Making the Leap, Part 6. Prepare for Landing

simplyblood.org/2018/05/making-leap-part-6-prepare-for-landing.html

ISEH Headquarters May 31, 2018

Photo by Terje Sollie from Pexels

Faculty interviews are over. You've negotiated your offers and decided on an institution that fits your needs. Your signed letter has been sent back and (importantly) has been approved by the dean(s) or other institutional heads, making it official. Maybe you've made or have scheduled a couple of additional visits to your future scientific home. The end of your post-doctoral training is in sight. Now what? I made my final decision to join the faculty of University of Colorado's Anschutz Medical Campus in July of 2015, with a planned start date at the beginning of November that year. The intervening time was full of excitement and anticipation, and plenty of work to tie together loose ends in my postdoc and set the stage for my faculty position. Now that you've made the leap, here are a few things to consider as you prepare for landing.

1) Celebrate. Don't overlook this. You've worked hard and all of the effort has borne fruit. It's worth getting your friends, colleagues and mentor(s) together to celebrate the good news. Whether it's a little party at the lab, drinks or something more involved, you deserve to

reward yourself for this major accomplishment. Likewise, before you move, make sure to spend time with your friends and/or family in your old city. Have a party and enjoy the memories before you move on.

> Whether it's a little party at the lab, drinks or something more involved, you deserve to reward yourself for this major accomplishment.

2) Notify any institutions whose offers you are turning down. These phone calls are never easy, but they are important to make. Be professional and respectful. Be sure to thank your faculty handler(s) for their interest in bringing you aboard, and for their time and energy. It's unlikely the person on the other end of the phone will be happy to hear the news, but it's worth delivering it to them by a phone call rather than an email, as a sign of respect. They may ask why you chose a different institution. Be succinct, keep your framing positive, and if there is something informative that may aid them in recruiting another potential faculty like you, then you can let them know. It's also worth letting any potential collaborators or individuals you were particularly interested by what your decision was, particularly if you want to maintain the relationship and/or collaboration across institutional bounds.

3) Manage your current (and future) projects. There's a likelihood you still have work to do in your current lab, whether it's working on your last paper, setting up new projects, or training other staff. It's important to keep at these tasks. It's also worth having a detailed discussion with your mentor in order to establish priorities and realistic timelines for completing key tasks before you move on. It is unlikely that you will be able to continually attend to experiments in your old lab if you are across the country or in a different country, so part of this discussion is to also manage your expectations for the future, as well as those of your mentor if needed. Once you're in your new office you will have a lot of work to do setting up your new lab, and this will need to be a priority. If you have your own funding/resources, as well as the time and blessing of your current mentor, then set up some exploratory experiments that and/or start writing your first independent grant(s). Spend some time as well thinking about what projects you intend to start up in your new lab. Identify key resources you will want to get up and running to facilitate those projects, and what sort of staff you would need to do them. Are there new systems you want to set up? If so, is there expertise at your new institution, and do you need to start building a relationship with an investigator who has such expertise? What key experiments will you need to do to ensure your system is robust? When I started my lab, our first efforts were geared toward reproducing key experiments from my postdoctoral work, that would form the basis of our future projects. These 'shakedown runs' served several purposes. They gave us confidence in our results and set a baseline standard for our work. They allowed us to identify areas where our workflow needed optimization, and allowed me to teach new lab staff to carry out experiments carefully and correctly, since the experimental outcome was already known. For this reason, as you plan your first moves, consider what basic work you will need to do to build confidence in your system and your workflow.

4) Tie up loose ends in the lab. It's critical that your scientific notebooks and data are complete, properly archived in electronic and/or physical format, and that your mentor and other members of the lab know where to find such information. Likewise, if you have developed protocols for key experiments that others will need, ensure they are clearly written down and archived. If there are boxes of samples or reagents stored away, then ensure their locations and contents are clearly documented for others. This is a set of tasks that are best not left for last minute. Experimental reproducibility and correct documentation practices are subject to scrutiny by institutions and sponsoring agencies. As such it is an important component of responsible conduct of research. It's also a key element that can help or hurt your scientific reputation among your mentor and colleagues. On a more mundane note, it also saves you, other lab members and your mentor from a future of inconvenient email or phone discussions trying to track down data or other information.

5) Prepare for moving to a new city (or country). Between the time your offer letter goes in until the time you drive away from your house or apartment for the last time, there is a lot to do in order to ensure your physical move goes smoothly. Your institution may reimburse you for moving, but certain conditions (such as requiring more than one estimate from pre-approved moving companies, and having you use the lowest bid) may apply. Get the estimates early; scheduling a move with professionals often requires significant advanced timing. If you need to sell items, move a vehicle or obtain visas and other documentation in order to work in a different country, start the process. If you need to give advance notice to a landlord, ensure you have it timed correctly (not too early, and not too late). My wife and I sat together and established timelines for specific tasks relating to moving. We also scheduled a joint trip to Denver about a month before our move to look for housing and meet with some future colleagues. In advance of a trip like this, it's important to ensure you have the correct documentation and available deposit or down payment money needed to sign a lease or mortgage. We also were connected with a local real estate agent by a new colleague; this person helped us with our apartment hunt while we were in Denver. As a last point, depending on where you are, there are likely requirements for establishing residency (such as establishing a bank account, driver license or ID, etc), for tax and/or other legal purposes. We used our house hunting trip to open a local bank account, and when we arrived in November headed straight to the DMV for new driver licenses and auto registration.

