

## Opportunity Knocks: But Which Door Should You Open?

Game-changing career opportunities for postdocs are everywhere. Whether it is a paper to write, a fellowship to chase, or an informal conversation to have, any opportunity could be “the one”—the one that grants you access to a satisfying job, a prolific alliance, or a novel research insight. After you network, go to the right conferences, have coffee with the right people, and apply for several appointments, how do you pick which avenues to pursue?

By **Alaina G. Levine**



**Matthew Wund**

“It’s never too late to think about and explore options that may make you really happy and excited to come into work every day.”

**Melanie Sinche**



Shortly after receiving his Ph.D., **Lakshmi Reddi** ran into a researcher from South Korea while he was on route to the restroom. The scholar was visiting his department to give a talk in an area with seemingly very little connection to Reddi’s expertise, but he cornered him nonetheless, because “as a doctoral student I had made it an issue to attend talks in areas other than mine and to cultivate learning from people who didn’t speak the same language as I do,” he recalls. That ad hoc assembly in the antechamber led to a discussion about innovative avenues to solving the engineering problems perplexing Reddi at the time. And later, it paved the way for a series of rich collaborations between Reddi and the visiting Korean engineer, resulting in multiple co-authored grants.

Reddi, now the dean of the graduate school at Florida International Universi-

ty, realized early on that “hundreds of opportunities that could connect my research to other areas” would have been lost if he had been only focused on his own day-to-day activities as a researcher and not on also keeping his eyes open to new opportunities. “It takes a new paradigm to cultivate this type of thinking,” he admits. “Now I tell my students: don’t think it’s a time-intensive process—change your thinking about where the research opportunities are.”

Keeping your options open to game-changers, whether they are opportunities to apply for fellowships, serve on committees, referee a journal paper, or just talk to someone in or out of your area of expertise, is a necessity if you want to advance in science. “The number one job of a postdoc is not to be a postdoc anymore,” says **Matthew Wund**, assistant professor of biology at the College of New Jersey. And the output one generates from all the tasks required of a postdoc—research, publishing, and presenting at conferences—is only part of the equation that gets one ahead. It is “really stressful” to say no to any opportunity, whether it is as overtly concrete as a job offer to something more amorphous like engaging a visiting scholar, he concedes. “Who knows whether that conversation in a hallway could lead to a job?”

But how do you find balance? “The scariest thing about the postdoc is that you have to do all the work *and* get a job,” concedes **Prosanta Chakrabarty**, assistant professor of biology and curator of ichthyology at Louisiana State University (LSU). And how do you know which opportunities to pursue and which to let go? At Argonne National Laboratory, which hosts 320 postdocs, “we try to emphasize that part of their job here is to get a job,” says **continued**

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