

JEFFPOST

Empowering Postdoctoral Careers

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Key Highlights

National Postdoctoral Association (NPA) celebrated its 20th anniversary on April 21, 2023, at the NPA Annual Meeting at Lowes Hotel Philadelphia!

Our very own Lisa Kozlowski, PhD, Associate Dean for Student and Postdoctoral Affairs, JCLS, was awarded the NPA Distinguished Service Award for her profound and consistent leadership in improving the postdoctoral experience.



We could not be happier and prouder applauding Lisa Kozlowski for this honor.

Christian Meissner, PhD, from Iowa State University won the 2023 NPA Gallagher Mentor Award of the year in recognition of 15 years of outstanding mentoring of postdocs.

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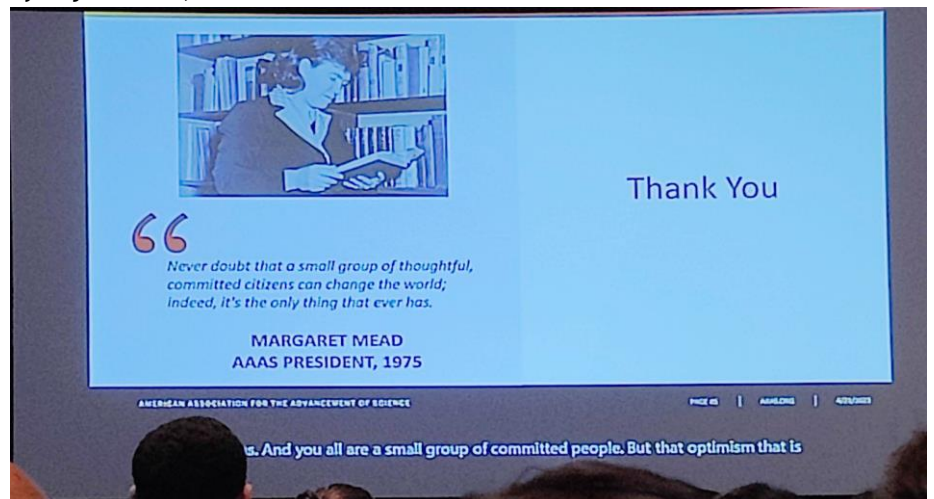
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NPA Conference 2023

by Arijita Ghosh, PhD



Slide from keynote address by Sudip Parikh, PhD, from AAAS at NPA 2023

The National Postdoctoral Association conducted its Annual Meeting from April 21-22 in Philly! It was an amazing networking event dedicated to the postdoctoral community nationwide. Jefferson Postdoctoral Association (JPA) members were among the local attendees. The conference participants included postdocs, administrators, disciplinary committee representatives, industry personnel, and faculty. The event served as a great platform to discuss and share new ideas with strategic collaborators, recruiters, and peers, which was quite a resource to the postdoctoral community. Here is a report covering key features of the event.

- One of the early sessions was on mentoring scientific communication for postdocs by BioMedX, focusing on their program, The Scientific Communication Advances Research Excellence (SCOARE), that enables postdocs to grasp skills and strategies for better communication.
- The SciPhD team led by Larry Petcovic, MS, and Randall Ribaldo, PhD, discussed mentoring postdocs to upskill themselves and land their first job.
- Mayank Chugh, PhD, postdoc at Harvard Medical School, led a discussion on the importance of reforming compensation and retaining postdocs by recognizing their worth. He spoke about recent reports in *Nature* and *Science*, outlining the struggles in recruiting postdocs and frustrations engulfing the postdoc community.

