Networking is a critical career-enhancing activity whose importance in the development of young scientists has only recently been appreciated. An overwhelming workload and the expectations of one’s principal investigator (P.I.) might contribute to the perception of postdoctoral scholars and graduate students that any activities aside from laboratory research are not germane to building a successful career. However, it is becoming apparent that well-developed networking and organizational skills, as well as the appreciation of the diversity of individuals within the scientific community, all contribute to the success of a young scientist.

The Career & Professional Development (CPD) Program for graduate students and postdocs at Albert Einstein College of Medicine serves more than 700 individuals. In 2009, the program started an International Coffee Hour for young researchers as an informal means to forge personal and professional connections among students and postdocs of different departments and backgrounds.

The Coffee Hours are monthly gatherings featuring treats prepared by students and postdocs from a specific highlighted geographic area. Everybody is invited to attend the events during which the co-organizers and volunteers welcome and introduce all participants.

Science Knows No Boundaries: How an International Coffee Hour Fosters Networking for Graduate Students and Postdocs

Jörg C. Schlatterer & Victoria H. Freedman

Your science is excellent. What about the rest?

Mary M. Mitchell helps others to become more professional, so that they can expand their careers and make better contributions to their organizations. Her recent dining workshop at the NPA 10th Annual Meeting garnered rave reviews. Invite her to work with your organization and learn more about how improved interpersonal skills will benefit your career.

Consider these on-site programs:
- Business Dining
- Communication Skills
- Business Etiquette
- Personal Coaching

Now you can access “Presenting Yourself to Your Best Advantage”, first developed through the University of Pennsylvania. In this 85-minute webinar program, you will learn key elements of the interview process, while helping to build your personal professional presentation style. We recognize that your Curriculum Vitae speaks for itself—as far as it goes. Yet it’s not the whole story. Now you need to focus on interpersonal effectiveness in order to move yourself further ahead.

To find out more or purchase the webinar click here. Click the logo below to access our website.
Coffee, continued from page 5

Typically, printed flyers about the culture and special foods of the featured geographic area are provided. Research and funding agencies from abroad also provide materials to selected programs. In addition, the Coffee Hours provide another opportunity to publicize upcoming CPD events and workshops.

Figure 1 gives an overview of the organization of the International Coffee Hour. Four co-organizers, members of the CPD committee consisting of graduate students and postdocs, recruit two to four volunteers from one country or geographic area (examples are highlighted in Figure 1D). The volunteers prepare food, handouts, and musical playlists and set-up the venue. The co-organizers advertise the event, manage the web site, order beverages, and reserve the appropriate event space (Figure 1A). These events have been very well received by the graduate student and postdoctoral community (Figure 1B). The number of monthly attendees has increased from 30 to 80 during the past two years (Figure 1C). Attendance at the annual International Ice Cream Social was up to 180.

Every International Coffee Hour costs approximately $150. The costs are covered equally by the budgets of the Graduate Division and the postdoctoral office. Events highlighting research opportunities in Germany have been sponsored by a DAAD research ambassador.

There are many benefits to hosting an International Coffee Hour. The institution shows and fosters awareness of diversity, benefits from new collaborations, builds a strong network, and now has direct access to its young researcher community to advertise institutional events. The co-organizers and volunteers have the opportunity to highlight the features of their home area and also to demonstrate and refine their organizational, managerial, presentation and networking skills. Every attendee experiences a new community, meets friends and collaborators, learns about future career opportunities, finds immediate help for scientific or personal problems, and learns about institutional activities.

Evaluation of this innovative event format is not easy, but there are strong indications that the International Coffee hour fulfills its goal. For example, the rising number of attendees appears to correlate with increased popularity of the event. All other events of the CPD programs such as workshops and seminars show increasing numbers of participants partially due to efficient advertisement during the International Coffee Hour. The annual CPD survey among all graduate students and postdocs at Einstein now shows higher levels of interest regarding international careers. Volunteer recruitment for the activities of the Einstein Postdoctoral Association became easier since the implementation of these regular networking events.

Einstein’s International Coffee Hour can be easily and inexpensively adopted by other institutions, would enrich the predoctoral and postdoctoral experience, and would contribute to the professional development of young researchers.

Jörg C. Schlatterer, PhD, is an Instructor in the Department of Biochemistry and an Administrative Fellow in the Graduate Division at the Albert Einstein College of Medicine. Victoria H. Freedman, PhD, is Associate Dean for Graduate Programs in Biomedical Sciences at the Albert Einstein College of Medicine.

EDITORIAL
Does the American Dream in Science Still Exist?
Ahmed Samir Mady

Many international postdoctoral scholars come to the United States to pursue the American dream. Some want to continue their training and stay in the United States; others want to gain technical skills, enhance their education, and return to their home countries. Regardless, the majority aspires to have a significant impact in academic and research fields. They leave their families, friends, and traditions behind to make this dream a reality, but does the American dream in science still exist?

With the ongoing economic difficulties around the world affecting different sectors including science and research, it is challenging for postdocs to secure funding to do their research or to find employment in their field of interest after finishing their postdoctoral training. Moreover, the length of postdoc training has been increasing, extending the time it takes for scientists to get into a more permanent research position.

According to a 2012 National Science Foundation Report, “the unemployment rate for all individuals in science and engineering occupations ranged from 1.3 to 4.3 percent, which contrasted favorably with rates for all U.S. workers (from 4.0 to 9.6 percent).” However, the success rate of postdocs entering some fields is among its lowest level. For example, according to the American Chemical Society, the unemployment rate among chemists at 4.6 percent stands at its highest mark in forty years. Many postdocs have started to escape their scientific field by entering other career paths, such as consulting, administrative work, and entrepreneurship. What are their reasons for leaving? Postdocs have given the following reasons: lack of available positions, low-wage salaries, job security concerns, and a lack of basic benefits, such as health insurance.

Now, can you imagine combining this with the huge obstacles related to the immigration policies of the country? Most international postdocs find it hard to gain permanent residency in order to be able to work in the United States long-term. Political dialogue on Comprehensive Immigration Reform (CIR) has been ongoing but controversial.

It is critical for the United States to retain the best talents during economic recovery and as the country moves towards improved technologies in nearly every sector. The government should continue to increase its focus on the individuals who work and/or study in the science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) fields as they are highly recognized by academia, industry, and the public.

It’s time for a change. It’s time to remove all of the obstacles that face job creators. It’s time to ensure that new scientists can pursue the American dream.

Ahmed Samir Mady, MD, is a Postdoctoral Fellow with The Cardiovascular Research Center at Massachusetts General Hospital/ Harvard Medical School and is an NPA International Officer.