Thoughts of a Postbac: Building Your Own Research Community

By Ashley Pratt

I began my training as a postbac at the NIH in August 2020, during the height of the pandemic and consequently a quiet time on campus. With limited people allowed in lab spaces, and in-person interactions kept to a minimum, I was only interacting with one or two fellow researchers on a regular basis for the first year of my training. I felt like the prototypical scientist working alone at the bench.

Thankfully, however, as normal interactions and events are resuming on campus, my experiences as a researcher are slowly changing. Many meetings are happening in person or in hybrid formats; communal areas are busier with chatting colleagues; and I even attended my first in-person lab meeting recently!

These interactions have allowed me to build familiarity with many individuals in my lab, as well as meet new researchers and fellow trainees from outside of my lab. I am quickly learning about the many professional and social benefits of having a community in research. This article will describe some of those benefits, as well as tips for how trainees can develop their own community.

FORMING RELATIONSHIPS WITHIN THE LAB

“The first and most important situation in which you will present yourself is to the people in your own laboratory,” writes Kathy Barker, PhD, in her manual *At the Bench: A Laboratory Navigator.* She describes how these are the people that you will rely on the most during your training, and from whom you can learn a lot about research. These individuals know where everything is in your lab and can answer specific questions about the techniques you are using. They are also the individuals who you will see the most.

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Letter from the Editor

Next up in our multi-part series on how to foster a successful postbac experience, postbac fellow Ashley Pratt writes about the **importance of forming a research community**. Ms. Pratt joined the laboratory of Dax Hoffman, PhD, Senior Investigator in the Section on Neurophysiology, within the first few months of the COVID-19 pandemic. In-person restrictions during that time made it challenging to experience the full laboratory dynamic.

Reading Ms. Pratt’s article reminded me how critical and meaningful those initial connections are for incoming trainees. It’s a first-hand account of what it was like to begin a research career with minimal individuals in the lab, and what Ms. Pratt gained once her broader research community formed.

For any fellows who are struggling to find a research community, we have assembled a list of “**Communities on Campus**” for you to explore and potentially join. They range from communities based on your research interests to listservs tied to your level of training. Participating in one or more of these groups is a wonderful way to expand your research network right here on campus. Many additional opportunities to grow your community can be found in the **May announcements** and **events**.

Do you know of a group that you think would be of interest to other NICHD fellows? Let us know, and we can help spread the word!

Your Editor in Chief,
Shana R. Spindler, PhD

*This is a newsletter for NICHD fellows, by NICHD fellows. We want to hear from you! Please send your questions, comments, and ideas to our editor at shana.spindler@nih.gov.*
In my own experience, getting to know my lab mates has made asking questions and seeking help much more approachable. When I don’t know where something is or am confused about a specific technique, it’s nice to know that there are people nearby who can help me.

Additionally, I’ve found support in these relationships and a lot of advice about navigating careers in research. In casual conversations during breaks, the people in my lab have shared insights about navigating graduate school, collaborating, and scientific investigation that have been invaluable to my training. I like to imagine that receiving this advice from experienced colleagues is a lot easier than it would be to learn these lessons on my own.

Getting to know these individuals has also made my work much more enjoyable. It’s fun to come into the lab and have engaging conversations about the research you’re doing. It’s also fun to have people around who you can simply chat about life with. Having this community within my own lab environment makes me feel less like an isolated researcher and more like a part of a team.

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Relationships within a lab can often develop organically due to the amount of time you’ll spend with your lab mates. If that’s not the case (say, perhaps, there’s a pandemic…), it’s still possible to foster lab relationships by reaching out to these individuals with questions or inviting them to grab a coffee together (even if it’s six feet apart). Being thoughtful about how you interact with your lab mates can go a long way to facilitating camaraderie within the lab.

BROADENING YOUR EXPOSURE TO DIFFERENT RESEARCH ENVIRONMENTS

Even if it feels like there’s an endless source of knowledge within your own lab, there’s a lot that can be gained by connecting with individuals from other research environments. Each lab functions with its own culture, in a way—a unique set of interpersonal and scientific styles and philosophies. Some labs are more social or organized than others, and often labs prefer different techniques. Connecting with individuals outside of your immediate lab can give you exposure to the different roles and environments that exist in research.

