Lunch and Learn 1/16/19: Choosing Academia

Panelists:

Frans Vinberg, PhD, Assistant Professor, Department of Ophthalmology and Visual Sciences Minna Roh-Johnson, PhD, Assistant Professor, Department of Biochemistry

Aaron W. Puri, PhD, Assistant Professor, Biological Chemistry

Sheetal Hardikar, PhD, Assistant Professor in Population Health Sciences

Please introduce yourself.

AP: Aaron started his faculty position about 2 weeks ago. He was a postdoc at University of Washington for 6 years. He started applying for faculty jobs during fifth year of his postdoc but deferred when he had a child. He received his PhD from Stanford.

MR: Minna started her faculty position in January 2018. She went to Grad school at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hilll. She did a first postdoc at Albert Einstein College of Medicine in New York on mouse model for cancer. Then she transitioned to a second postdoc at Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center in Seattle, WA. She has already been involved in two faculty searches at the U for the Biochemistry department and can provide perspective from the other side of the hiring table. She had two young children during her postdoc, they were 3 and 5 when she applied for faculty positions.

SH: Sheetal started her faculty position in October 2017. She was a Graduent student at University of Washington School of Public Health Epidemiology, in Seattle, WA. She did her Postdoc at Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center in Seattle, WA. She had one kid during her PhD and 1 kid during her postdoc. She applied for a K award as a postdoc that did not get funded but resubmitted as a faculty member here and got it funded. She was a postdoc for 3 years.

FV: Frans started his faculty position in August 2017. He did his PhD training in Finland. He is a first-generation academia, so he had no role models and no clear plan, but he was always passionate about science. He advised postdocs to “follow your heart and do what you love to do”. A high school summer job motivated him to do what he was passionate about because the work he was doing was so boring that he told himself he would never have a career that was uninteresting. He enjoyed math and science from an early age. Frans advised postdocs to network by going to meetings, to meet significant people in the field and convince them that you are good. He advised that postdocs do something independent from their postdoc PI, apply for own grants and show track record of that.

How many positions did you apply for?

AP: 22, 1 interview, 1 job, 1 year to apply

MR: 17, 3 interviews, 2 offers, 1 year application, feeler year of 3 apps the year before

SH: 12, 2 interviews, 1 phone interview, 2 offers at interview place, 1 year apply

I currently have a K award, should I complete my R00?

MR: If your concern is that getting an R00 will not give you junior investigator status for a first R01, this is not a good excuse to. It is expected that you are capable of getting your R00 and the money is a huge help. As long as what you plan to do is in the mission of the IC, you should do it. You will still maintain your junior status for R01 application.

To MR: Since you are now on job search committees, what surprised you about these job search committees?

MR: a lot goes into a job search. All applicants have an impressive record (grants, papers, etc.). Fit is the most important part and there is a large element of luck too. Timing is very important and each hiring cycle is different. Networking is important, go to summer conferences and get yourself out there.

SH: it’s good to make a connection [with the department], send an email about what they are looking for. One of her friends emailed a department chair “completely cold” (no position was posted) and that person got a job there. Ask your mentors to send out email to ask if there are positions.

AP: had a friend that was interested in “home” university. This person email profs and asked to give talks while she was already in the area.

Why did you eventually chose academia, did you have any other options or look at other jobs? Also what about the doom of low funding rates?

AP: He was not always interested in academia, he was involved in industry while at Stanford and did an internship and wanted to go to industry, but was turned down and went to a postdoc position and loved academia. He did a lot of thinking about his personal preference and liked the idea of flexibility that academia offers.

MR: Minna has always planned on academia, considered other options late, just to make sure she was making the right choice. During her final year of postdoc - after signing faculty position— she joined the EPIC program that matched postdocs up with industry. This was an eye-opening experience—industry was less fixed than she thought (especially in R&D scientist jobs). Academia still more flexible and she is happy with her choice. She likes the freedom of academia and to work for her own “business”. Knowing that you can do whatever you want is unique to academia. Now that she knows about other career options, she thinks that she could have been happy in some of them.

SH: Sheetal is excited that she can pursue whatever she wants. Academic freedom is great. Ans she also loves to teach. She had a head hunter reach out and she interviewed there but it was inflexible. She is still very happy with her choice. She advised postdocs to find out what drives them and that will help with their career choice.

What are the day-to-day challenges of being a new faculty member?

SH: you think you are prepared, but there are many things you don’t realize you have to do. As a postdoc you have protected time, as a faculty member you have to do a lot of administrative duties (paper work, budgeting, etc.). The biggest challenge is to balance time between everything and still be productive.

