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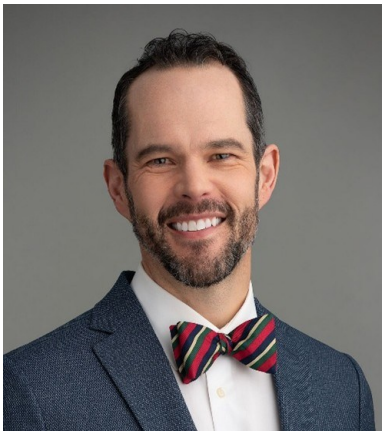

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Career Development Committee

Degrees of Uncertainty; Surviving Science — Discovering New Possibilities for a Rewarding and Resilient Career in Science

The January 2026 Career Development Session brought together a panel of experienced scientists to discuss how to navigate increasing uncertainty in scientific careers. This uncertainty is driven by shifting funding landscapes, evolving policy environments, and broader systemic changes affecting research and academia. The aim for the session was to provide practical guidance, perspective, and reassurance to scientists at various career stages facing an unpredictable future.

Session Panelists:

- **Judy Ford, Ph.D.,** Professor, University of California, San Francisco
- **Dawn Ionescu, M.D.,** Executive Medical Director, Experimental Medicine, Johnson and Johnson Innovative Medicine
- **Pamela Feliciano, Ph.D.,** Scientist, Division of Genetics and Genomics, Boston Children's Hospital and Instructor, Department of Pediatrics, Harvard Medical School
- **Carolyn Rodriguez, M.D., Ph.D.**, Associate Dean for Academic Affairs and Professor Stanford University

The panelists discussed the following dimensions of uncertainty. Panelists emphasized that uncertainty should not be viewed solely as a risk, but also as a space for opportunity and reinvention.

- Funding instability: Rapid changes in grant availability and priorities
- Policy shifts: External forces reshaping research agendas
- Career linearity breakdown: Traditional academic paths are no longer guaranteed
- Institutional pressures: Increased competition, reduced tenure-track opportunities

The panelists highlighted practical strategies to strengthen resilience.

1. Reframing Career Expectations

- Move away from the idea of a single "correct" path (e.g., tenure-track)
- Embrace nonlinear and evolving career trajectories
- Recognize that career pivots are normal and often beneficial

2. Building Transferable Skills

- Communication, leadership, and collaboration are critical
- Skills beyond bench science increase flexibility across sectors
- Scientists should position themselves as problem-solvers, not just specialists

3. Networking and Community

- Relationships are essential for navigating uncertainty
- Mentorship and peer networks provide both opportunity and support
- Engaging with broader communities opens unexpected doors

4. Proactive Career Management

- Do not rely solely on institutions to define your path
- Continuously assess and adapt your goals
- Stay informed about trends in science, industry, and policy

The panelists emphasized discovering new possibilities within an evolving landscape of opportunities. They also emphasized a shift in mindset from survival to empowerment.

Emerging Opportunities:

- Industry roles (biotech, pharma, consulting)
- Science policy and government
- Science communication and public engagement
- Interdisciplinary and applied research fields

The panelists encouraged the attendees to:

- Explore adjacent and alternative career paths
- Align careers with personal values and lifestyle goals
- View science training as a foundation for diverse opportunities

Mindset Shift: From Survival to Empowerment

- From uncertainty as a threat to uncertainty as a catalyst
- From passive career progression to active career design
- From rigid identity to flexible identity

While the scientific career landscape is increasingly uncertain, it is also richer with possibility. Success now depends on adaptability, intentional decision-making, and openness to change. Ultimately, moving from surviving to thriving in science is about leveraging uncertainty to build a resilient, fulfilling, and self-directed career.

The Career Development Committee remains committed to supporting early-career scientists and looks forward to delivering another engaging session at the January 2027 Annual Meeting.