

A spotlight on Individual Development Plans (IDPs)

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Over the past several years there has been an increasing focus from grant funding agencies on assessing and improving graduate student and postdoctoral training. One leading example has been provided by the NIH, which commissioned a working group to specifically look at the current state of the biomedical workforce and the current training model. The working group generated a widely-read reportⁱ which concluded that significant improvements were needed in biomedical graduate and postdoctoral training in order for biomedical research careers to remain a desirable career path in the future. The working group formulated a series of recommendations aimed at addressing areas needing significant and immediate attention. Many of these recommendations were adopted by the NIH in an implementation strategy to be fully in place by 2015. One of the specific changes was a call for all NIH funded graduate students and postdocs, regardless of funding mechanism, to develop and utilize Individual Development Plans (IDPs). The NIH released a notice about this new policy in July 2013ⁱⁱ that informs the biomedical research community that the NIH will begin collecting information about the use of IDPs by trainees on grant progress reports by October 2014.

What is an IDP? An IDP begins with a self-assessment. A student or postdoc would assess their own skills, interests, and values in a systematic way aimed at revealing strengths and areas needing improvement. The self-assessment also allows trainees to begin to understand how their skills, interests, and values should align in choosing the best possible career fit. Upon completing the self-assessment, the trainee should conduct career exploration activities with the goal of narrowing down their career interests into a small number of potential career paths. The final part of the IDP is the actual planning segment. Trainees would devise plans for career development that will allow them to reach their career goals. Generally these plans should be crafted such that they could be accomplished over 6-12 months with objective ways in which completion of each plan could be evaluated.

Why is it critical that graduate students and postdocs develop and implement an IDP? In the biomedical sciences in particular, there has been a strong emphasis on training graduate students and postdocs to ultimately obtain faculty positions in research-intensive universities. For a long period of time this training model worked well, with large fractions of trainees selecting this career track and reaching this career goal. However, the reality facing today's biomedical trainees is quite different, with only a small portion of trainees obtaining tenure-track faculty positionsⁱⁱⁱ. Where are the majority of trainees employed? PhD trained life-scientists are commonly employed in research and non-research positions in industry, governmental agencies, non-profit organizations as well as non-tenure track positions in academia. Most trainees utilize their research training in their penultimate career, and employers from an array of sectors highly value a life science trained PhD candidate. With these career realities in mind, it can be

appreciated that significant career development beyond traditional academic biomedical training is needed for many students and postdocs to be competitive in the evolving job market.

Developing and implementing an IDP allows a trainee to identify potential career fits, establish career goals, and devise plans to reach these goals in a timely manner. An IDP also provides a convenient mechanism for a faculty member to discuss with their trainees their career aspirations and provide feedback and assistance to their trainees in reaching these goals.

What resources are available for one to complete an IDP? The Office of Postdoctoral Affairs has been particularly focused on building an annual program to launch in August 2014 that will assist trainees develop and implement an IDP. We have partnered with the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences and the program will target NIH-funded graduate students and postdocs. The IDP program will consist of seminars that will address topics relating to development of an IDP, including career management, career exploration, the purpose and functionality of an IDP, best practices to complete an IDP, as well as networking and informational interviewing. Optional workshops will be run to assist participants in completion of an IDP. The program will utilize a free and widely accessible IDP resource that is already available, myIDP^{iv}, which is highlighted in Science Magazines career section. Career panel and networking events will be held to offer opportunities for participants to learn more about potential career options and the skills and experiences needed to gain employment in these sectors. Participants will be encouraged to share portions of their IDPs with their mentors, providing a means for faculty members to engage their trainees in career discussions. Additionally, postdocs will be provided the opportunity to join peer mentoring groups that will offer them further opportunities to discuss their IDPs and career exploration.

ⁱ http://acd.od.nih.gov/bmw_report.pdf

ⁱⁱ <http://grants.nih.gov/grants/guide/notice-files/NOT-OD-13-093.html>

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.ascb.org/ascbpost/index.php/compass-points/item/285-where-will-a-biology-phd-take-you>

^{iv} <http://myidp.sciencecareers.org>