MR: “trial by fire.” Every day she has no idea about what she is doing. As postdocs we are trained to do research. As a faculty member management matters and it takes a lot of time. She was told that there is a “magic 3 years”, after 3 years you are suddenly able to do your job. She advised postdocs about how to better prepare for the transition: ask your postdoc advisor how to get more involved in administration so that you understand that side of the job.

AP: in the only 2 weeks he was surprised about how fast his schedule fills up with “not science”. Hiring is also a challenge.

How did you handle the transition of your postdoc research project to your own lab? Was it hard to negotiate who (you or your postdoc advisor) would take what aspect of the research?

AP: K award laid this out early on and the conversation was clear. K award brought on a co-mentor and he designed something in the middle of the 2 mentors research foci.

MR: similar situation as AP. Didn’t need to have discussion because the K award made it obvious. Observing these negotiations going on in her current department but realize that research questions aren’t that focused and progress is slow (there is more room for the PI and the postdoc to investigate specifics aspects of the research). Having a conversation with your postdoc advisor is necessary, but it shouldn’t be a stressful environment. Remember that your research might start out similar, but will eventually diverge even more.

SH: Sheetal did not have to add since she does not work in a lab environment. But she said that the conversation with the PI definitely needs to happen.

To MR: Why did you do 2 postdocs?

MR: Minna couldn’t pay for living in NYC, needed to move for cost of living (both her and her husband were postdocs and they had 2 children). Scientific reason: needed to learn new technique. If you do 2 postdocs, keep them short.

SH: didn’t do 2nd postdoc. She felt like she was ready to transition.

AP: did think his postdoc was good and his wife didn’t want to move after the first. The two types of training made sense.

How was your spouse involved in your job search?

AP: Aaron wife is a nurse practitioner, she just got a job when he finished his first postdoc and was not ready to move so he did a second one. She had the say in what jobs he applied for.

MR: there will be compromises. No job will be perfect. She had K99 and a timeline and her husband was not ready to apply for faculty positions. Minna chose to apply to keep her R00 and negotiated a position for him. She feels like they got lucky and advised to apply for more places if you are in this situation.

SH: it is important to communicate. Her husband gave 5 regions in the US that he would want to move to, and she applied there.

How many positions should a postdoc apply to? Can I apply to too many? Too few? Is it good to apply to places you really don’t want to go to? What if I have multiple interviews? Is that bad?

MR: how many interviews you have doesn’t matter—search committees are not allowed to ask but the information always gets to the committee anyway. The search committee doesn’t view applicants different based upon this. She can only offer personal advice. She didn’t apply to any position that she didn’t want. She was tired, had young kids and didn’t want to deal with the extra work.

SH: search committees are not supposed to ask if you are applying in other places, also can’t ask about family or other personal matters. One mentor told her to apply only to places she wanted to go to, because it is difficult to turn down an offer if it is the only one you get. Another mentor said to be open because you don’t really know what you want until you see it and go out there. She knows people that just went out and ended up liking it, it depends on personal preference.

AP: His spouse had huge influence.

How can I be a competitive applicant for a faculty position?

MR: funding is important—NIH funding is really important. K99 isn’t a golden ticket.

FV: having funding to bring with you is important, but more important is to show that you can get funding (have a track record of funding) to show that you can generate good fundable ideas.

SH: consider applying for internal pilot mechanisms, in addition to K mechanism—even small amounts are good to show that you can get funding.

My postdoc is in its final year. My funding was for three years but I have multiple grants out without guarantee that they will be funded. There are limited opportunities in my field. What should I do? Apply late for faculty positions? Get a position I don’t really like just to have one?

FV: Maybe consider applying for another postdoc if this falls through. You are only a 3rd year postdoc. You don’t be a postdoc for too long but three years is still short enough to do another one. This will give you time to develop before applying for faculty positions in such a short amount of time.

MR: she agreed with FV. There is still time. If all grants fall through see if you can stay and work on your CV and try to become a new applicant. Go on the market next fall.

What do you like most about your job?

SH: For Sheetal teaching is important and freedom is ultimate. She is motivated because she gets to work on whatever she wants. She likes her co-workers too.

MR: Minna likes her department. She really likes the students in her lab. Discovery is cool, but watching her students mature is great.

AP: Aaron has an empty lab currently so he cannot comment on the mentoring aspect. He likes making things and building systems. He enjoys the department and being treated as a colleague is much different (such as texting with professors in the department).

FV: Frans loves the job, it is a dream (he means it because Finnish people rarely say they love anything). He enjoys that he can do many different things: interact with students, teach, perform experiments, build setups (for experiments), attend conferences and travel the world. He loves the versatility of the job and all it has to offer.