

NIEHS Biomedical Career Symposium inspires and informs hundreds

By Monica Frazier

The 18th annual NIEHS Biomedical Career Symposium opened April 25 with a warm welcome from NIEHS Director Linda Birnbaum, Ph.D., and a keynote address by Melanie Sinche of Harvard Law School. Sinche spoke to an estimated 300 attendees, mostly graduate students and postdoctoral researchers, who came to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) in Research Triangle Park, North Carolina for career guidance, skill development, and networking opportunities.

Birnbaum noted the importance of postdoctoral researchers and the variety of possibilities they can seek in their careers. “NIEHS has a responsibility to provide you opportunities for experience, for mentorship, and for support as you all transition to independent careers,” Birnbaum said.

Samantha Hoopes, Ph.D., co-chair of the Career Symposium Planning Committee, introduced several new features at the 18th annual event, including color-coded stickers to facilitate networking with others who share a career interest, and longer curriculum vitae (CV) and resume consultation appointments.

Hoopes and co-chair **Kiersten Verhein, Ph.D.**, stepped forward to oversee the event shortly after the 17th annual Career Symposium and began work with the planning committee in the fall of 2014.

Learning how your skills transfer

Sinche's talk, “But I Have No Skills! Debunking Myths and Exploring Career Options for Ph.D.s,” was informed by her work a senior research associate in the Labor and Worklife Program at Harvard Law School. She is the lead investigator on a survey study to identify career outcomes of students who earned Ph.D. degrees between 2004 and 2014. The survey is now closed, and Sinche is conducting an analysis of more than 8,100 responses.

Sinche kept the audience involved throughout her talk, beginning with survey responses by more than 200 of the registered attendees regarding their career paths of interest and what they hoped to learn at the event. The breadth of those responses impressed Sinche. “As recently as five years ago, the trainees that I worked with weren’t as aware of the vast array of possibilities,” she said.

Sinche debunked several myths, including “I’m only trained for one job,” which she said was based on the historical apprenticeship model of graduate study that no longer applies to today’s workforce. By sharing a sample job description and CV, she helped participants identify transferable skills and understand how an academic-oriented CV may not reflect those skills. Fortunately for participants, one-on-one CV consultations were available with more than 25 experts from a variety of job sectors.

“The content of your studies is critical, but that is not all you have to offer,” Sinche said. “The reality is that graduate students and postdocs possess a wide range of skills that are valued by employers across all sectors.”

Options and career planning

Concurrent sessions allowed participants to choose events most applicable to their interests, including eight expert panels from various career paths, 10 career development workshops, and a networking reception that featured exhibitors from local groups and companies.

Workshops focused on preparation for and identification of pathways to careers, including “Leveraging LinkedIn for Expertise Development and Career Opportunities” and “Managing Your Career with an Individual Development Plan.” Others highlighted self-assessment and development, with topics such as “Untrain Your Brain: Synergy Between Personal and Professional Interests” and “Leadership and You: Balancing Strength and Challenges.”

An opportunity close to home — planning the symposium

The planning of the symposium reflected one of Sinche’s central messages — take advantage of local opportunities to volunteer in ways that will develop transferable skills appreciated in every job sector. The event was organized and executed entirely by trainees at NIEHS and EPA (see sidebar), with support from the NIEHS [Office of Fellows’ Career Development](#).

Trainees through the years have used the symposium to strengthen many of the transferable skills Sinche mentioned, such as problem solving, creativity, managing resources, and communicating effectively. The committee members personally invite panelists and workshop speakers, offering an extraordinary opportunity to network.

(Monica Frazier, Ph.D., is an Intramural Research Training Award fellow in the NIEHS Mechanisms of Mutation Group.)



Sinche shared her motivation for her lecture topic. “I have heard the same message over and over, that I have knowledge of a particular discipline, but I don’t have any skills, and that has really pushed me to think more carefully about what skills people emerge from graduate school with.” (Photo courtesy of Steve McCaw)

Planning committee members

Samantha Hoopes, Ph.D. — Co-chair
Kirsten Verhein, Ph.D. — Co-chair
Suchandra Bhattacharjee, Ph.D.
Joanne Damborsky, Ph.D.
Kelly Daughtry, Ph.D.
Kristin Gabor, Ph.D.
Ju Hee Haam, Ph.D.
Jackson Hoffman, Ph.D.
John House, Ph.D.
Julie Lowe, Ph.D.
Simone Otto, Ph.D.
Deirdre Robinson, Ph.D.
Erin Romes, Ph.D.
Jordan St Charles, Ph.D.
Natacha Steinckwich-Besancon, Ph.D.
Eugene Gibbs-Flournoy, Ph.D.
Marie McGee, Ph.D.
Jennifer Nichols, Ph.D.
Samantha Snow, Ph.D.



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Members of the planning committee include, back row from left, Otto, Damborsky, Hoffman, Gibbs-Flournoy, House. Front row, from left, Haam, Gabor, Daughtry, Verhein, Hoopes, Snow, Lowe. Not shown, Bhattacharjee, Robinson, Romes, St Charles, Steinckwich-Besancon, McGee, Nichols. (Photo courtesy of Steve McCaw)



Birnbaum encouraged participants to take advantage of the impressive list of panels and workshops organized by the NIEHS and EPA postdoctoral fellows. (Photo courtesy of Steve McCaw)



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Sinche asked the graduate and postdoctoral researchers in attendance to assess their own skills, by reflecting on their most rewarding and positive experiences. (Photo courtesy of Steve McCaw)



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In the writing and communication career panel, Robin Arnette, Ph.D., NIEHS science editor, encouraged listeners to get involved in science writing at their current institutions, to help propel their career. She and other panelists shared insights into their career paths and gave guidance in response to audience questions. (Photo courtesy of Steve McCaw)



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Hoopers participates in a discussion session during a workshop by Patrick Brandt, Ph.D., director of Science, Training, and Diversity at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (UNC), titled "How to Develop the Skills Needed for Careers in Science Outreach and Program Administration." (Photo courtesy of Steve McCaw)



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Diane Klotz, Ph.D., of Sanford-Burnham MRI, discussed assessing personal leadership style using specific leadership models, in her workshop, "Leadership and You: Balancing Strengths and Challenges." (Photo courtesy of Steve McCaw)



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After three sessions of career panels and workshops, a networking reception allowed attendees to meet each other and make connections with local peers sharing similar interests. (Photo courtesy of Steve McCaw)



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Janice Allen, Ph.D., right, from the NIEHS Division of Extramural Research Training (DERT), takes a question during the career panel on Scientific Review Officer and Grants Management careers. Other panelists included, from left, Jonathan Hollander, Ph.D., of DERT; Erin Hopper, Ph.D., research director of the UNC Office of Research and Graduate Education; and Mike Humble, Ph.D., DERT. (Photo courtesy of Steve McCaw)

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