



What I Have Learned in My First 3.5 Years as Principal Investigator



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I am a physician scientist at Boston Children's Hospital. Our lab studies the changes that occur in blood formation across the lifespan and how this impacts age-biased blood diseases – this work is strongly driven by my perspective as a pediatric hematologist. In this post, I share some of the lessons that I have learned over the first 3+ years as a PI. This advice is not one-size-fits-all – you can take it or leave it, and I am sure everyone's situation is different in one way or another.

You must spend money to make money. When you start a lab, your institution may provide you with startup funds. What funding you receive is variable and open to negotiation. This funding is crucial to support your pet projects that are not externally funded, fill gaps in salary support, and in many cases, to support your own salary. Early on, I was overly protective of my startup., then I realized that the point of this money is to 'start up' your work to form a basis for externally funding your projects. Use it - but use it wisely.

Don't let the perfect be the enemy of the good. Your central focus as a new PI should be getting your first paper published. Grant reviewers will not hesitate to criticize young PIs as not having published enough. The current reality, however, is that publishing is increasingly (and in some ways justifiably) more difficult, so get that first paper out: find a solid observation, develop and consolidate it rigorously, efficiently, and get

it published. You can't have your first paper come out as your startup is dwindling. Assuming (at least one) revision is required, it can take >1.5 years from initial submission to the start of funding for NIH grants, so don't hold out for a super high impact paper as your first one – once you have long-term funding, then you can go for the riskier work.

No one is perfect at hiring. In most cases, we are choosing our co-workers based on a one-page resume and a one-hour interview, so it is no surprise that no one gets it perfect every time. Leverage their strengths, but don't hold back constructive criticism regarding weaknesses.. And do not forget to remind to your mentees of all the progress that they make. Seek out institutional guidance and external opportunities on how to hire to help you grow comfortable making these decisions.

You're going to spend a lot of time writing grants. Starting out, frankly speaking, you are an easy target for reviewers – in most cases you don't have a high-profile reputation and an extensive professional network as a buffer from criticism. Expect one in ten applications that you submit to be funded and plan accordingly and remember that your main job as PI is to provide the support your trainees require for growth.

Grow your network. And I mean outside of your institution: the people in your field are your peer reviewers on papers and grants, and they may also invite you to speak at their seminars, which in turn increases both your network and profile. Use your new status to invite speakers and run seminars to grow your network.

Seek out collaborators early on. Especially more senior PIs. Complementary expertise and partnership with a productive established investigator will give your grant applications a leg up and lend more weight to your papers.

Feel free to contribute your own advice in the comments below!

Blog post contributed by Grant Rowe, MD, PhD (@bloodandtime1), ISEH Publications Committee





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