Optimizing Your Training: What's Worth Your Time and What's Not?

Tuesday, 16 Jun 2026
11:30 – 12:30
Room G
Roundtable

Organizers

Nima Zargarnezhad
Western University
London, ON, Canada

Da-Yea Song
Johns Hopkins University
Baltimore, MD, United States

Timothy Jordan
Emory University
Atlanta, GA, United States

Priscila Thalenberg Levi
Monash University
Melbourne, VIC, Australia

Description

A symposium is the ideal format to address the growing uncertainty trainees and early career researchers (ECRs) face when navigating their professional development and deciding how to prioritize their time. Effective training is shaped by a combination of individual choices and broader community practices, and understanding this balance requires multiple perspectives. Our session will bring together speakers from diverse backgrounds who offer complementary, experience-based insights into how trainees can strategically approach their development, refine their skills, and make informed decisions about their career paths.

Through engaging talks and an interactive question-and-answer (Q&A) session, attendees will gain a clearer understanding of how training priorities vary across research environments, disciplines, and career stages. They will also be exposed to practical

strategies for evaluating opportunities, managing workload, and cultivating professional growth in a sustainable and intentional way.

This symposium will be of particular interest to trainees and ECRs, who are often confronted with overwhelming choices and limited guidance. By presenting a range of perspectives and actionable advice, the symposium format provides an accessible and impactful platform for helping them navigate their development with greater confidence and clarity.

Learning Objectives

1. Identify key categories of training and evaluate which are most effective for career development across different stages of scientific training.
2. Develop practical strategies for prioritizing time and energy when selecting among formal courses, workshops, and hands-on learning opportunities.
3. Recognize common misconceptions about training and learn how to avoid overcommitment, skill overload, or misalignment between training and long-term goals.

Target Audience

Trainees (undergraduates, graduate students, postdoctoral fellows) and Early Career Researchers (ECR)s, although we welcome more senior investigators to attend as well.

Presentations

Training with Intention: Synergy, Renewal, and Skills That Compound

Early-career researchers are often encouraged to optimize relentlessly, which can foster fatalistic thinking when choices do not appear to pay off immediately. Drawing on my own career path and years of mentoring trainees and early-career faculty, this talk emphasizes a more adaptive approach to professional development. I discuss optimizing time by pursuing synergistic combinations of skills, maintaining a mixture of topics that sustains curiosity, and intentionally creating space for networking and collaboration while setting boundaries that protect focus. I also emphasize that no single training decision or misstep is irreversible, and that careers benefit from continual renewal of perspective. Finally, I highlight the importance of recognizing our interconnectedness and approaching interactions and challenges with care, humor, and humility. The goal is to offer trainees a framework for building momentum while remaining resilient, collaborative, and human.

Vince Calhoun
Tri-institutional Center for Translational Research in Neuroimaging and Data Science

(TReNDS), Georgia State, Georgia Tech, Emory
Atlanta, GA, United States

Developing as a Researcher Through Diverse Contexts

Early-career researchers often imagine training as a linear sequence of courses and certifications, yet my career has been shaped by non-linear transitions across disciplines, sectors, and countries. After beginning in biochemistry, moving through industry, and returning to neuroscience across France, Australia, the US, and the UK, I found that the most meaningful development came from hands-on projects, exposure to different research cultures, and learning from a wide range of mentors. I will outline my career trajectory and discuss how these diverse environments shaped my growth and how hands-on work and varied mentorship became the foundations of my training.

Divyangana Rakesh
King's College London, Institute of Psychiatry, Psychology & Neuroscience
London, United Kingdom

Decisions, decisions - some ways to think about working towards career goals

Science is advancing at a rapid pace, creating challenges for young scientists who are trying to determine what techniques they should learn, what expertise they should develop, and how they can optimally reach their career objectives. There are no simple solutions to these challenges, but in this talk, I will try to provide some practical tips for career planning, time allocation, and goal prioritisation, while also discussing potential traps to be avoided.

Alex Fornito
Monash University
Melbourne, VIC, Australia