Networking in Microbiology

You’ve heard it several times: the graduate student in Dr. Krebs’s lab who made a significant finding with a newly acquired collaborator and published a groundbreaking paper; or Lisa, who started a blog after she met Steve, a program coordinator in science communication, while in circuit training class. Networking creates new opportunities and therefore it’s very important to your research and your overall career.

So, how does one network in the field of microbiology? To learn more about this, Microbe Mentor reached out to microbiologists to ask for their one piece of advice for networking. The main take-away: do not limit your network to the people in your field.

Here are other great pointers:

“Value the diversity, we can learn from each other despite our differences” says José Pérez-Jiménez. Dayle Daines adds that “networking should be considered an important way to learn about the latest science, both in your own field as well as others. An interesting discussion with someone in a completely different field has the potential to spark new ideas and possibly new collaborations in ways that you may not have predicted otherwise.”

Always treat others the way you want to be treated. “You really have one chance to make a first impression so manners matter: listen well, do not interrupt, and send a ‘thank you’ email after the encounter. The world is very small and it is likely that your paths will cross again, for example, as a peer reviewer on your manuscripts or grant proposals, or being invited to speak at a conference,” comments Amy Cheng Vollmer.

Open doors for other people. Amy Cheng Vollmer suggests that networking is a two-way relationship, so be a “connector” for others. If someone has opened a door for you through a special opportunity, be grateful and work to get to a point so that you can open the door for others.

Start small with networking. Stephanie Fiorenza suggests that “If you are at a conference, talk to individuals presenting posters and follow up after the conference if their work especially interested you. At breaks, talk to vendors in the exhibit hall; they are there to meet people so it will be easy to converse with them. At meals, sit at a table where you don’t know anyone and introduce yourself.”

Finding a connection can happen anywhere. As Stephanie Fiorenza points out, “contact your alma mater and classmates, join alumni associations, become involved in professional societies, use LinkedIn, and get involved in activities.” To build collaborations and make himself known to a wide network, Marcos Pileggi started a blog on Facebook about the latest news in environmental microbiology. He comments that the blog was “essential to achieve more supporters in environmental microbiology,” which naturally led to more contacts.

Make connections with people prior to attending a conference or through mutual contacts. Fernando Ontiveros recommends two approaches for connecting with people: (i) if you are attending a conference and would like to meet a particular person there, send a brief e-mail introducing yourself. Mention that you will be attending the conference and would love to chat at some point. You are likely to get an invitation to find them between talks or during meal breaks, and because they will be expecting you, all you have to do is present yourself to them at the appropriate time; (ii) find someone who knows the person you would like to connect with, and have them introduce you, either in person or by e-mail. Having the “target” meet you through someone you both know really makes the initial approach feel more natural and logical.

Do your research on the person you want to connect with. Thomas Hanson says, “My networking is primarily done through reading literature and emailing someone with a question, a request based on the publication, or at conferences during the poster session and going up to a speaker after a talk. The best advice I have is to ask good questions and share observations based on what you have seen. They are the best lead-in to a
substantive discussion that is the start of potential collaborations or other relationships like post-doctoral positions.” Beth Lazazzera adds, “talk to people you know and see what their recommendations are because people who are good collaborators will gain a reputation and others will suggest them.”

Present your work well. Mostafa S. Elshahed reminds us that “Networking is certainly important but not a substitute for hard work, so well written manuscripts and good presentations of your work at scientific meetings, will make you stand out to potential collaborators.”

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