

To succeed in academia, grad students need 'street smarts'

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In an era of reduced funding, it's not enough for a young researcher to be a good scientist. He or she also needs "street smarts" to, for example, find an influential mentor, dress professionally, network during scientific meetings and be able to describe a research project in the time it takes to ride an elevator.

These are among the techniques taught at a "Street Smarts for Science" workshop offered at the annual Society for Leukocyte Biology meeting, and described in the November issue of the journal *Nature Immunology*.

What students learn in the workshops can help them "navigate educational and professional waters to find success in academia," Elizabeth J. Kovacs, PhD, and colleagues report. Kovacs, a professor at Loyola University Chicago Stritch School of Medicine, initiated the workshops and is senior author of the report published in *Nature Immunology*.

The proportion of PhDs who obtain tenured or tenure-track faculty positions has declined from 34 percent in 1993 to 26 percent in 2012, according to the National Institutes of Health.

"Worldwide fiscal constraints have trimmed government and private sources of research funding, which has created an increasingly competitive landscape for young scientists looking to succeed in academia," Kovacs and colleagues write. "Thus, students seeking tenure-track faculty positions must make efficient use of their training time and

network with colleagues in their scientific discipline, including potential employers."

Here is a sampling of the career advice offered in the workshop and described in the report in *Nature Immunology*:

Find a mentor. Preferably, a mentor should be in a tenured position, or at least be around long enough to see the graduate student through the entire project. The mentor should exemplify what the young researcher wants to do professionally. Ideal mentors have "pull," meaning they are well-established and credible, and thus can help in job searches—especially in writing recommendations.

Self marketing. In today's research environment, the ability to describe your research is as important – if not more important – than the research itself. "In many cases, brilliant scientists with potentially groundbreaking ideas fall short because they cannot communicate their ideas or the importance of their research to the appropriate audience."

A researcher should be able to describe his or her work and goals in 1 to three 3 minutes – roughly the time it takes to ride an elevator.

Networking tips. Get exposure by, for example, asking thoughtful questions after presentations. Collaborate. Be friendly: Sometimes it's not what you know but whom you know that counts when seeking a job, grant, research opportunity, etc. "You never know how far kindness can get you." Tap into potential networking opportunities. For example, if you like sports, join a sports club so you can network there.

Make the most of scientific conferences. Beforehand, research the speakers and topics. "This will allow the [young scientists](#) to ask more insightful questions and get more from each session."

Dress well: "While it is true that one cannot judge a book by its cover, first impressions are lasting. Junior researchers should dress as if attending an interview because every encounter might represent an opportunity for advancement." If another participant has a MD or PhD, address the individual as Dr. until invited to use a first name. Turn off your cell phone, because conferences "are places to learn and network."

Provided by Loyola University Health System

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