

# STEPS TO SUCCESS & WELLNESS IN SCIENCE CAREERS

## CAREER PLANNING FOR POSTDOCS AND GRAD STUDENTS

### WELLNESS AND SCIENTIFIC PRODUCTIVITY

A career in science involves rigorous training, high intellectual engagement and a commitment to advancing knowledge (McDowell, Gunsalus, MacKellar et al. 2014). However, its demanding nature can lead to stress and burnout for those working in STEM (Levecque, Anseel, De Beuckelaer et al. 2017; Woolston 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the need for institutions to prioritize mental health and wellbeing to support scientists and public health workers (Gregor, Burke, Campbell et al. 2024). As postdoctoral trainees and graduate students navigating the challenging yet rewarding path to a scientific career, it is essential to maintain a healthy balance between your professional and personal life. Taking a holistic approach to career planning can improve your personal wellbeing and allow for a more sustainable, productive and successful career in STEM (Fisher, Mendoza-Denton, and Patt et al. 2019).

### 2024 PARTNERSHIP SPRING SYMPOSIUM

The annual UMass Boston - Dana-Farber/Harvard Cancer Center Partnership Spring Symposium, "Steps to Success and Wellness," took place in May of 2024 and focused on work in STEM, career success and personal wellness. Five panelists shared stories of their career journeys, highlighting the personal and professional factors that influenced their decisions to pursue a range of scientific careers in different industries and institutions. Each panelist discussed how they are working to create more inclusive and considerate scientific workplaces. Two break-out sessions, each led by our panelists, offered postdoctoral trainees and graduate students advice on the steps needed to achieve a successful and well-rounded career in science.

### PANELISTS

- Juliet Girard, PhD, University of Massachusetts Boston
- Jim Gould, PhD, Harvard Medical School
- Kathryn T. Hall, PhD, MPH, Boston Public Health Commission
- Ryan Mudawar, MS, Massachusetts Life Sciences Center
- Yohannes Tesfaigzi, PhD, Mass General Brigham, HMS

[View the \*Steps to Success and Wellness\* panel here.](#)

### DR. JIM GOULD

**Director, Postdoctoral Affairs  
Harvard Medical School  
Author, *Making the Most of the Postdoc***

I am a husband to a brilliant wife, teacher, and administrator and a father to another brilliant young woman graduating from high school in a few weeks. I'm very proud of being a husband and a father. We're talking about success and wellness in life and work and I think it's important to acknowledge that I wouldn't be where I am today without the support of my wife and child. I wouldn't be in Boston.

I wouldn't be at Harvard Medical School. I'd probably still be in graduate school on my 20th year as a PhD student. So I think it's very important to acknowledge that they were major motivators in my success as well as my current wellness and stature.



Fisher AJ, Mendoza-Denton R, Patt C, et al. Structure and belonging: pathways to success for underrepresented minority and women PhD students in STEM fields. *PLoS ONE* 2019;14(1):1.  
Gregor MA, Burke KA, Campbell-Halfaker D, Dunn MG, Bhatia A. "I need a break or I might quit": STEM academics' pandemic experiences. *The Counseling Psychologist* 2024;52(1):88-123.  
Levecque K, Anseel F, De Beuckelaer A, Van der Heyden J, Gisle L. Work organization and mental health problems in PhD students. *Research Policy* 2017;46(4):868-879.  
McDowell GS, Gunsalus KTW, MacKellar DC, Mazzilli SA, Pai VP, et al. Shaping the future of research: A perspective from junior scientists. *F1000 Res* 2014;28(3):291-307.  
Woolston C. How burnout and imposter syndrome blight scientific careers. *Nature* 2021;599(7886):703-705.

# Success and Wellness in a Science Career

## Advice from the UMB-DF/HCC Partnership Spring 2024 Symposium



### On sustaining relationships with mentors...

Mentors have been important throughout my path. My instinct is to do it on my own, but I've had to actively try to ask people for help or for advice. Don't be afraid to reach out often and regularly. Send a monthly email and update mentors on your life. Having a regular point of communication can be really helpful for preserving those relationships.

**Juliet Girard, PhD**  
Assistant Professor, UMass Boston

### On making the most of your network...

When I was a postdoc at NIH, I took full advantage of every training opportunity - the career services office, the postdoc organization - and I made sure to make new contacts. I surrounded myself with people who complemented my skills and filled in the gaps and missing pieces in my training and expertise.

**Jim Gould, PhD**  
Director, Harvard Medical School



### On changing careers...

If you want to do a lot of different things, like I did, you have to find your tribe. Also, it might be time to make a change in your career when you think to yourself *is there anything more I can do about this problem?* If you can't do much more, try it from the other end. Don't be afraid to take a risk, but don't burn any bridges behind you when you do.

**Kathryn T. Hall, PhD, MPH**  
Boston Public Health Commission



### On the importance of diversity...

One of the things that really is important is interactions with other people. If you interact with everyone, you can really gain a lot. The most productive, most interesting and most exciting time I have had in my work and life has been when I interact with people from different cultures.

**Yohannes Tesfaigzi, PhD**  
Professor, Mass General Brigham



### On STEM careers in Massachusetts...

Massachusetts has really led the nation, led the world when it comes to life sciences and healthcare. Nothing like this level of investment from the state exists anywhere else. We strategically invest state funding to support the growth of this industry which is patient-driven and about supporting cutting edge research. At the same time, we are creating meaningful jobs and developing a robust and diverse workforce pipeline.

**Ryan Mudawar, MS**  
VP of Education & Workforce Programs  
Mass Life Sciences Center

