Event Title: Faculty Careers in Epidemiology

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Organized and hosted by: Drs. Kyra Mendez and Amit Singh

Panelists:

Amal A. Wanigatunga, Ph.D., MPH
Assistant Professor, Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health

Susan Olivo-Marston, Ph.D., MPH
Associate Professor, SIU School of Medicine and Director of Cancer Epidemiology, Simmons Cancer Institute

Krystle A. Lang Kuhs, Ph.D., MPH
Associate Professor and Co-leader Cancer Prevention and Control Research Program, University of Kentucky

The purpose of this panel presentation was to capture the different roles of professors in Epidemiology, as well as their day-to-day activities. There was something for all attendees to learn, especially for trainees aiming for epidemiology careers. All three panelists shared their experiences, their challenges, and the different paths that led to their successful careers. The panelists shared several resources and advised fellows what they can do to make a smooth transition to a faculty position. Below is the summary of the panel and key takeaways.

Dr. Wanigatunga

Dr. Wanigatunga started by discussing his typical workday. A typical day, for him, consists of meetings, emails, mentoring, doing research, conducting data analyses, and giving presentations. Although he is mainly in a research position, he does spend some time teaching and discussed the different tracks for epidemiology (e.g., aging, cancer, infectious disease).

His biggest advice for postdocs was to publish, publish, publish! He applied to 3 different positions during his first year as a postdoc without having a lot of publications. As a result, he did not get any interviews. He chose to do a non-tenure track position instead, which enabled him to get publications and experience what a tenure track investigator position would look like. From his experience, getting funding in a postdoc was secondary to publishing, because there are opportunities to apply for funding in faculty positions. Nevertheless, Dr. Wanigatunga encouraged postdocs to start applying for K01 and K99 grants during their training.

For those interested in teaching, he advised to look for opportunities to get experience during your postdoc. For example, he helped teach an Introduction to Epidemiology course during his postdoc, even though it was not a requirement. In terms of teaching as an assistant professor, Dr. Wanigatunga mentioned it takes more time than you think because you need to know the material and prepare in advance, even if the course materials have already been created. Nevertheless, he mentioned academia gives you flexibility in your work schedule. At an academic position, he can ask the research questions he wants to ask and work towards them.
When applying for jobs, Dr. Wanigatunga recommended thinking about your research interests and passions. He highly encouraged trainees to network, collaborate, get involved, and visit the individual departments’ websites to look for job postings. In addition, he shared several resources for the exploration of open faculty jobs including: 1. https://publichealth.jhu.edu/careers 2. https://jobs.chronicle.com/ 3. https://www.academicikeys.com/

Finally, he highly encouraged postdocs to get soft skills— for example, having a positive attitude (critiques can be difficult to receive, but remember people are just trying to help you and make your research better); developing empathy (understanding what your colleagues may be experiencing); learning good communication skills; developing skills in scientific writing; and practicing good time management.

Dr. Olivo-Marston

Dr. Olivo-Marston started by mentioning her daily activities. Most of her time is spent writing grants, analyzing grants, and trying to get funding. Her teaching responsibilities changed when she moved academic institutions, so it is important to understand what your teaching responsibilities will be in different academic positions.

Her advice was to focus on learning new skills during a postdoc, then bringing it all together as faculty. For example, she mentioned how she did two different types of research— one at the bench and another in epidemiology— and she brought it all together in her research as a faculty member. Like Dr. Wanigatunga, Dr. Olivo-Marston also suggested getting involved in as much as possible during a postdoc. For example, teaching and serving in leadership positions is important. She encouraged trainees to take advantage of career development workshops and activities and to teach as a postdoc, although she also mentioned balance can be difficult. She advised postdocs to work on time management, teamwork, networking and developing critical thinking. She was invited for guest lectures at her doctoral institution and took these opportunities to present her research.

Finally, Dr. Olivo-Marston discussed things to think about when applying for faculty positions. When preparing to apply to an assistant professor position, Dr. Olivo-Marston recommended talking to your PI and mentors and starting early because it can be a long process. Two years is a reasonable time frame to apply for academic positions and to consider different institutions. She recommended thinking about where you want to be geographically and the type of institution. The funding also can vary across positions; for example, in one of her faculty positions, she could conduct more research and have fewer teaching responsibilities, if she brought in grants. Additionally, when applying for faculty positions, she tailored her job application documents based on the institution and position. When negotiating with potential future employers, Dr. Olivo-Marston recommended speaking with your mentors about what you may need at the institution and in a certain position.

Dr. Lang Kuhs
When applying to academic positions, Dr. Lang Kuhs mentioned a strength is having multiple, inter-institutional collaborations (both domestic and international) that you have developed. Furthermore, she mentioned that writing a good research statement is important – she ensured that she communicate how all of her projects aligned and how she exhibited resilience throughout the research process. She also tailored her job talks to communicate (generally): “I understand the resources and research you have at your institution, and here’s what I can bring.” She recommended collaborating with a colleague to critique each of your different statements (e.g., teaching, mentoring) and to practice your job talk multiple times with many different people. Dr. Lang Kuhs also recommended working on projects that align with your research interests and securing grants in your postdoc, if possible.

When interviewing, Dr. Lang Kuhs mentioned it is good to know and understand the institution’s measure of success (e.g., having NIH grants, publications, etc.). Also, have discussions with people at the institution to better understand the institution (e.g., workplace dynamics) and academic position (e.g., roles and responsibilities). During your first year, Dr. Lang Kuhs mentioned you may need to build new relationships and teams, so attend as many events at your new institution as possible. In her first and second years as an assistant faculty member, she focused on project development, grant writing, and building her team. She also tries to apply for grants each NIH cycle.

In summary, her advice is to be a team player, know how your institution defines success, seek honest and constructive feedback often, and create your “brand” by asking who you are as a researcher and understanding your strengths.

Final takeaways:

- Be positive, resilient, and adaptable
- Have empathy
- Develop good communication skills, time management skills, experience working in teams, and critical thinking skills
- Network
- Take advantage of career development workshops and activities
- Write papers and grants
- Work hard early in your academic career to apply for grants and funding

All the panelists would be happy to assist with further questions and tips. Please contact Drs. Amit Singh (amit.singh3@nih.gov), Idalia Yabe (idalia.yabe@nih.gov), or Kyra Mendez (kyra.mendez@nih.gov) if you would like to connect with the panelists.