

By Aliyah M. Weinstein

An unexpected career resource

A few years ago, my graduate student association ran into some trouble. We knew that our classmates wanted our career development seminar series to cover opportunities in biotechnology, yet we were struggling to identify speakers. As president of the association, it was my responsibility to tell faculty members and program administrators that we might need to shorten the seminar series. Their response was unexpected—and ended up transforming how our organization works with faculty for the better.

My board and I had taken on the task of planning these events on our own, because we thought that asking faculty members for help wasn't likely to pay off. We expected resistance from those who think that nonacademic careers aren't worthwhile pursuits, and some committee members even worried that approaching faculty members could have negative personal repercussions. We had heard that when professors learned that their students were spending time organizing events related to careers away from the bench, some withheld academic support or asked their students to drop these activities and focus only on their lab work, so we felt that broaching the conversation wasn't worth the risk.

On a strictly pragmatic level, we also assumed that most professors couldn't offer much help because their contacts would be primarily within the academy. We knew of some faculty members who had helped students transition into non-academic jobs, and we sometimes asked them to put us in touch with former students so that we could invite them to speak, but that approach alone wasn't enough to fill our calendar.

But when I mentioned our plight during a quarterly update meeting with faculty members and administrators, one of the professors surprised me. "Remember," he said, "we know a lot of people. We all know former lab members who have moved on to nonacademic careers." Another professor—who had never before expressed particular interest in helping with our career development efforts—then offered to connect me with one of his former students, now an executive in the pharmaceutical industry. I tentatively accepted this offer. My board agreed, realizing that at worst, he would not agree to come and we would have to shorten the seminar series anyway.



“Trainees and faculty members can work together toward a common goal.”

The executive ended up giving a wonderful presentation, and the experience paved the way for a fruitful relationship with our faculty. Since then, we have solicited faculty input on events about careers in regulatory affairs and as a medical science liaison, and on finding post-doc positions in industry. We also began a long-term collaboration with our graduate studies office to create a list of program alumni to invite to speak at future events.

Students appreciate the diversity of speakers that faculty members have helped us bring in, and many professors who had shown no interest in career development training commended our efforts after seeing their peers take a more active role (although several still say that they can't help us because they don't have connections working outside academia). Indeed, it seemed that as a few professors began contributing to our initiatives, the mindsets of others, including both junior and senior faculty members, started to shift.

The experience has helped me appreciate the networks that many academics maintain with their former colleagues and trainees in and out of academia. And I have been proud to advance the conversation about the importance of career development training in my school and watch the next student government boards achieve similar successes through collaborations with faculty. Ultimately, I've learned that trainees and faculty members can work together toward a common goal: preparing graduate students to be successful STEM professionals, no matter the position. ■

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