In the video “Networking for Scientists (2021),” Amanda Langer, MA, career counselor in the NIH Office of Intramural Training and Education (OITE), recommends that you take time to introspect on what you learn from conversations with other scientists. Perhaps that individual’s job sounds appealing to you, or maybe you realize that you wouldn’t enjoy the environment they work in. These insights can help inform your own career goals and decisions.

Networking also exposes you to different scientific questions and techniques being tackled within a field. You never know who might inspire a new project or help solve a problem in your own work. Cole Malloy, PhD, and Meghyn Welch, PhD, researchers in the Section on Neurophysiology, agree that the ideas that emerge from connecting with others is an important benefit of networking. “Like a writer who has writer’s block,” sometimes researchers encounter obstacles that require a new perspective to work through, Dr. Malloy explained. Talking with colleagues and learning about other projects can spark innovative ideas and solutions.

Furthermore, connecting with other researchers is an opportunity to practice talking about your own work. In describing the importance of communication, Dr. Barker writes that “if you can’t communicate your data, they don’t exist.” Talking about research with individuals who are within and outside of your area of expertise is a great way to build

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your science communication skills and receive feedback that can help push your work forward.

From national meetings to small talks within your institution, there are many opportunities to meet researchers outside your own lab. Ms. Langer points out in her video that if you find networking to be daunting, requesting one-on-one meetings or informational interviews can help make the process feel more approachable.²

BUILDING A SUPPORT SYSTEM OF PEERS AND MENTORS

Getting to know colleagues in the broader scientific community provides a major source of information, and it can also be a great source of support.

In a recent conversation I had with Erin Walsh, PhD, director of the NICHD Office of Education, she pointed out the value of multiple mentors when making career decisions. Dr. Walsh advised that decisions are ultimately up to the individual, but having input from multiple mentors can provide unique perspectives that you may not have considered otherwise.

Broadening your network of support can also help you access the “hidden job market,” which refers to the high percentage of positions that are filled (or created!) through referrals and connections. Having connections and making good impressions with other researchers increases the likelihood that someone will think of you, or refer you, when a new opportunity or position becomes available.

Finally, connecting with different people in research can make the job more fun! I’ve found that it’s much more enjoyable to attend talks or meetings when there are familiar faces around. Developing relationships in research has been shown to be beneficial to scientific careers. But, in my experience, it also serves to make the job more enjoyable.

REFERENCES

Communities on Campus

Struggling to build your research community? To quote the Office of Intramural Training and Education (OITE), “The NIH is a big place; we can almost guarantee that you will be able to find a community that will make you feel at home.” Check out the resources below:

» **You are Not Alone!** is an OITE-maintained list of groups that NIH fellows may want to join. The website contains a brief description of each group and links to their websites.

» **OITE listservs for current NIH trainees** provide information about training events and career development activities to specific trainee populations. Some trainee communities have created additional listservs that may be of interest. These can also be found on the OITE listserv page.

» **NICHD Affinity Groups** within the Division of Intramural Research serve as intellectual hubs for groups of investigators. They provide a forum to share ideas and collaborate on common themes in support of the DIR mission. Take advantage of these groups to network outside of your primary lab but still within your field of interest.

» **NIH Intramural Scientific Interest Groups (SIGs)** are assemblies of scientists with common research interests. Communication within the group occurs via a listserv, and activities sponsored by the groups include hosting symposia, providing mentorship and career guidance for junior scientists, sharing the latest techniques and information, and more. Most of the SIGs also welcome interested non-NIH scientists, which provides trainees with access to the broader scientific community as well.
The Rep Report  
*By Hyo Won Ahn, PhD*

As the current NICHD Basic Sciences Institutes and Centers (IC) Representative, I represent NICHD postdoctoral fellows at the NIH Fellows Committee (FelCom) meeting every month and share the latest news with you here. Do you have a concern or question that you want brought up at the next meeting? Contact me, Dr. Hyo Won Ahn, at hyowon.ahn@nih.gov.

