MENTORING Q&A

Location, Location, Location?

What to consider when choosing a postdoc.

Each issue, we’ll ask a trainee to pose their career questions to an established investigator and mentor. Here, Maria Jones-Muhammad, a PhD student in the neuroscience program at the University of Mississippi Medical Center, asks Rudy M. Ortiz, PhD, a professor and chair in the School of Natural Sciences, University of California, Merced, how important location is when choosing a postdoctoral position.
Q: My question pertains to advice about choosing a postdoc once we graduate. I had been told by other professors that the postdoc itself is more important than where it is located. Is it true that location should not be a high priority when choosing a postdoc?

A: This is a great question that doesn’t have a clear black or white answer because everyone is different and everyone has different priorities. Personally, I think that the person I’ll be working with is more important than the geographic location, but location should be considered and will be weighed differently. For example, if you can’t tolerate extreme cold, taking a postdoc position in a geographic location where there is extremely cold weather may not suit you well. And the contributing factor to a successful postdoc is your personal well-being, so if you are not happy, it makes focusing on your work that much more difficult and potentially leads to less-than-ideal performance.

Ideally, you find a great mentor in a location you love and you get to experience a win-win situation, but I’m not sure how common that is. But a less-than-ideal location can be viewed from another perspective: This limited-time experience can be an opportunity to be adventurous and expand your horizons. Being out of one’s comfort level sometimes allows a person to grow and develop confidence by demonstrating an ability to overcome a challenge. And this lesson will very likely be an important one later in your academic career and in your personal life as well.

Selecting a postdoc position in a seemingly less-than-ideal location at first may be a bit challenging, but at the end of your tenure, it may actually end up having been the best decision. Thus, while location may not be the highest priority for selecting why you go to a particular institution to work with a specific mentor, it should be considered for various reasons. Ultimately, the weight applied to it as a contributing factor will vary from person to person based on their priorities and personal well-being.

But keep in mind that a postdoc is intended to be a temporary position, so selecting to work in a less-than-ideal geographic location could be viewed as a challenge that may lead to life-changing experiences and lessons that will last a lifetime.

For more information and suggestions, check out the National Postdoctoral Association’s career page at www.nationalpostdoc.org/page/Career_Resources.