

From the bench to a grander vision

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Figure 1: Presenting a poster on our science advocacy workshops at the 2017 AAAS meeting

As a kid, I was always very diligent in school and took it very seriously. As I was also curious and enjoyed a challenge, science was a good field for me to pursue. Plus, I grew up in a family of scientists, with both my parents and grandparents doing it. But that didn't necessarily mean I knew how academia worked.

I moved to the U.S. after high school, graduated from college (with a B.S. from Clemson University), and attended graduate school at Emory University. While I had good grades and test scores, I still had a lot to learn about doing research in spite of having worked in a lab for one year prior to graduate school. But I knew that I enjoyed the bench work enough to pursue a graduate education, and I wanted to learn the scientific way of thinking.

I had a really excellent graduate mentor (also female) who taught me everything I know about science. She taught me how to design experiments and interpret data, and pointed out when I was doing things wrong. She always pushed me to do better in multiple aspects of being a scientist, and taught me to speak up when I had a question or a thought, no matter how small it might have been. This ultimately allowed me to become

more confident in my abilities as a scientist. She also managed work-life balance extremely well, which was really inspiring to see and proved to be very useful for me later. Overall, she was an amazing mentor and role model.

Graduate school was pretty comfortable. I wasn't eligible to apply for many fellowships (at least not until I obtained my U.S. citizenship), but luckily the lab was well funded during my time there, which alleviated some pressure. I didn't seek additional mentors because I felt that her guidance could point me in the right direction, which, at the time, was still an academic career. I also didn't really consider other career options during this time - if I did, I probably would have approached my scientific training differently.

During my postdoctoral training, I started exploring other careers, although academia was still on the table. Many changes took place in my life during this time, which allowed me to mature in several ways. I still carried with me the confidence I had gained during graduate school, which materialized into wanting to become a leader in my field of choice. But while examining potential careers, I also kept an open mind. I attended my first national meeting related to postdoctoral issues (but unrelated to my bench research), which peaked my interest in this area. Together with another postdoc at the university, I subsequently established a career seminar series as a resource for postdocs to hear from professionals in non-academic careers.

While I didn't realize this at the time, the seminar had the potential to change the local academic culture. Trainees came up to me and thanked me for creating this resource, which made me feel good in so many ways. At some point I noticed that some of them were regularly attending the events, and also seemed to be asking more questions and interact more frequently with some of the speakers following their talks. This was a great experience. After that, I organized regional symposia to connect trainees to each other, and got involved with national organizations focused on training and policy for graduate students and postdocs.

During this time, I began to network with experts in these areas, and to speak up about certain issues in academia. As I participated in more of these activities on the side of my postdoctoral work, I eventually decided to follow these strong interests that I was developing instead of trying to stay in academia. So, I quit my postdoc and continued to explore what I was really interested in doing, but now with a slightly more clear direction.

As luck would have it, I obtained a travel award to attend a science advocacy meeting in Boston (organized by [Future of Research](#) and other groups), which interestingly took place during my last month as a postdoc. That meeting got me hooked on studying academia and advocating for scientists, although my interests were fairly broad at that point. But these topics seemed to fit me like a glove, and I knew that I had to get more involved with the group.

The rest is history. At the Future of Research, I was fortunate enough to be involved early on with a project on tracking postdoc salaries nationally, which isn't something I ever imagined myself doing but I loved it. This experience also opened me up to the idea of trying new things and going with the flow, instead of planning my next move in detail as I had always done.

Overtime, this project gave me a sense of purpose and direction while still figuring out my path. And no matter what else I did during this time, I always came back to that feeling of passion that I had developed for trying to create evidence-based change in academia, while advocating for transparency in the system. I was a bit surprised to see how naturally these ideas came to me, as I never knew that you could study something like this; nevertheless, I found it extremely fascinating.

I later reflected upon why it was so easy for me to engage in this area, and realized that it essentially blended multiple aspects of my personality: 1) an interest in doing research with a purpose; 2) the feeling that I am making a difference with my work; 3) speaking up for a particular cause and backing it up with data; and 4) I had always been a bit of rebel, which worked well for wanting to challenge the status quo.

I finally felt that my life had a purpose and direction that I was happy to pursue. Without going into details about my contributions (see more on [my website](#)), volunteering for a cause I believe in (and knowing what that is) has been a very powerful motivator for engaging in this type of work. In this context, taking ownership of science policy projects and leading them has been a very fulfilling experience. I am now on the Future of Research Board of Directors, which I feel is the ideal leadership position for me. In some ways, this is the opportunity I had been waiting for all this time, I just didn't know it, and obviously couldn't have predicted it.

I'm very grateful to this group for making my opinion feel valued and my voice count during a time when I wasn't quite sure where I was going. I now know the direction I want my life to take, which is quite amazing in itself. I also know that just having a job isn't sufficient for me without contributing to a grander vision and the potential to make the world a better place. And while I am still looking for a position in this area, I am now aware of the fact that I am much more motivated by a mission (than by money). I wouldn't have realized that if it weren't for my experience with Future of Research.

Some of the lessons I've learned along the way are: 1) Don't let anyone tell you how to live your life; 2) Volunteering can pay off if you are truly invested in it; and 3) Gratitude is a good way to live your life in general. As I try to keep these lessons in mind moving forward, perhaps the biggest one is still that taking some time to discover what is truly important to me will be a worthwhile long-term investment in my future.