The April FelCom meeting welcomed special guest Nina Schor, MD, PhD, NIH’s Deputy Director for Intramural Research. Dr. Schor spoke about career development opportunities, attaining uniform stipends across institutes (with fair fellow representation on decision-making committees), and other matters affecting fellows at NIH.

The NIH Career Symposium will take place May 8–10. This event is fully VIRTUAL. You are welcome to attend as many sessions as you wish. You will have the opportunity to network with over 250 professionals in a variety of jobs.

1. Check out the full agenda.
2. See the speakers.
3. Register here (the event is free).

The Foundation for Advanced Education in the Sciences (FAES) has new housing available to NIH trainees across the street from NIH. See the FAES website for more details and applications instructions: [https://faes.org/housing](https://faes.org/housing).

Did you know that there are several ways to stay informed on postdoc activities and events?

» **Fellows listserv** is the main source of FelCom event advertisements, so don’t forget to sign up.

» Visiting fellows can also sign up for the **Visiting Fellows listserv**.

» There is an **NIH postdoc Slack channel** to connect with other postdocs and join social events (sign up with a non-NIH email).
May Announcements

NICHD POSTDOC FELLOW DR. ADAM CACCAVANO RECEIVES CENTER ON COMPULSIVE BEHAVIORS (CCB) SEED GRANT

Congratulations to Adam Caccavano, PhD, postdoctoral fellow in the NICHD Section on Cellular and Synaptic Physiology, for receiving a Seed Grant from the Center on Compulsive Behaviors (CCB). Dr. Caccavano received the award in collaboration with Katherine Savell, PhD, postdoctoral fellow in the Neuronal Ensembles in Drug Addiction Section (National Institute on Drug Abuse). Their project, titled “Transcriptional and functional characterization of interneuron subpopulations within macaque hippocampus and prefrontal cortex,” was praised as a strong collaboration in the pursuit of novel science.

The CCB Seed Grant, piloted by the Center on Compulsive Behaviors, provides intramural postdoctoral fellows with an opportunity to take on a principal investigator (PI) role in a NIH grant. As part of the program, researchers across the preclinical-clinical divide discuss shared interests and develop joint projects.

NIH INTRAMURAL AIDS RESEARCH FELLOWSHIP APPLICATIONS DUE THIS MONTH

Applications are due by May 12 at 5:00 p.m. (EDT)

Are you looking for an opportunity to gain experience in grant writing while competing for an intramural funding award? The Intramural AIDS Research Fellowship (IARF) program is a collaborative effort of the Office of AIDS Research, the Office of Intramural Training & Education, and the Office of Intramural Research, designed to further cross disciplinary research into HIV and AIDS at the NIH. The aim of the program is to recruit graduate students and postdoctoral researchers from all scientific disciplines to the broad field of AIDS research and to provide a grant-writing opportunity for intramural fellows whose work can be directly related to HIV and AIDS.

The fellowship is open to all graduate (predoctoral level) and postdoctoral fellows who are part of the Intramural Research Program (IRP) at NIH. FTE employees such as Research Fellows and Clinical Fellows are NOT eligible for the fellowship. There are no citizenship requirements. Awardees will be individuals who show outstanding scientific potential through both a creative and thoughtful research plan and a well thought out career development plan.

Please read more about the program at https://www.training.nih.gov/aids_fellowship_home.

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May Announcements

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JAPAN SOCIETY FOR PROMOTION OF SCIENCE (JSPS) NIH INTRAMURAL FELLOWSHIP APPLICATIONS DUE THIS MONTH

*Applications are due by May 25 at 5:00 p.m. (EDT)*

From the [JSPS website](https://jspsusa.org/wp/kaitoku-nih/application): This program is offered at the National Institutes of Health (NIH) by the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science (JSPS), in cooperation with the NIH’s Fogarty International Center (FIC), and the NIH Office of Intramural Research. It is designed to support meritorious biomedical and behavioral research projects undertaken in NIH laboratories by young Japanese postdoctoral researchers who intend to hold research positions at Japanese universities or other academic institutions or public institutions in Japan in the future.

