

## Course 1: The Strategic Postdoc

### Module 1: Positioning Yourself for the Postdoc

#### Session 4: Prepare to leave your PhD

##### Activity 4.1: Negotiating with your PI

Carefully read the following case studies and answer the reflection questions below:

1. Mary is a fifth-year trainee in the neuroscience department and during her PhD, she made two important discoveries. After all her hard work, she's ready to begin writing her thesis and finalizing her first author publication (about her first discovery). She's 11 months away from defending her thesis. However, her research mentor, who is up for tenure, wants to add more experiments to her manuscript so they can submit it to the scientific journal *Cell*. The PI thinks this would benefit both herself and Mary. As Mary starts to work on the extra experiments, she's finding it hard to balance her time between doing experiments and writing her manuscript and thesis. She feels that if this continues to be the case, she won't be able to meet her deadlines.
  - a. What is the advisor's main objective? What is Mary's main objective?

**Advisor - She wants to build a competitive promotion/tenure package.**

**Trainee - She wants to meet the requirements to graduate on time. She also wants a high-impact publication.**

- b. Do you think Mary can complete her PhD and publish the paper on time? Come up with two possible strategies to help Mary sort out the role conflicts with her PI.

**Mary needs to think about what her ideal career is and what the qualifications that she needs for it are. She also needs to examine other needs she might have (e.g., funding sources, personal timelines) and decide on the best plan of action.**

#### **Possible options:**

##### **Focus on finishing her PhD on her original schedule:**

- **Publish a small paper in a lower-impact journal to complete the requirements of the PhD. Write her thesis. Graduate on time. Possibly do a short postdoc in the lab to complete the high-impact publication.**
- **Recruit someone from the lab to continue with experiments or help her with the experiments for the high-impact paper while she focuses on her thesis defense and completing her graduation requirements.**
- **Give up on the high-impact paper. Publish in a lower-impact journal. Try to graduate on time.**

##### **Focus on the publication:**

- **Delay her graduation by a year. Focus on her high-impact publication and then complete the requirements for graduation.**

- c. What resources does Mary have to help her through this transition?  
**Mary needs to weigh the pros and cons of potentially delaying her graduation and make a decision of what is the best option for her. This includes thinking about what career she wants to pursue and whether focusing on finishing her PhD vs focusing on the publication would be better. Before she goes to talk to her research mentor she should consider what things she may be willing to compromise on. She may want to discuss these issues with other mentors or with peers who have gone through similar experiences to help her think through her options.**
- d. If you were in Mary's shoes, what steps would you have taken to avoid or manage some of the conflicts she is facing?  
**Before commencing the new set of experiments, I would have talked to the PI to discuss what to do if the experiments delayed my graduation timeline. This way, I would have a plan B or C if the experiments took longer than anticipated. To manage her current situation, I would talk to the PI to present my proposal (to either focus on the paper or focus on graduating) and try to come up with a solution together. If that conversation didn't go well, I would go to a Dissertation Committee member for advice.**
2. Noah is a sixth-year graduate student who has already fulfilled all of the requirements for graduation and published a first author paper, and he's ready to schedule his thesis defense. In preparation to graduate, given his strong interest in the field, he decides to apply for a competitive two-year science policy fellowship that would start in 3 months. His PI, Shawna, had a meeting with him and asked him to stay 6-10 more months in order to complete a few additional experiments needed for a second manuscript. He agrees with his PI that this would be a great opportunity for him and he would like to do that. Right after his meeting with his PI, he found out that he was awarded the full-time science policy fellowship. But there is a stipulation that he must begin the program as scheduled and if he can't, he must decline the offer. Noah feels very bad about the possibility of breaking his commitment to his advisor, but he also knows he wants to pursue a career in science policy and not academia.
- a. What is Shawna's main objective? What is Noah's main objective?  
**Advisor - needs paper to make her grant renewal submission(s) more competitive and for promotions in her career.**  
**Trainee - Graduate and transition into his fellowship.**
- b. How can Noah negotiate with Shawna to reach a compromise?  
**He can reach out to mentors to help with this decision. He needs to talk to his PI about his career plans and the fellowship and see what solutions they can find together. He could suggest training someone to take on his work.**

- c. If you were in Noah's shoes, what steps would you have taken to avoid or manage some of the conflicts here?  
**I would have shared my interest in science policy, tried to have a conversation with the PI to talk about what I wanted to do after the PhD, and talk about the transition process.**
3. Wei is a seventh-year PhD candidate who wants to do a postdoc and is graduating soon. She sent her PI John a draft of her thesis for feedback weeks ago but hasn't heard back from him. Her defense is approaching and she invited him to her practice talk. However, John told her that he was too busy writing a grant and he couldn't make her practice talk and sent her a short email with minimal feedback about her thesis. She's terrified because she doesn't have her PI's input on her thesis and is not sure how to effectively prepare for her defense.
- a. What is John's main objective? What is Wei's main objective?  
**Advisor - Needs to get grants to continue with his lab.**  
**Trainee - Needs to prepare for defense, write thesis, and publish manuscript in order to complete the graduation requirements.**
- b. What are the main challenges presented in this case? Briefly explain.  
**Wei's PI is too busy, and she doesn't have the support system that she needs as she transitions out of her PhD.**
- c. What options does Wei have in order to solve the challenges described in question 3b? Briefly explain.  
**Wei needs to build her support network. She could do so by asking senior postdocs or graduate students in the lab for advice. She could also seek help from classmates, former mentors, or other groups (e.g. peer-mentoring groups). These support systems can provide feedback according to their expertise (e.g. lab members could aid in manuscript and thesis writing, while classmates could help in practice talks).**
4. Rob is ready to graduate; he has already published a first author paper and scheduled his dissertation exam. He knows that he needs postdoctoral training in order to be competitive for the career that he wants. He has heard from his classmates that PIs are an important resource to leverage when trying to secure a postdoctoral position and can help you think about the type of postdoc that you need, give you feedback on your postdoc job talk, and write recommendations. Rob decides to coordinate a meeting with his PI to talk about his career goals and see how his mentorship can help him get there. The PI tells Rob that he's super busy as he is putting his tenure packet together, but he can give Rob a 30 minute slot to talk about his career. They meet, and Rob tells his PI about his career goals and asks for advice. His PI looks at Rob and tells him that when he graduated, he didn't have any help from his PhD advisor, and that he was able to navigate

everything and succeed in his career goals. He didn't understand what Rob was asking from him, and he was totally confident that Rob would be able to get to where he needs without his help. Now, Rob feels very frustrated and doesn't know what to do next.

- a. What is the advisor's main objective? What is Rob's main objective?

**Advisor - Busy. Needs to secure tenure.**

**Trainee - Needs to prepare job talk, apply for postdoctoral labs, line up interviews, and create an exit plan.**

- b. What are the main challenges presented in this case? Briefly explain.

**Rob doesn't feel that he has the support that he needs as his PI is super busy.**

- c. If you were in Rob's shoes, how would you solve the challenges presented in this problem? What resources would you have available?

**I would build my support network. I could ask senior postdocs or graduate students in the lab for advice. I could also seek help from classmates, former mentors, other PIs in the department, or other groups (e.g. peer-mentoring groups). These support systems can provide feedback according to their expertise.**