- The first keynote address was by Sudip Parikh, PhD, CEO, American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS).
- A series of speed talks covered multiple topics: tips on building a postdoc office, professional development for nonbiomedical postdocs, impact of DEI in postdoc success, and entrepreneurship as a postdoctoral career path.
- Megha Lal, PhD, and Priyanka Lahiri, PhD, represented STEMpeers along with career coach Tracy Costello, PhD. They spoke about the benefits of their Gurukool program, which focuses on a sustainable network of peer-sourced mentorship.
- An inspiring keynote address was delivered by Dawn Bonnell, PhD, from University of Pennsylvania, who shared insightful stories about lessons learned from a non-linear career trajectory.
- A wide array of posters from postdocs representing postdoctoral offices at universities across the country made the poster presentation and networking session eventful.
- A special Diversity reception event was organized with the efforts of Philly-based universities (Jefferson being one of them) which was filled with interesting games, food, and cheer and gave the postdocs more time and energy to network and build community.



Diversity Reception event attended by NPA2023 attendees



Keynote address by Dawn Bonnell, PhD

Science Slam 2023

By Ivette Martorell Serra, MS

On March 23, 2023, the Graduate Student Association and Science Communication Series partnered to hold Jefferson’s first Science Slam at the Venture Café. The speakers were Jefferson graduate students and postdocs who competed to present their science in an engaging, accessible manner in a timespan of 5 minutes. The audience was the judge and jury of the competition, and they showed great enthusiasm to complete the assigned task. They also challenged our speakers with very interesting questions that sparked enthralling debates. Venture Café was the ideal space for helping to create a fun and dynamic atmosphere throughout the event.

After 2 hours of presentations, debates, and some drumrolls, courtesy of the attendees, the winners were announced. First place went to Dr. Melissa Molho, postdoc from Dr. Holly Ramage’s lab, for a captivating and slightly daunting talk regarding the uptick of tick-borne viral diseases. PhD students Alexandra Ciuciu and Sushrut Shah placed second and third, respectively. Dr. Yolanda Gómez-Gálvez and PhD student Tanvi Abhang closed our list of participants. Congratulations to all the speakers, who demonstrated great talent and put on a fierce competition.

Keep an eye out for more events that connect researchers to the public in an engaging way.



Melissa Molho, winner of Science Slam 2023



Speakers and organizers, Science Slam 2023

Faculty Interview

Featuring Rajarshi Chakraborti, PhD
Assistant Professor, MitoCare Unit
Thomas Jefferson University

Told to Arijita Ghosh, PhD



Rajarshi Chakraborti, PhD

What was your motivation behind a career in academia? What were the key factors behind your decision?

Perhaps the biggest factor to remain in academia was the sense of “freedom” I got throughout my training period (both during my PhD and postdoc). During the wee hours of my postdoc, I was told to have “fun” with cells and in the process learn something about how they work. As “work” turned into “fun” sessions, I wanted to stick to it. However, a few more factors contributed: a successful post-doctoral stint and a super-supportive mentor propelled me to the next stage.

At what point in your scientific career did you start planning and preparing to be a PI?

For me, I had a clear sight early on during my postdoc that I wanted to transcend into having a lab and the preparation started thereafter. It is important to carve out a path for yourself that is inspired by your postdoc and mentor’s work but that also delineates you into a niche of your own, distinct from that of your PI.

What are your insights/personal experiences behind your transition from postdoc to faculty?

In my opinion, a multitude of factors contribute to the efficacy of the transition. (1) How productive and “enjoyable” was your postdoc stint? This often becomes the compelling reason to “take” or “not to take” that next step. (2) Do you have it in you to drive a project forward both individually and as a “team.” I was fortunate to have a brilliant graduate student under my wings for 5 years and I was given the freedom to both “train” and “learn.”

Did you apply for your own funding? How did you equip yourself on knowing and researching about funding opportunities?

No, I did not apply for any grants during my postdoc (something that I feel I should have done a little more pro-actively). While it is important to apply for funding, I believe getting meaningful publications out regularly can equally help you in the long run. There are several articles out there on the web that keep you updated on funding opportunities available to postdocs and young PIs. Your mentors can also educate you on that.

What were the challenges during your transition and what are the challenges now?

