skills required for this type of position include being able to translate science into lay terms, thinking critically, building relationships, balancing the details with an overall vision, and managing multiple projects. Wendy mentioned that volunteering outside of the lab helped her to develop many important skills and suggested that post-docs explore career options sooner rather than later and, as always, network! Lastly, Wendy offered a number of resources for those interested in pursuing a career in policy, such as your Institute or Center (IC) Director's Office of Education, the OITE's NIH Career Symposium and Workplace Dynamics workshops (attend and/or volunteer at either), the Foundation for Advanced Education in the Sciences (FAES) courses at NIH (teaching and/or learning experience), the NIH Catalyst (writing experience), Smithsonian's Q?rius Workshop, teaching opportunities at universities in the area, and policy fellowships (AAAS – American Association for the Advancement of Science).

Finally, Krista Zanetti, PhD, discussed her career as a Program Director in the Epidemiology and Genomics Research Program in the Division of Cancer Control and Population Sciences at the National Cancer Institute (NCI). Before earning her PhD in Nutrition at Cornell University, Krista worked as a clinical dietician in an acute care facility. After graduate school, Krista joined the Cancer Prevention Fellowship Program at NCI and completed her MPH at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health. In her current position, Krista manages a portfolio of grants that includes rare cancers, health disparities associated with cancer, and epidemiology studies that apply 'omics technologies. Specific duties for her profession include presenting science and policy topics within NIH and at meetings, preparing funding justifications, attending study sections, and advising/monitoring grantees. For this type of career, you need skills in the following areas: presentation, organization and management, team work, leadership, and communicating both to professional colleagues and lay audiences. Krista highlighted that volunteering with FelCom helped her develop a number of these abilities and the experience made her a more competitive candidate for her current position.

Overall, the panelists agreed that working at the NIH and volunteering for extracurricular activities like FelCom helped them develop a skill set that is coveted in a variety of professions both in and outside of the laboratory (communication, project organization and management, leadership). They also found that networking played a big role in their career development and even in their current jobs. Finally, the panelists agreed that one of the best resources for career development at the NIH is the OITE (build the skills for your career, resume/CV preparation, interview tips, negotiation tactics, etc.).

Key Takeaways:

- 1.) Customize your resume/CV to the positions for which you are applying and visit OITE for more tips. Be sure to use the words as they are written in the job application. Also, keep your resume and LinkedIn page up-to-date, which will save you time in the long run.
- 2.) Communication skills are a must for many fields – practice in your lab meetings, volunteering for FelCom, writing for the Catalyst, or presenting at Toastmasters.
- 3.) Learn/hone your organizational and project management skills. These will come in handy in any profession and can be developed in and outside of your lab. Highlight these skills in your resume and in interviews.
- 4.) Network! To quote one of the panelists, "Social interactions are as important as a Nature paper". Someone who knows you and knows the way you work can help you advance your career.