Epidemiology and Biostatistics of Aging Training Program
Monday, January 23, 2012, 3:30-4:30pm
Center on Aging and Health, 2024 E. Monument Street, Suite 2-700

“What I Wish I Knew Then That I Know Now” (A career development panel discussion)
Panelists: Karen Bandeen-Roche, PhD; Dani Fallin, PhD; Thomas Glass, PhD; and Thomas Louis, PhD.

Key Items from the Panelists

Karen Bandeen-Roche, Ph.D.
Hurley-Dorrier Professor and Chair, Department of Biostatistics

1. I wish I had known as a doctoral student to take advantage of that time to learn good professional habits including real strategies for sound time management and reading the literature a little every day.
2. I wish I had known how important mentorship is, and that it can be sought in a way that is not burdensome to the mentor. I have had wonderful mentors—but having mentors early on to proactively engage in career development, visibility opportunities, and help in prioritizing the important ranging from straight talk to running cover would have made a big early difference for me.
3. I wish I had learned earlier than I did how to establish boundaries and protect a reasonable work-life balance, because I ultimately learned it the hard way of becoming unhealthy over it. This is not only important for one’s health and life satisfaction but actually improves creativity and prioritization thus the quality of one’s contributions!
4. I wish I had known to be more honest with myself over the opportunity balance in a two-body problem. A situation that feels wrong often will turn out to be. My husband and I could have better balanced our combined career satisfaction somewhere else. We learned that life happens in a way that one can’t always rectify this after the fact.

M. Daniele Fallin, Ph.D.
Professor, Department of Epidemiology

1. There are happy academics! Choosing this career is not a choice to be unhappy and stressed out your whole life.
2. It is ok, and actually important, to highlight your strengths/accomplishments and ask for what you need. Just remember to be appropriate in your demeanor. (There was some discussion that, generally, women are not as naturally good at this as men).
3. Networking is important – even if awkward at first. People generally like to be approached and it can pay off later for paper reviews, grant reviews, promotions, etc to have met as many people as possible. This is also true about calling funding agencies and NIH program officers.
4. Simple clear messages are much better that complicated confusing ones (even if the complicated is more interesting to you).
5. Do a post-doc. That is the time to think and to write without a lot of other responsibilities that come with faculty positions. However, choose it wisely – should have good mentorship, good research opportunities, and good opportunities for independent work that will set you up for the next step in your career.
Thomas A. Louis, Ph.D.
Professor, Department of Biostatistics

What I wish I knew earlier that I know now:

- Level 0 design (structure for success): Projects need to have the right team and the right resources in order to have a chance to succeed.
- Keeping your eye on the prize(s): Set goals and keep them in mind. Don’t be so goal-oriented that you are inflexible, but you need aids to navigation.
- Just because it’s logical doesn’t mean that it’s desirable: You may not be interested in something that is completely “logical” like getting involved in another collaboration. Desirability may trump logic.
- Work with productive, intelligent, personable colleagues: do it!
- Make standing appointments with yourself: Treat them with at least as much respect as you do appointments with others.
- \( P = I \times D \): The prevalence of obligations equals their incidence times mean duration (well, it’s approximately true in the steady state). So, beware of the very large “\( P \).”
- \( 20 \times 5 \ 5 \times 20 \): Having 5, 20% commitments is very, very different from having 20, 5% commitments. The latter is neither career nor science/policy friendly.
- In order to have inter/multi/cross disciplinary research, there must be disciplines: Administrators tend to forget that successful collaborations result from different skill sets getting together. Early in your career, definitely collaborate, but it is at least as important that you refine your disciplinary knowledge and skills.
- Publication is more a matter of persistence than brilliance: It’s true. Keep at it, spend time on communicating your ideas, study published work to see how the successful authors write, organize, . . . .
- Build and maintain a reputation as an honest broker: Never tell a lie (that doesn’t mean you have to tell the whole truth!). Be trusted with information. Be evidence-based in critiquing/reviewing work and in presenting your own work. Separate evidence from speculation (but, it’s fine to speculate!).
- Enjoy yourself!

Knew then, wish I knew now:
- The NIH pay line in the mid-1970s was greater than the 20th percentile!

Thomas Glass, Ph.D.
Professor, Department of Epidemiology

My three points were:

1. I wish I had known as a doctoral student that my dissertation was the beginning of my career and not the end of my education/training. This has major and deep implications. For one thing, it helps students who are perfectionistic to think about their dissertations as the "worst" thing they will ever do in their research career as opposed to the "best" thing they have done as a student. In a sense both things are true, but the thinking leads to important differences.
2. I wish I had known how hard it is to get traction with out of the box ideas that go against the flow. If I had, I would have done a better job of enlisting support and feedback from senior established people who could have helped me frame issues better and deal with the credibility gap a young person faces. I believed when I was young that better ideas would rise to the top on their own. That's not (sadly) how it works in my experience.

3. (I forget what I said, but am now thinking of a third point that is just as good) I wish I had known how long it takes to become good at writing academic prose. If you had told me when I started that it takes 20 years to get good at clear, concise effective writing, I would not have believed it. I have many good ideas that never saw the light of day because of this. It’s all about the writing!

3b. This is a corollary/extension of point 3. I remember seeing those few faculty who were great presenters and clear speakers and thinking that this must be a gift from God. You were either born with it or not. Now I know that (like anything else) those people who are dynamic effective presenters/speakers are just people who are hard working and who have a great deal of practice and experience. It’s not a gift at all but the consequence of a long term investment. If you are shy or not a great speaker, you can learn and improve over time (but you must practice and practice often).

4. (Oh yea, now I remember point 3): I wish I had been aware of how valuable my "free" time was when I was a doctoral student and post-doc. I know I wasted the luxury of free time to think and do big picture work because I didn't have the awareness of how easily my time would become taken up by the sand and pebbles of academic responsibilities (See parable of the jar below)*

*Appendix: The Parable of the Jars

(Attribution unknown)

STUDENT: Wise teacher, I am having trouble knowing how best to use my time in graduate school. Can you give me some advice?

WISE TEACHER: Ok, here take this big empty jar and go fill it up with big rocks and then come back.

STUDENT: Ok, will do, but I am not sure what this has to do with my problem.

WISE TEACHER: [rolls eyes]

Student returns with jar full of big rocks.

WISE TEACHER: So, good, now is the jar full?

STUDENT: Yes teach, it’s full (beaming with the bravado of accomplishment)!

WISE TEACHER: I am afraid you are mistaken. Now go and put all the pebbles in the jar that you can.

Student goes away again and finds that the jar will hold many pebbles that fall between the rocks.

Student returns to the teacher.
WISE TEACHER: Is the jar full now?

STUDENT: (hesitantly) I....think so....

WISE TEACHER: Sorry, wrong again. Now go try sand.

Student sulks away, finds that a plentitude of sand will fit in the jar amidst the big rocks and pebbles. Student returns to teacher.

WISE TEACHER: Looks good. Now is it full this time?

STUDENT: Um. I guess so.

WISE TEACHER: Ok, let’s say you are right this time. We will save quantum physics for another day. In the meantime, what is the lesson in all this?

STUDENT: (snaps her fingers with delight) I've got it! You can always put more in the jar (beaming)!

WISE TEACHER: Wrong again I am afraid. The lesson is: always put the big rocks in first!

Note: I find this a powerful and general source of guidance in time management. It’s basically another way to say what Tom Louis said about scheduling meetings with yourself. If you don’t schedule in blocks of time to work on the things that really matter (big rocks) your time will quickly get filled with the gravel and sand that characterizes academic life. BRF!