speaking German, but they do have to be reasonably fluent in English.

But assessing applicants' credentials can be dicey if their accomplishments took place at far-off institutions with different grading systems. "Our department is getting a lot of applications from different countries," says Kelleher, who works at the University of Houston in Texas. "Some are like a black box. You read it and you have no idea if they're a good candidate or not." In such cases, contact with candidates as well as referees takes on paramount importance.

CHECK EVERYTHING

Chan says that, in his experience, many applications fail to stand up to scrutiny. "A lot of CVs claim to have every skill on Earth," he says. So more than ever, it pays to be diligent and contact supervisors as well as look at the actual publication history. "In a competitive market, a lot of people will colour beyond the lines," he says. "But if you claim to have done something that you didn't really do, that's a deal breaker."

Andrade says that every detail on an application is worth double-checking. "We see incorrect information at all levels," he says. "At best, it just shows a lack of care. At worst, it's something else." And even letters of recommendation can mislead, adds Odom, who says that he puts little stock in them and calls the referees instead. "You have to speak to a human being. Even if they were truthful in their letter of reference, they may have been guarded."

He says that grades, testing scores and endorsements from past supervisors are all important, but above all, he is looking for people with a plan, especially potential postdocs. "Grad students are there to stabilize their lives and figure out what they want," he says. "If they want to be an investment banker, cool. But if postdocs don't know what they're going to do, you shouldn't hire them. Some of them may not be planning to go into the field, but they have to have a clarity of heart."

Of course, PIs must have plans of their own. Kelleher, for her part, wants to keep her lab small — hire a couple of PhD students soon, and maybe a postdoc down the road. As a postdoc, she was in a lab with just a few other people, and enjoyed that intimacy. "That will probably be my preference as a PI," she says. Her vision for her future will really start to take shape when the next person joins the lab — whoever it is. ■

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TURNING POINT

Juan David Ramírez

Juan David Ramírez, a postdoc in molecular parasitology at the US National Institutes of Health (NIH) in Bethesda, Maryland, was named a Pew Latin American Fellow in June. After the two-year fellowship, Ramírez plans to return to his native Colombia to help fight his country's endemic parasites.

What sparked your interest in parasites?

I come from a country with many endemic tropical diseases. Many people in my family had malaria. One had Chagas' disease. I became really interested in infectious diseases, particularly those caused by parasites. Luckily my teachers in high school encouraged my love of microbiology, and I decided to study it as an undergraduate at the University of the Andes in Bogotá.

What made you pursue a graduate degree?

During my bachelor's, I developed a molecular test for diagnosis of Chagas' disease. When I finished that, I did a master's examining the link between genetic diversity and clinical outcomes. Only two drugs are available to treat Chagas' disease. My adviser, collaborators and I found that most of the parasites (*Trypanosoma cruzi*) were resistant to one of the two, and developed a test to determine which drug should be used in each patient. Our results helped to create a guide for treatment of the disease in Colombia. I want to do similar work on other parasites.

Describe your graduate experience.

My adviser was supportive and let me do anything I wanted. I was an author on 18 studies on the molecular epidemiology of parasitic diseases in journals such as *PLoS Neglected Tropical Diseases* and *Acta Tropica*. We were in a good situation — we had close contact with patients and clinical metrics of the disease. I also had the opportunity to spend a year at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine. I brought parasite samples from humans, reservoirs and insect vectors in Colombia and explored the genetic diversity and reproductive mechanism of *Trypanosoma*.

Eighteen publications seems like a lot.

It was. I won the national science award as a result. I owe a lot to my supportive adviser, but I was quite focused on publications, serving as primary author on 12 studies while also providing samples or analysing data for collaborations. As long as I had interesting results, I pushed my adviser to read and correct the manuscript. I wrote so that we could submit for publication.

How did you secure a postdoc at the NIH?

While I was doing my PhD, the Latin American Congress of Parasitology convened in Bogotá. There, I met my current adviser, Michael Grigg. He had seen my work on *Trypanosoma* markers and liked it, and was doing similar work in *Toxoplasma*. I asked about the possibility of coming to the NIH to do a postdoc, and e-mailed him when I finished my PhD. In April last year, I started a postdoc on *Leishmania* and *Giardia*.

Describe your postdoc.

It is awesome. In Bogotá, where I did my masters and PhD, we had restrictions on resources, equipment and technology. Here, the sky is the limit. I do not have to worry about not having access to a sequencer.

What does the Pew award mean to you?

I am the second Colombian in history to get the award and that is important to me. Research in South America is focused largely in Brazil, Chile and Argentina. Other countries have talented researchers but do not get many opportunities. The award is also important because it provides funds if I want to return to Colombia to start my own lab after two years here.

Will you return to Colombia?

Yes. I was productive in Colombia as a graduate student and got research funded by the European Commission. I think I can still do that. I want to help Colombian science to be better appreciated and to do good work that will help to persuade the government to invest more in science. There are many other parasites I want to explore. I want to do work that has an impact on the health of my country. ■

INTERVIEW BY VIRGINIA GEWIN