

Setting Up Shop and Laboratory Management

During the September 2000 meeting of the Howard Hughes Medical Institute's predoctoral and physician postdoctoral fellows, participants gathered for an informal discussion on setting up and managing a laboratory. The discussion leaders were Mel B. Feany, M.D., Ph.D. (1998 physician postdoctoral fellow), instructor in pathology, Harvard Medical School; Robert W. Gereau IV, Ph.D. (1991 predoctoral fellow), assistant professor, division of neuroscience, Baylor College of Medicine; and Klaus Nuesslein, Ph.D., assistant professor, department of microbiology, University of Massachusetts. The panelists shared experiences and advice about negotiating a new investigator position and setting up a laboratory.



Mel B. Feany, Klaus Nuesslein, and Robert W. Gereau IV

Negotiating a New Position

- If you are faced with several offers, carefully consider the benefits and drawbacks of the top contenders. Then, feel free to go back to them and try to negotiate the best arrangement. Take a day or two to think about the offers before negotiating.
- Make sure that everything you negotiated is in your contract—laboratory space, all benefits, the contract renewal date, start-up funds, and the percentage of time expected for clinical duties and teaching responsibilities. If any items are missing, return the contract and politely ask that they be added.

Setting Up a Laboratory

- Do not feel uneasy about asking your colleagues for spare equipment. You might send an e-mail message to your new colleagues introducing yourself and asking for donations of equipment.
- Explore sites on the Web that sell or auction used equipment at a fraction of the cost of new equipment from the manufacturer. You might also be able to save on sales tax by buying on the Web.
- When you do need to order new equipment, ask colleagues to recommend the best sales representatives. When you talk to a sales representative, be

friendly and ask for new investigator discounts and freebies.

- Keep some money on the side for special opportunities.
- Ask for a departmental credit card to buy those items that are not necessarily scientific in nature, such as a freezer or spoons, from hardware or department stores.
- If you plan on buying an expensive piece of equipment that you will use a lot, ask colleagues who already use this type of equipment for recommendations about brands and models.

Hiring and Managing a Staff

- The major expense for a laboratory is the staff, not supplies and equipment.
- Start-up money should be used for necessary equipment and as much staff as possible. Therefore, it is critical to negotiate well for this money.
- Some students have training grants to support them in the laboratory. Also, during their first year, many students are paid by other sources to teach. Consequently, they may be able to work in your laboratory while you spend the year raising money to pay them.

- Advertise your laboratory and staffing needs on an appropriate website.
- Make hiring decisions carefully. Resolving staff problems can be time-consuming.
- Once your staff is hired, support them and the group dynamic with weekly meetings and opportunities to socialize.
- Provide opportunities for staff members to gain management experience. For example, you could rotate responsibility for different aspects of lab management, such as ordering supplies, among the staff.

Writing the First Grant Application

- When preparing the budget section of a grant application, seek advice. An experienced, successful grant writer as well as the grants office of your institution can help you develop an acceptable budget.

- It is critical to ask for enough money to do the research.
- Although new research must draw on your experience, as a new investigator, you should not be afraid to take some risks. Apply for two lines of research: one that is an extension of your postdoctoral work and one that will take you in a new direction.

Getting Advice

- Institutions vary greatly in their support of new investigators. In most cases, it is important to find a mentor or other knowledgeable adviser to help you learn the system and the infrastructure of your institution.
- The *Chronicle of Higher Education* website (www.chronicle.com) and Next Wave's Career Development Center website (nextwave.sciencemag.org/feature/careercenter.shtml) offer advice for new investigators.