

# Career in focus: Academic Administration

In this issue, former CNSPY board member and recent graduate, Yan Gao researched and provided answers to frequently asked questions on careers in Academic Administration. In addition to this, CNSPY member and 3rd year graduate student in Genetics, Hariyat Andargachew interviewed Dr. Arnaldo Diaz, Assistant Dean for Research Training Programs and Adjunct Professor of Pharmacology, at the University of Pennsylvania (UPenn) to provide first-hand insights into careers in Academic Administration.

## Career FAQs

### **What is academic administration?**

Academic administration positions include the maintenance and supervision of an institution or research group and are often separate from academic positions, although some positions may have joint responsibilities.

### **Why switch?**

Working in administration is an attractive option for Ph.D.s who want to remain associated with institutions of higher education and work with academics but do not want faculty positions. Since administrative structure varies greatly among institutions, an 'administrator' may interact with diverse personnel from secretaries to deans. Numerous administrative positions are only open to Ph.D.s. For instance, for jobs in career services, some institutions require graduate training because they want someone who can relate to graduate students and provide adequate counseling and advice.

### **What are the major types of administrative jobs?**

According to the Chronicle of Higher Education, academic administrative jobs can be divided into four major categories: Academic affairs – admissions, supervision of hiring, promotion, tenure, and evaluation;

Business/Administrative affairs - fundraising, grants and contract administration, institutional compliance with federal and state regulations;

Deans - approving faculty hiring, setting academic policies, overseeing the budget, fundraising, and other administration;

Student affairs - oversight of student life and activities, such as religious or cultural groups, disability services, career centers and public service centers.

### **Where would you work?**

Colleges, universities and institutes of technology that provide tertiary education are situated throughout the United States and across the world. Such institutions vary greatly in size and can be either teaching- or research- oriented.

### **How to make the transition?**

One piece of advice: use your university as a testing and training ground. Campuses offer many opportunities for part time work, which can be used to test out one's likes and dislikes as well as to get valuable experience to put on a résumé.

## Interview with Dr. Arnaldo Diaz

### Assistant Dean for Research Training Programs and Adjunct Professor of Pharmacology, UPenn

#### **How did you get interested in academic administration?**

I became interested in academic administration as an undergraduate student at the University of Puerto Rico where I was involved in the Minority Access to Research Careers program, which gave me an opportunity to interact with the program directors. That led me to develop an interest in understanding how the program was put together and the process of grant applications to sponsor the students in the program. I moved to Texas to pursue my PhD and I used that opportunity to get involved in student associations and to develop programs to recruit minority students to do research. Later on, I moved to

UPenn for my post-doc in cancer pharmacology. During my post-doc, I volunteered to be a part of the planning committee for a symposium that I had attended as an undergrad. This helped me learn how to coordinate programs and meetings, but it also was a great opportunity for me to meet and network with higher-level program coordinators from various institutions. Also as a post-doc, I was in charge of coordinating the scientific seminar series for the summer programs which also provided the opportunity to mentor the summer students.

***Can you share with us your career path?***

I started as a post doc in 2008 with Dr. Ian Blair, who was my research mentor. However, I also had career mentors within and outside of UPenn whom I consulted before making the move away from academia towards the end of my postdoc. I started working as a summer research program coordinator in 2010 and in 2011, I accepted the offer to be the associate director, a newly created position. In 2013, I was promoted to assistant dean for research training programs.

***What does academic administration entail?***

Strategic planning skills and the ability to successfully navigate a large organization are extremely important. I would also place a very strong emphasis on interpersonal and communication skills. I interact with and mentor students and trainees at all levels including undergraduate, post baccalaureate and graduate students as well as post docs. I try to stay accessible to these trainees as much as possible, which means being flexible with my day-to-day schedule. It's also important to keep up to date with relevant information and develop partnerships with other schools and programs.

***Is there an opportunity for career growth?***

Yes there is. You have to be alert and be ready to take opportunities for growth. For instance, during my post-doc, I learned about a week-long leadership training course sponsored by SACNAS. I attended the course and it turned out to be a great learning and networking opportunity. So I will advise that you constantly train and prepare yourself.

***What does your day look like typically?***

Every day is different. For instance, today, I'm working with the cohort for the 2014 summer internship program. What that means is that I'm making sure that the students are matched to the right research mentor. At the same time, I'm also reviewing applications for the post-bacc program, which also starts in the summer. I'm currently planning a second visit for PhD students in the biomedical sciences that were offered an admission and I am also working on a grant proposal. I'd summarize my typical day like this: strategic planning, writing and mentoring. Depending

on the season, my job description may also vary. For example, in the spring, I am a part of the admissions committee for PhD and MD/PhD programs while in the fall I travel to recruit students at major conferences including ABRCMS, SACNAS, and the Leadership Alliance. Penn visits about 15 schools, including schools in Puerto Rico, to recruit students into the graduate program so I will say there is a fair amount of traveling but it's seasonal.

***What do you enjoy the most and what is the least favorite aspect of your job?***

I enjoy the interaction I get to have with students. Being an advocate for my students and being able to help and guide them is very rewarding. Having travelled that path myself, I feel I am able to offer the students the benefit of my knowledge and experience. My commitment is to underrepresented minorities in the sciences and I follow up with each student's progress. Knowing that they are progressing and making advances brings me satisfaction. One of the challenges in being a young professional is to project authority. I'm still learning and seek advice as I grow into my position.

***How did you get over the stigma of switching careers?***

In graduate school I wanted to go to industry but my advisor wanted me to go into academia. Ultimately, he was not very helpful as a career mentor. As I mentioned earlier, I went to UPenn as a postdoc and my advisor there was supportive. I sought out a career mentor separate from my research mentor to give myself the benefit of multiple perspectives. When you're looking for a research mentor (for instance as a graduate student looking for post-doctoral positions) always look out for where the past students are currently. This will give you an idea of how familiar the advisor is with alternative career paths.

***Advise to graduate students and post-docs interested in academic administration?***

As a graduate student I wanted to go into Pharma but I interacted with people from different fields and always kept my eyes open. Networking is key. Don't limit yourself to one track but be open-minded to different career paths. However, irrespective of what you want to do, find a mentor in that field and have them guide you.

***CNSPY Upcoming Events***

Small group discussion with Dr. Michel Ledizet on April 28th at 7pm (Venue TBA)

Small group discussion with Shannyn Smith on Careers in Medical Communications (Date and Venue TBA)

CNSPY mixer at Kelly's Gastropub on May 29th at 6.30pm

**Thank you for reading!**

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