

By Diane Shao

# Knocking on opportunity's door

**M**y research career started when, at 15 years old, I showed up at university laboratories asking for a job. When I told this story to my spouse, another academic, we laughed uproariously at the idea of a kid not even out of high school knocking down the doors of our future laboratories. It sounded utterly clueless. After all, many in the scientific community believe that “talent” alone is the most important ingredient for a successful scientific career. To those with this mindset, people who actively promote themselves or advocate for their careers must be less intelligent or less deserving. But reflecting on my own trajectory, I’m glad that I was bold enough—or clueless enough—to proactively ask for what I needed early in my career.

On that first job search, I had no research experience. But I did have advice from a friend whose enviable jobs as a cashier at both Starbucks and Barnes & Noble proved that he was the authority on getting hired. “The secret,” he told me, “is to find a way to talk to the boss.” So I emailed 40 principal investigators (PIs) at the nearby university, soliciting a summer position. I strategically included the line, “If I do not receive a response via email, I will visit you at your office between 2 and 4 p.m. on April 10,” which led to a series of rapid replies kindly turning me down.

But 10 unsuspecting souls did not respond, so on the designated day, I dressed my best to visit them. My friend was right: Two PIs offered me unpaid internships on the spot. I played it cool, telling them that I would have to think about it. Finally, I met a quirky structural biologist with a friendly smile. He brought me to his lab manager, who eyed me dubiously and offered \$8 an hour. “How about \$9?” I piped. We shook hands, and I landed my first job ever. I realize now that my actions could have been seen as presumptuous, given the common idea that academia is a meritocracy and good things, such as jobs and higher salaries, naturally go to those who “deserve” them. As a high school student, though, I was blissfully unaware of those cultural norms.

I maintained this mindset in college, where I asked potential advisers whether they had a low-risk project that could lead to a primary authorship for me. Some were disdainful of this goal-oriented approach, declaring that success cannot be planned. But one told me that he had just the project for me: a study whose results would be of importance regardless of the outcome. Three years later, I was his only undergraduate student to have published a first-author



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paper. I put in a lot of hard work, but I also know that being willing to ask for what I wanted was a crucial contributor to my early success.

As I progressed in my training and started to internalize the academic community’s values, it became harder to ask for success on my terms. As a Ph.D. student, for example, I felt uncomfortable speaking up when it looked like I wouldn’t get the authorship position I felt I deserved on a paper. I did end up raising the issue. After some opposition I got the appropriate credit, but the fact that I had to ask reinforced my sense that rewards and recognition aren’t meted out based solely on merit. Now, as a postdoc, I never tell stories of my youthful, brazen self-advocacy—partly because I wonder whether asking to be given

the things I needed means that I don’t deserve what I have achieved, and partly because scientists prefer stories of amazing breakthroughs leading to recognition and success.

The reality is that creating opportunities for career advancement is as important as innate scientific talent. I hope to have my own lab one day, and I know that my success—or failure—will be determined by many factors beyond the merit of my projects. I will need to attract trainees, entice funders, and convince the department chair to give me freedom to explore—all of which will require negotiating and advocating for myself. For me, that will mean starting to reharvest some of my inner teenager, knocking on doors of opportunity and asking to be let in. ■

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