**Department of Epidemiology Career Panel Discussion Spring 2014**

**Question 1**: How did you go about finding post-doc positions outside Harvard?

* *Panelist Responses*:
  + I started thinking about potential post-docs last summer (is graduating in May)
  + Some NIH deadlines are earlier than that, so if you have your own funding then you will need to start planning earlier.
  + My approach was to talk to my advisor and other faculty that I knew and had them put me in touch with people they knew who might be looking for post-docs
    - Also cold-emailed people I was potentially interested in working with
    - Signed up for list-serves for job-announcements
* *Panelist Responses*:
  + I started by trying to think about what exactly I wanted to work on
    - I changed topic areas from my thesis to post-doc
    - Think about whether the research area is something you are interested enough in to commit 2-3 years to
  + Self-funding requires *earlier* planning and also that you have a complete research plan, so might not be for everyone
  + More flexibility is needed when you want to expand or change fields, and it takes more time
  + I found my current position based on a colleague who heard about it and thought I might be interested
* *Panelist Responses*:
  + Start thinking early in the summer before your graduation year
  + Think about *where* and what you want to do
  + Get your name out there
    - Once they know you are looking, people will start contacting you with opportunities
    - Some really great things can come up, but don’t count on it
    - Not all post-doc opportunities are going to be posted on job-boards

**Question 2**: What was your process for finding non-academic positions?

* *Panelist Responses*:
  + I knew someone at Analysis Group (AG) who told me about a job opening, and I applied to that
  + Note that AG is very academic/research-based but does do contracts for pharma
    - *Research* consulting, not marketing consulting
* **Question 2b**: What about other non-academic positions?
* *Panelist Responses*:
  + The best way to hear about positions is from friends working at private companies
  + A lot of the Boston-based consulting positions revolve around pharmaceuticals or insurance due to the business climate of this region
  + Other consulting companies, besides AG, include:
    - Econometrica, Mathematica, Quintiles, RTI-international, RTI-health sciences
      * Note, that companies often have multiple different tracks
  + A good way to start is by doing informational interviews
  + Also, ask your advisor if they know anyone they can put you in contact with
  + Sometimes jobs are posted, and it’s good to get connected and go through someone you know who works there
    - Definitely still cold-apply if you don’t have a connection
  + Many of the companies are always hiring
  + Make use of the [Career Services Office](http://www.hsph.harvard.edu/career-services/) for professional development support. They can help you format your resume and cover letter for non-academic positions
    - Be sure you are representing and selling yourself well
    - Consulting firms will care about how you deal with clients; how you manage projects
  + Learn about the interview process
    - Panels vs Cases
    - Consulting versus Contract Research
  + Some Epi consulting jobs also let you work remotely
  + Conferences are a good way to hear about positions
    - International Conference of Pharmacoepi is especially great for that

**Question 3**: What is the value of your degree; if you ‘sell your soul’ what’s the most you could expect to get?

* It varies: up to $80-120,000 as an intro-level
* Also, this amount depends significantly on where you want to live
* *Panelist Responses*:
  + One thing it depends on is years of experience
    - Includes between or before degrees
  + There is a wide range for 1st year grads
    - To maximize income in industry, you want to NOT be a 1st year grad
      * i.e. using your previous experience
  + The y care about whether or not you can get things done
    - There is usually a small window of non-training time where you can show you got results
  + Also, try to make use of connections from Harvard
    - Use the alumni network
      * For example, the head of Quintiles is from Harvard
* *Panelist Responses:*
  + They really care about how much ‘learning *potential’* you have
    - When you see a problem, how do you handle it?
    - You are more than likely not going to be expected to know everything about your new position when you begin. You are going to be evaluated based on your response to learning opportunities and your work ethic.
      * Ex: What are your previous research and work experiences like? What is your learning capacity? Do you think of innovative responses to issues that inevitably arise?
    - Expect panel interviews, so they can see how you deal with a group

**Question 4**: How to successfully apply for your own funding?

* *Panelist Responses*:
  + Can apply for a F32 after being on a T32, and it doesn’t require that you switch research areas or advisors
    - But, *not* switching can make the application process harder
    - The funding is for training, so they want to see that you are learning, developing new skills, or expanding your network
* *Panelist Responses*:
  + Try to branch out with other mentors
  + Try to branch out with other cohorts (national/international and/or other data)
    - Gain collaborators
  + Need to argue that you are getting a new skill set

**Question 5**: Research Scientist vs Post-doc?

* *Panelist Responses*:
  + I started on the research scientist track and prefer it for my own research interests
    - I like to teach, and do have the opportunity but I don’t have to deal with a lot of the other administrative issues of the tenure-track
* **Question 5b**: is the funding pressure different on the research scientist track?
* *Panelist Responses*:
  + Everyone needs to write grants, but there is maybe less pressure
  + On the research scientist track, your salary depends on grants, but you can be on big projects, where the funding is more stable
  + There are plenty of people who go through the research track who never apply for their own funding
  + Also, when you chose your post-doc, you don’t have to decide until later which track to do
* *Panelist Responses*:
  + If you do the research scientist track, there is maybe a bit less independence, but a bit more of a safety net
  + Happiness probably depends on the research group you are in and how much independence they will give you/you want
  + When you take a post-doc, you really need to be clear up front what is expected
    - How much protected research time
    - Degree of involvement in writing grants
    - Involvement in papers or ongoing projects
    - Remember the goal is to develop new skills
* *Panelist Responses*:
  + Speak to post-docs in the groups you are thinking about joining, not just the mentors
* *Panelist Responses*:
  + A supportive group environment is the most important
  + Also, how well do you interests align with the group

**Question 6**: Many of the panelists seem to be/have switched areas. How do you approach that with your advisor, and other colleagues?