The NIH-JSPS Intramural Fellowship provides a two-year stipend to Japanese postdocs to work at NIH intramural labs. This fellowship is awarded to about eight postdocs annually. For application instructions, please visit [https://jspsusa.org/wp/kaitoku-nih/application](https://jspsusa.org/wp/kaitoku-nih/application).

SAVE THE DATE: 2023 THREE-MINUTE TALK (TmT) PROGRAM FINAL COMPETITION

Thursday, June 22, 10 a.m. to 12 noon

Imagine describing your research in less than three minutes. See how it’s done!

We would like to invite everyone to our final TmT Virtual event for 2023, where our NICHD finalists will present their research stories with others from NHGRI, NIDCR, NIAMS, NEI, NCATS, NIDCD, NIAID, NIDDK, NIEHS and NLM.

A Zoom link will be circulated to NICHD trainees and staff a few days prior to the event.

NIH UNITE: ENDING STRUCTURAL RACISM (ESR) ACTIVITIES

The [NIH UNITE initiative](https://nihunite.nih.gov) was established to identify and address structural racism within the NIH-supported and the greater scientific community.

The [ESR Intranet](https://nihunite.nih.gov/intranet) includes various resources like the [Toolkit](https://nihunite.nih.gov/resources/toolkit), [Newsletter](https://nihunite.nih.gov/newsletters), [FAQs](https://nihunite.nih.gov/resources/faq), and other information.

[UNITE Milestones and Progress](https://nihunite.nih.gov/updates) and the [Co-Chairs Corner](https://nihunite.nih.gov/about_us/co-chairs) (public ESR webpages) are other avenues to stay informed on UNITE efforts.
May Events

WEDNESDAY, MAY 3, 1 PM
The Universe of Careers Waiting for You—Plan Now for Your Success
Led by Stem Career Services

The universe of careers available to STEM graduates outside is widespread and exciting. Often, STEM graduates have limited knowledge of the types of careers they can pursue upon completion of their education and training. This workshop describes strategies for exploring career opportunities based on a variety of factors (personal interests, industry trends, desired geography, and more). Attendees will also be introduced to tools they can use to identify potential careers of interest and to gain skills that will enable them to be strong candidates for the positions they seek when they are ready to start applying for jobs.

Please email Ms. Veronica Harker (veronica.harker@nih.gov) to register, and a link will be provided a few days prior to the webinar.

MONDAY–WEDNESDAY, MAY 8–10
16th Annual NIH Career Symposium (All Virtual)

The NIH Career Symposium is an annual event for all fellows who are interested in what career options are available to biomedical researchers. Please visit the 16th Annual Career Symposium website for more information.

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May Events

WEDNESDAY, MAY 31, 1 PM

Networking—One of the Most Underappreciated Skills in Landing the Job You Want
Led by Stem Career Services

As you go about your professional interactions, you will inevitably encounter the request “tell me a little bit about yourself.” This first impression frequently sets the foundation for a relationship and can help determine if someone will choose to grow the relationship. The traditional “elevator pitch”—a 30–60 second introduction about oneself—is commonly practiced, memorized, and delivered to initiate this conversation.

Your initial interactions with people can set you on a path of relationship success. Therefore, it is essential to understand the role that networking plays in career development, and also the long-term role it plays for career success. Networking, crafting elevator pitches, and sustaining professional relationships are essential career and life skills that you can master with the tools and advice you will learn at this workshop.

Please email Ms. Veronica Harker (veronica.harker@nih.gov) to register, and a link will be provided a few days prior to the webinar.

ONGOING EVENTS AROUND CAMPUS

NIH-Wide Office of Intramural Training and Education Events
For more information and registration, please visit Upcoming OITE Events.

NIH Library Training and Events
For more information and registration, please visit the NIH Library Calendar.