The biggest challenge I feel is to decide on your lab’s course and carve out a niche that is distinct from your PI. This does not happen overnight and should be developed over time. That is why it is important to start early. It is important to identify the field early and devote some “spare” time developing preliminary data and hypothesis. An honest conversation with your PI surely helps you in this regard as it is important to have his/her support and not become his/her competitor.

The principal challenge after transition is decision making and mentoring. The first few years can be tough as these initial years often define the foundation of your lab. I was advised by Dr. William (Bill) Wickener that a PI has to recruit herself/himself as her/his lab’s first and most prolific “postdoc.” Often that places the lab on the right course for years to come.

Do you feel the need for systemic changes in academia?

No. The system is perfect, but we try to evolve, work-around, and try to solve the problems.

What is your perception of “publish or perish”? Do you feel any pressure relevant to this?

The fact that I have had a stress-free run throughout my academic career might make my answer biased. I personally do not agree with the perception of “publish or perish.” I believe that if you are true to yourself and honest at work, clarity of thought and the joy of solving a problem often gets you the “publication” that is often sought after. The mere “pressure” of publishing something often clouds our thoughts and brings about “errors.” I have always believed it’s important to address the “controllable,” which has made my journey an enjoyable one so far!

How has your experience been at Jefferson so far?

“Different” but “enjoyable” nonetheless! I was happy to have the support of the entire “Mitocare” team, which led to quite an “unexpected” early success.

Now that you are a PI, has your perspective changed? If so, in what ways?

I do not think my core principle as a scientist would ever change. I always made sure I learnt from all my previous experiences and work to implement the “best practices” I have encountered. I still consider myself as my lab’s first “postdoc” with some more added responsibilities.

What would be your advice/suggestions to current postdocs interested in a career in academia?

My advice to current postdocs interested in academia is that at some stage they should ask themselves the following questions: Do I like science unconditionally for its own sake, in addition to the possibility of developing a ‘product’? Do I get super excited when looking at data, and envision what it means for future experiments? Am I excited to get to lab in the morning for the joy of learning something “novel”? Does an unexpected result say ‘opportunity’ to you, rather than ‘drat’? Do I have “fun” planning experiments after a “failed” assay? Answers of ‘yes’ to most of these questions are sure to make life and transition in academia simple. One doesn’t have to work a zillion hours per week to do this job, but one does have to enjoy the trip, not just the destination.

What would be your suggestions to current postdocs in general?

As pointed out above, try to have clarity in your thought process, and it is very important to be true to yourself. Life as a postdoc should be more as an introspection to understand where you fit in. Once you get an answer, work towards that goal.

What is the best and worst part of your job according to you?

The best part of my job is ‘freedom.’ I started my lab with a reasonable “spoonful” of money provided to address whatever scientific question I wanted to answer. It’s like running a small enterprise, with the advantage that a whole bunch of infrastructure is provided and there is some (perhaps meager) form of a safety net.

There are perhaps two aspects of the job I am not very fond of: First is the tendency towards cliquishness in a given field that makes entry of an “outsider” super difficult, making it a so-called “closed” system. Second, the accent to publish in “big” higher-impact journal that often leaves the door open for over-interpretation of results and possible fraudulence. For me “incremental” stimulative discoveries in science often drive the field forward in a better way.

Call for Stories for JeffPost:

Postdocs, graduate students, and PIs interested in showcasing the following are encouraged to reach out to JPA

- Technologies or services for potential use by postdocs and the research community at Jefferson
 - Stories of research/awards from Jefferson laboratories
- Articles/information associated with improving the life of postdocs and students
 - Postdoc achievements

Acknowledgments: Dr. Lisa Kozlowski, Office of Postdoctoral Affairs, and Pamela Walter, Office of Professional Writing, Publishing, and Communication, for editing and suggestions.

Announcement:

We have a new VP Communications on the JPA Executive Board.

Contact: Deepa Fnu, PhD

VP Communication, JPA

Thomas Jefferson University

Email: Fnu.Deepa@jefferson.edu