The HFES block of rooms at the Sheraton Chicago Hotel and Towers is more than two-thirds sold out. The special symposium rate is available until February 23 or until the block sells out. Book today!

The full program may be viewed at hfes.org or browsed by key word, author, or track at the itinerary site. Create a login to build your personal itinerary.

**STUDENT VIEWS**

**Transitioning Through Academia: Graduate, Postdoc, and Tenure-Track Faculty**  
By Tina Mirchi

*This is the first of three articles summarizing Student Career and Professional Development Day at the 2013 Annual Meeting. The theme of the day was transitions. Panelists represented both recent graduates and successful professionals from universities, industry, and government agencies.*

Whether starting a postdoc or getting a tenure-track faculty position in human factors/ergonomics, a student may wonder what he or she needs to do to find the right path to access these opportunities. This article summarizes comments and advice from the panel, “Transitioning Through Academia,” at the 2013 Annual Meeting Student Career and Professional Development Day. This panel was chaired by Jim Miles (California State University, Long Beach) with the following panelists: Lisa Jo Elliott (University of South Florida), Kelly Neville (Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University), and Mary Ngo (Pacific Science & Engineering Group).

**Why Academia?**

Miles started by asking the panelists, “What got you interested in pursuing a career in academia?” After working in government and industry for 16 years, Neville felt that she was ready to transition to academia to help better prepare future professionals in the field. She believed that industry helped her understand what works and what does not work as a professional, and she wanted to teach students how they can avoid some of the mistakes she made in her career. According to Ngo, academia will push you to continue to learn more, which is intellectually challenging and satisfying. She commented that her transition from a doctoral program at Oxford to academia as a postdoc came about through her love of teaching. As a postdoc, she worked closely with students on research and advised them about future academic careers. Elliott found her work at IBM and with the U.S. Department of Defense exciting, and it was rewarding to be involved with a team and able to influence the design process. However, she felt that the lack of opportunity to contribute to theories was both restricting and frustrating. Elliott believes that industry professionals are limited in how they can address problems, and she prefers the ability to write papers and carry out studies that build on theories in an academic setting. Students challenge academicians to continue growing in new ways, said Elliott, who thinks that a major benefit of pursuing a career in academia is teaching students and exercising the will to pursue ideas that are of interest to the academic rather than to the company.

**Day to Day in Academia**

A typical day in an academic career is spent preparing for a course, reading literature reviews, grading, and writing papers and proposals. Ngo commented that even as a postdoc, she spends a lot of time advising students, training them to run experiments and providing them with theoretical knowledge. All panelists noted that in order to increase the production of research, one must have management skills to train students to work on their projects.
How to Stand Out When Searching for a Job in Academia

The panelists explained that the interview process begins long before the application process. Because HF/E is a small highly networked field, members of academic hiring committees usually know people with professional relationships with a student. In addition, the panelists who had served on hiring committees commented that a candidate’s research potential at the university and his or her potential for gaining tenure are seriously considered. The applicant’s fit with the organization is also critical. Panelists advised students to determine the scope of the department’s current research and then see how their own interests relate.

Hiring committees may also look for collaboration and teamwork skills, qualities that are demonstrated in letters of recommendation. Having good writing skills and being creative are critical and can be ascertained from the application. Teaching is another necessary skill for students pursuing academic careers. The panelists suggested that if students feel uncomfortable teaching or they lack skills in that area, they should consider taking classes within the institution’s teaching academy or attending teaching conferences.

What About Publications?

If students are thinking of beginning a career in industry but possibly returning to academia later, they should consider the amount of research that would be needed to make them competitive for the type of academic position being pursued. Another way students could make themselves marketable for an academic position is to be listed as first author on publications. Miles indicated that the quality of the published work, level of authorship, and prestige of the journals in which the research is published are more reflective of a student’s potential than is the number of publications. Members of the audience who had served on academic hiring committees also noted that having multiple publications or a program of research in a specific area, with a clear direction for future studies, will also stand out to faculty selection committees.

Academic Career Promotion and Tenure Guidelines

Students need to investigate the promotion and tenure guidelines at the institutions to which they apply. Guidelines differ between universities and departments; some require that assistant professors bring in a certain amount of funding, and others may stipulate that a certain number of students would need to be mentored. Elliot noted that promotion and tenure guidelines can be found online for public universities, or students can request them from the department.

Best Advice for Students Transitioning to Academia

The panelists offered the following tips.

1. Be prepared to be independent. Professors have the freedom to decide which experiments to run and how to design them. Although professors may be influenced to take on certain projects based on their funding sources, they do have some control over the direction of the research.

2. Be comfortable being the expert. Neville advised, “be confident and believe in yourself.” There will always be someone discouraging you from an idea, but be determined to keep pushing.

3. Make the best use of your time. Ngo noted that professionals need to know when something is good enough; reiterations of a paper may not be beneficial when the time could be spent on something more fruitful.
4. Do not underestimate the amount of work that goes into preparing a class. The panelists agreed that, typically, one new class can take up to two months of 40-hour weeks to prepare.

Job Prospects in Academia

Miles ended the panel by asking how the panelists felt about the state of the current job market for academic careers, both from their own experience and from that of their recent students. Neville commented that job placement for students at her university has not been a problem. With regard to salaries, academic jobs tend to pay less than do industry jobs. The drawbacks for industry, however (such as limited control over choice of research projects), can affect quality of life. In addition, the panelists noted that the academic salary is typically for only nine months of the year. As such, they indicated that there are opportunities to augment the academic salary with grants or summer teaching.

In conclusion, the panel provided a wide variety of tips for those considering an academic career. Students are encouraged to take advantage of opportunities to gain experience and help aid the transition to academia.

Tina Mirchi is a first-year master’s student in human factors psychology at California State University, Long Beach.

ANNUAL MEETING

Submit Your HFES 2014 Annual Meeting Proposals by March 3

The online Call for Proposals for the 2014 HFES International Annual Meeting is open. The deadline for submitting any type of proposal is March 3. Case studies, debates, demonstrations, competitive product designs, new methodologies, on-site experiments, and posters are welcome. HFES especially invites special-format sessions and presentations from invited speakers who bring their perspectives from areas related to human factors/ergonomics, identifying areas in which HF/E work is needed.

Only papers that have not been published previously or presented at another professional meeting may be submitted. All research and analyses described in a proposal must be complete at the time of submission. Papers that do not present completed work will be rejected. The sole exception to this policy is for student work submitted for consideration in the Student Forum track, in which case the proposer may report on work in progress. Before submitting your work, please read the Call for Proposals thoroughly.

Note that for all accepted submissions, one of the authors must attend the meeting to present the work. All presenters are required to pay the meeting registration fee. For questions on the submission process, please contact Lois Smith at 310/394-1811.