* *Panelist Responses:*
  + Recognize that you will be using what you’ve done already to at least help you learn faster than someone who is completely newly starting out in an area
  + Also, it helps to be finished your other projects when you get to the job stage, so you aren’t leaving people hanging
  + Ask your advisor and committee members about other projects they are working on or planning
    - They often have projects in many areas and this can potentially help you find something to switch to
* *Panelist Responses:*
  + Starting a new field isn’t the same as starting from scratch, so it doesn’t mean that you don’t have skills that can carry over to the new research area
* *Panelist Responses:*
  + Quantitative skills, SAS, project experience, etc carries over into any field and into industry
* *Panelist Responses:*
  + In industry interviews, they will care less about your substantive area, and more about
    - Models, study design, types of data you have worked with or know about
    - Teaching and supervising experience
    - Programming languages – what you know; what you think you can learn & how quickly
    - Whether you have ever done lit reviews
  + Even in academia, if you are looking for jobs in other departments, they will ask about the methods if the substantive area isn’t relevant

**Question 7:** Did you get any blowback about switching?

* In some ways, it’s almost expected that you switch topics
  + If anything, you’re more likely to have to justify why you didn’t switch
* Industry interviewers will want to know why you want to switch to industry though
  + But that’s easy to talk about – just list cons for academia
* Also, tailor cover letters and CVs/resumes specifically for each position
  + Tell a story that shows aspects of you each position will most want to see

**Question 8**: When you started thinking about job hunting, did you try to acquire any new skills?

* Can be hard to predict what methods you might need
* Some good skills might be in economics, health policy, surveillance, or evaluation
* Depth is often more important
* Panelist
  + I took some pharmacoepi classes because I was thinking about moving into that area
  + But seminars and workshops are better
    - Gives you a chance to meet people and explore topics you might not otherwise
* *Panelist Responses:*
  + If you have extra time, it might be worth it
  + But not taking those extra classes won’t hurt
  + In industry, they are usually more interested in how much depth/independence you have in your own project
    - They will train you when you start and so mostly care about self-management and idea development
* *Panelist Responses:*
  + From an interviewers perspective
    - Most people will read your CV and make a decision on that
      * Make sure you spend the time to make that good
    - They know you have just graduated, and don’t expect you to have done much beyond your thesis work
      * Methods classes look good
    - They are looking for initiative, curiosity, focus, capacity to learn
    - Also, make sure to keep your reference list up to date, and keep in contact with your references so they know what you are up to

**Question 9**: What is the expected length for an academic CV?

* Most people won’t want to read more than 1-2 pages
  + Show the big projects, and the projects that are relevant to what you are applying for
  + If there are gaps, expect to be asked about them
* Have a different CV/resume for different types of positions
* Academic positions care about all publications, not just 1st author

**Question 10**: What types of work do you do at research consulting firms?

* *Panelist Responses*:
  + It can vary a lot – projects are client based
  + At AG they have 2 main groups: drug safety and cost effectiveness
    - Sometimes may do other things, like assess prevalence of a condition in a new market
  + At AG, new PhD’s are coming in at the associate level
    - You will be paired with analysts and you tell them what to do
  + Primarily using SAS
* *Panelist Responses:*
  + At that level, you will be working with other people who do the programming for you though
  + Important to find out who the clients are when considering working for a firm
  + And What the structure of the organization is
    - Government contractors get very long projects
    - Places like AG get lots of small projects

**Question 11**: Some of the panelists are working in multiple groups. What motivated that? Was it funding, research interests? And how do you split your time?

* *Panelist Responses*:
  + All of the above
  + A post-doc in one group would have been shorter due to funding, plus for me, my advisor is not in Boston and I wanted a closer mentor as well
  + Also, to learn new skills but still have a chance to work on my original projects
  + On paper, I split my time 50/50 but it varies from week to week
  + If you are splitting a post-doc be careful about how you get paid and how the admin is handled
    - You might get paid entirely from one group and have them bill the other group
    - Or, both can pay you directly
    - It can take a long time to work out
    - It can mess up taxes, and benefits
    - Talk to more senior faculty members – they will likely have dealt with similar issues
    - Talk to the grant administrators
* *Panelist Responses:*
  + If you decide that your interests have evolved/changed and you want to change to a new topic during post-doc, recommend spending at least 1 year in original position
    - Leaving before the 6 month mark will burn bridges
    - Also, you don’t want to do too many post-doctoral positions
* Need to be very clear about expectations on all sides, with multiple mentors
* It’s easy to end up in a situation where you are basically doing two full-time post-docs
* Best if your 2 mentors already have a relationship of some type
* The easiest way to be in multiple areas is to get on a training grant
  + But your salary is less flexible, although you can sometimes get supplemented by department
  + NIH minimum for new post-docs is 42K
    - Advisor can supplement up to some percentage
  + Don’t be afraid to talk about the particulars
    - Health insurance
    - Travel budget
    - Moving expenses
  + Also, clinicians tend to pay more because they are used to higher salaries
  + In government positions, there is a 10k bonus for areas of need and both Epi and Biostats qualify
  + Another strategy for maximizing salary is to pursue more than one opportunity and then try to get your first choice to match the higher offer
  + Also, smaller schools will take you on as an instructor without a post-doc, if you are interested in primarily teaching