

MOVERS

Julio Frenk, dean, Harvard School of Public Health, Boston, Massachusetts



2007-08: Senior fellow, Global Health Program, Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Seattle, Washington; President, Carso Health Institute, Mexico City, Mexico
2000-06: Minister of health, Mexico City, Mexico
1998-2000: Executive director, evidence and information policy, WHO, Geneva, Switzerland

Medical student Julio Frenk was inspired to address health policy in his native Mexico by a visit to the impoverished southern state of Chiapas. After a career immersed in public health, Frenk now has a global reach. Colleagues say the newly appointed dean of the Harvard School of Public Health has a superlative track record of creating health policy based on scientific evidence.

After receiving his medical degree from the National Autonomous University of Mexico, Frenk pursued a public-health career at the University of Michigan. He obtained master's degrees in public health and in sociology, but it was a PhD in medical-care organization and sociology that gave him insight into crafting health-care policy.

While working on his degrees, Frenk wrote articles critical of Mexico's medical care that caught the eye of the new health minister, Guillermo Soberón, who was eager to improve the country's epidemiological capability. Frenk developed a proposal for a Center for Public Health Research and became the founding director first of that, and then of the National Institute of Public Health.

"This opportunity to combine excellence with relevance was the beginning of my career," he says. "This is a great example of how a world-class university can help build a developing country's capacity — without creating dependence."

Harvey Fineberg, then dean of the Harvard School of Public Health and one-time adviser to Mexico's nascent institute, says that Frenk seemed destined to excel in public health and medicine because of his broad grasp of the issues. "He has converted evidence into practice with a strength and vision seldom combined," says Fineberg, now president of the US Institute of Medicine.

Later, a report from Frenk on the Mexican health system and recommendations necessary for health-care reform caught the attention of the World Health Organization's then director-general, Gro Harlem Brundtland. She hired Frenk to do similar work at a global level as executive director of the organization's evidence and information-policy section. In 2000, Frenk became Mexico's minister of health, enacting reforms based on his analyses.

At Harvard, Frenk plans to explore what public health should look like in the twenty-first century. "A citizen of Mexico will bring a fresh perspective and send a very important signal that Harvard is serious about its global reach," says Fineberg.

Virginia Gewin

NETWORKS & SUPPORT

Getting and gaining from interviews

Securing a faculty position requires hard work and a little luck. Based on our recent job-hunting experiences, we offer these tips to help increase the chance of getting an interview and receiving a job offer.

Tailor your covering letters to match the job description, and to convey knowledge of the department to which you are applying. When we were applying, this helped us get interviews in areas peripherally related to our disciplines. Note also that three or four first-authored publications in leading journals from PhD and postdoc work can be sufficient to secure an interview.

Fill half your research statement with achievements, and the other half with a clear description of realistic goals. Get these statements critically reviewed by postdocs and faculty members from diverse disciplines.

Remember that reference letters will not always be glowing. When in doubt, ask if the referee is willing to write you a strong letter. This can avoid wasting six months without an interview. Give referees sufficient time, send gentle reminders and, as a back-up, ask one or two others if they are willing to write a letter for you.

Networking is useful: meeting seminar speakers, giving presentations at meetings and e-mailing colleagues

can all help to get you an interview.

The skills for securing an interview are different from those needed in the interview itself. Giving a great seminar is key. Practise it in front of diverse, critical colleagues to help you identify potential points of confusion for the audience and weaknesses in your research plans. Also make sure you work out what the interviewers will expect to gain from the seminar and the likely composition of the audience you will have.

Make sure that the plans for your future research are clear. The most common questions we were asked related to specific goals, first grants and funding sources, projects for students at all levels and major equipment needs.

Interviewers ask themselves "Would this person be a good colleague?" So it is crucial to be able to hold a conversation, while showing interest in and knowledge of others' work.

Ask questions. Ours focused on collegiality, teaching and tenure requirements, student quality, departmental infrastructure, gender equality and parental policies. And, most of all, remember to show enthusiasm.

Siobhán Brady and Marc Johnson are biology postdocs at Duke University in Durham, North Carolina.

POSTDOC JOURNAL

Lessons from Formula One

"It was a great fight and I don't think there was anything wrong," announced racer Lewis Hamilton, who was accused of cutting a corner at the Belgian Formula One Grand Prix. As I watched, I mused about corner-cutting in science, and whether such practices are justified or even necessary in order to succeed.

When data are presented, the reader or listener assumes they are robustly reproducible. One trusts that quantitative results are based on an adequate number of experimental replicates and reproducible results, and that the design includes appropriate controls. Are such assumptions necessarily valid? Much may be left unsaid, especially in a culture in which it is important to save face.

A student from another lab once sought my advice on alternative experimental approaches, claiming that her original one had failed. I later discovered that she had attempted the experiment only once, and without proper controls. Even in the collegial atmosphere of lab meetings, there is pressure to look good in front of both peers and supervisor. The emphasis on positive data is quite strong. Negative data, technical problems and methodological shortcomings may be overlooked.

Hamilton was penalized for his alleged corner-cutting. But short cuts in the lab may never be detected — even though they could matter a great deal.

Amanda Goh is a postdoctoral fellow in cell biology under the Agency of Science, Technology and Research in Singapore.