6) Start the groundwork for your new position. Even if you aren't physically located at your new institution, there's still a great deal you can do to lay the groundwork for your new lab. Once your offer letter is processed, you may be able to work with your department/division administration to obtain an email address and other employee identification sufficient for a number of key tasks. Administrative tasks worth starting (or even finishing) before you land include biosafety protocols, animal protocols, and online trainings for new faculty. Have a discussion with the head of your institutional animal care and use committee (IACUC) and environmental health and safety (EHS) about your proposed procedures, and they will often help you with language and offer tips on how to properly write

the protocols. It is worth obtaining copies of established protocols from your new faculty mentor(s) and colleagues so you are familiar with institutional standards. Many institutions allow new faculty to submit protocols for a helpful pre-review process, where an IACUC or EHS member will review your protocol and give you rapid feedback to minimize revisions when you actually submit. Become aware of monthly protocol submission deadlines so you use your time wisely. If your department/division human resources (HR) allows, put together information to post job openings for your lab (i.e., for a first technician or postdoc), so you can have a set of CVs waiting for you before/once you arrive. If you already have a technician working for you, you probably already know whether that individual is willing to follow you to your new institution. If they are, it's worth investigating whether your technician's employment process can also be started.

7) Think of how you'll outfit your lab. Here's where your wishlist and some advance time is particularly useful. You know what equipment and consumables you need to start your lab; you might now be able to use the intervening time before your move to test lab equipment you are interested in purchasing. You can also start negotiating with suppliers for the best deals on equipment and consumables. Many suppliers offer deep 'new PI discounts' that can make it worth purchasing more than one years' worth of shelf-stable consumables such as pipette tips and tubes. Discounts may also apply on other items including durable goods like centrifuges, PCR cyclers and the like, particularly if purchased from the same manufacturer and/or supplier. It's worth having a look through your mentor's lab to identify products you like using. It's also worth considering how your mentor's lab is organized and managed; if you find the Excel ordering or animal colony spreadsheet less-than-useful, consider whether FileMaker, SoftMouse or another approach would work better. If you prefer the tissue culture room to be arranged differently, make note. All of these details will be yours to decide upon once you enter your new space. You can also ask your faculty mentor or department administrator whether items can be ordered ahead of your arrival. One institution had offered to give me a 'visiting assistant professor' position during the interim period before my arrival, which would allow me to place orders on either my startup Speedtype (account number), or the department Speedtype if mine wasn't ready. Not every institution or department has this level of flexibility, however. In addition, ordering items from afar requires effort from individual(s) at your new institution to ensure orders arrive safely and are correctly stored.

8) Start engaging with your new institution. It's worth setting up occasional conversations with your new colleagues (especially those who are potential collaborators) to learn more about your institution and department, and (if you have one) sign up for key email distribution lists to get a sense of what seminars, talks and other events are occurring on campus. Depending on whether you have time, you may have opportunities to visit your institution during graduate program retreats, give seminars and/or participate in other events that can increase your visibility to the scientific community there. Set a reasonable limit to such interactions however. You don't want to overdo it and in turn overextend yourself. This is

particularly important as you likely have numerous responsibilities in your current lab that need your attention. You are also in reality not yet employed at your new institution. It (and your future colleagues) will still be there by the time you move.

> In the interim period, it's worth mentally preparing yourself for what running your lab will really be like.

9) Manage expectations. This can be one of the hardest tasks for a new PI, especially in the interim period. It's sad but true, you won't have your lab set up and functioning in the first two weeks, no matter what you do. Likely it will take months, and this is fine. In the interim period, it's worth mentally preparing yourself for what running your lab will really be like. The answer is simple: it will be fun but also challenging, and you will make mistakes along the way. This is to be expected, and your new mentor(s) and colleagues understand this. It's also a marathon and not a sprint. Amidst the excitement you feel in beginning this new chapter of your career, spend some time to talk with your new (and old) colleagues about what starting a lab is really like. Get a sense of what successes and mistakes they encountered along the way. Think about what a realistic timeline is for getting your lab established, and understand that being deliberate and sweating the details at this stage can bear dividends later when your new staff have a well-organized and managed lab to work in.

Eric Pietras, PhD
ISEH New Investigators Committee Member
Assistant Professor
Division of Hematology at the University of Colorado
Anschutz Medical Campus
Aurora, CO, USA