

GRADUATE JOURNAL

Over-specialization?

When I began graduate school more than five years ago, graduation and what lay beyond it seemed a long way off, and I didn't feel forced to choose a speciality. In that first year, I switched from focusing on cancer immunology to wanting to do more basic research on fruitfly genetics. As each year passed, I remained convinced that there was still plenty of time to decide what to do once I had my degree in my hand — and that I could possibly do a postdoc to explore new options. But the years seem to have gone quite quickly, and I can no longer tell myself that I still have time.

Looking at friends and colleagues, I see that a lot of people have chosen a speciality and never looked back. They seem to be heading towards postdocs in areas that are familiar and comfortable. And professors seem keen to hire postdocs who can jump into a project with a minimal learning period.

But with my dreamed-of endpoint lurking and a lot of uncertainties about my future, there is one thing I am sure about. I know that I do not want to continue doing what I am doing now. For most of my graduate career I have been a fruitfly geneticist with a little molecular biology and technology development thrown in the mix. I'm done. I'm over it. I'm ready to learn something new. ■

Anne Margaret Lee is a graduate student at Harvard University.

Building a regional postdoc community

The idea for a regional symposium was hatched at the US National Postdoctoral Association's annual meeting in Washington in 2004.

Members of the University of Pittsburgh's postdoc association returned home from the meeting wondering how they could help their colleagues to take part in such career-development forums — especially as funding was scarce. They decided that if some postdocs couldn't afford to travel to the national meeting, then a meeting should be brought to them.

Joan Lakoski, assistant vice-chancellor for academic career development at the university's Schools of the Health Sciences, offered the support of her office and advised the postdocs to broaden their scope and

include administrators and postdocs from regional institutions. The National Postdoctoral Association endorsed the event, which grew into the first regional postdoctoral symposium for Pennsylvania, Ohio and West Virginia and was held last October at Pittsburgh.

Pooling resources resulted in several pluses. It yielded a larger audience than if the university had gone it alone, including postdocs, faculty members and administrators from 12 universities and postdoc organizations. It drew a high-level keynote speaker in Kathie Olsen, associate director for science at the US government's Office of Science and Technology Policy. And it encouraged institutions to partner with one another, for professional development and for policy purposes.

Participants at the symposium focused on advancing best practices in career development from the perspectives of a

postdoc, an academic administrator and a national advocate, with mentoring as the most important area.

They considered what local, regional and national postdoc organizations should do to see these best practices put into place. And they decided that national organizations could set standards, regional ones could arrange collaborations, and local ones could educate faculty members about mentoring roles and expectations.

Several participating institutions are now interested in hosting a future regional gathering. Postdoc institutions in other areas and countries might consider adapting this model to develop a regional postdoctoral community of their own. ■

Darlene Zellers is the director of the office of academic career development, University of Pittsburgh Schools of the Health Sciences.

► www.health.pitt.edu/oacd/postdoc_community.html

MOVERS

David White, director, Institute of Food Research, Norwich, UK



Biologists are used to life cycles, and David White can look back on some of his own. "My life goes in seven-year spells," the new director of the Institute of Food Research notes. "At the end of that time I feel I've done everything I'm going to be able to do."

An early change came as soon as he completed his physics BA at Oxford: a bursary from the Nuffield Foundation helped him swap to zoology. Why the

change? Growing up on the edge of a country town, he had been fascinated by biology and butterflies. But he noticed that 'high flyers' at his school took physics, mathematics and chemistry. So he did, too. "That turned out to be a useful background for biology," he says.

Inspired by John Pringle, head of Oxford's zoology department, he turned his interest in movement into a DPhil on insect flight muscles. Meanwhile, his colleague, John Thorson, taught him "most of what being a scientist is about", not only in the lab but during evenings with colleagues, when the conversation flowed over every aspect of science.

White continued to work on contractility and motility at York, but his interests were shifting. "I was drying up by the end of the 1970s," he says. "I was getting invited to all the right conferences, but it wasn't going anywhere."

So he began a series of collaborations using physical tools to study biological

phenomena. A phone call in 1990 persuaded one of his former students, Justin Molloy, back from Vermont to use optical tweezers to study molecules instead of whole muscles. They went on to develop a molecular-force transducer.

"It's easier to take risks later in your career," White admits. "When I went into optical tweezers, I thought it would be the last thing I'd do scientifically, and if it failed it wasn't a disaster."

A seven-year stint as head of biology at York ended when White joined the UK Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council. Due to retire last year, he moved on instead to head the council's Institute of Food Research, a chance he found "too much fun to resist".

It also meant a move to the fens of Norfolk, nurturing his passion for wildlife photography, which he'd once thought of making "more than a hobby". When the urge to move hits again, the next cycle may be ready to begin. ■

CV 1997–2004: Director of science and technology, UK Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council.

1997–: Honorary chair in Department of Zoology, University of Oxford, UK.

1971–97: Department of Biology, University of York, UK (starting as lecturer, rising to head of department).

1967–71: Demonstrator, University of Oxford, UK.

1962–67: Research, Department of Zoology, University of Oxford, UK.

1959–62: BA in physics, University of Oxford, UK.