

PEOPLE & IDEAS

Interviewing for a PI position—the pandemic way

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JCB asks early career researchers to share their experience interviewing for academic faculty positions and becoming independent PIs during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The COVID-19 pandemic has severely disrupted academic research. It not only reduced in-lab activities for most cell biological areas of research—it also forced institutions to pause or delay faculty recruitment. In this series of People and Ideas (Casadio and Simon. 2020. *J. Cell Biol.* <https://doi.org/10.1083/jcb.202012016>; Casadio and Simon. 2021. *J. Cell Biol.* <https://doi.org/10.1083/jcb.202012131>; Casadio and Simon. 2021. *J. Cell Biol.* <https://doi.org/10.1083/jcb.202101156>), JCB checks in with early career researchers about the impact of the pandemic on their research activities and careers. We contacted Christopher O. Barnes and Naima Sharaf, Danfeng Cai, Javier Fernandez-Martinez, Takayuki Nojima, Sinem Saka, and Maria Tokuyama to learn about their experiences with faculty interviews during the pandemic. Through this piece, we hope to introduce these new investigators and their exciting research to our readers.

Christopher O. Barnes and Naima Sharaf:

The Sharaf lab is interested in bacterial lipoproteins, particularly their roles in physiology and potential in vaccine design. Research in the Sharaf Lab bridges biochemistry, biology, microbiology, and immunology to translate lipoprotein research into therapeutics.

The Barnes Lab will use integrative approaches, driven by structural biology, to investigate viral–host interactions at all points throughout the viral life cycle. Structural understanding of viral–host interactions will allow us to choose pairs of

antibodies for treatment cocktails, engineer more effective antibodies with improved potencies that may be resistant to viral mutations, design viral entry and replication inhibitors, while also using structure-based immunogen design to improve candidate protein-based vaccine regimens.

Both labs are opening their doors at Stanford University, CA, in July 2021.

Christopher and Naima: The academic two-body problem refers to the difficulty couples face finding two jobs that are geographically close. In 2020, this already daunting task was made worse given the challenges faced during the pandemic. With diminishing university budgets, there was no guarantee that two assistant professorships would be available (or stay available), so the first challenge we faced was finding and applying for two tenure-track positions. We used two guiding principles to navigate this stage of the job process: (1) Do not prevent your partner from applying to a position, which guards against feelings of regret and resentment. This was particularly challenging when one of us was applying to jobs where there was only one faculty position available. (2) We asked ourselves, “If we accept the position, can we build a happy home life for ourselves and our two children?” Work/non-work balance matters, and we wanted to ensure that our lives outside of our labs would be just as enjoyable. Keeping these principles in mind, we applied for positions focusing on individual needs.

After completing in-person interviews in 2019 and early 2020, it soon became clear that interviews scheduled for Spring 2020



Christopher O. Barnes. Image courtesy of Christopher O. Barnes. <https://profiles.stanford.edu/christopher-barnes>. Twitter: @cobarnes27.

were not going to occur. We began to hear from friends that job searches were being paused or even canceled altogether. This led to some stressful weeks: we had to decide whether we should stop our ongoing interviews and accept two positions for which we already had offers or continue to let the process play out for those institutes where we still had interviews. Once the offers were in hand, should we accept immediately or formally negotiate to secure the resources needed for our research programs? For both decisions, we chose the latter, informed by conversations with the schools and departments involved and their commitments to our recruitments. Throughout, there was a sense of understanding by all parties as we all were adjusting to the “new normal” of virtual meetings, interviews, and negotiations, while grappling with the challenges presented by the pandemic such as working from home and being teachers for our two

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Naima Sharaf. Photo courtesy of Naima Sharaf. <https://www.sharafalab.com/>. Twitter: @naimagsharaf.

school-aged children. In the end, we were able to make an informed decision that would not only position us for success in our early career but also provide an environment that would be best for our family.

Since accepting our offers, we have begun the process of setting up our labs, which has been difficult due to COVID travel restrictions. The second and third visits that usually occur were put on hold indefinitely, which limited our ability to properly assess our laboratory spaces for design or renovations. Leaning on drawings, pictures, and schematics was critical, and when those were not enough, virtual walkthroughs helped. Thankfully, everyone has been more than happy to help to ensure that our needs are met. One faculty colleague even made a movie of one of the lab spaces! Looking back, it's clear that the pandemic made an already challenging process more difficult, with more difficulties still ahead—moving and settling into a new home, interviewing and hiring trainees, physically setting up our labs, and training new students with social distancing in mind. However, it has also shown us the value of communicating and asking for help, adapting to a “new normal,” and above all else, believing in and supporting one another and community.

Danfeng Cai

The Cai lab is interested in understanding how biomolecular condensates influence chromatin organization and transcription using advanced imaging techniques. The lab opened in March 2021 in the Biochemistry and Molecular Biology Department at Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, MD.

Danfeng (Dani): The pandemic unfolded at the same time that my interviews were taking place. When my academic job interviews began early in 2020, they were still done the old-fashioned way: arrive in town by airplane, have dinner with the host, present a seminar the next day in a crowded room, meet with many faculty members and trainees, and present a chalk talk the following day. There was definitely a lot of handshaking. Gradually, some faculty members would politely tell me that they preferred not to shake hands. And by the time I was interviewing at Johns Hopkins in March 2020, all the handshakes were gone. My last two interviews were both virtual, and I met faculty members all day, across multiple days, through Zoom. Having experienced both forms of interviews, I feel that in-person ones are more exhausting, considering the time involved in traveling as well as the realization that my every move is being scrutinized during the interview. There are also risks of catching bugs at airports and getting food poisoning at random restaurants. However, the great benefit of in-person interviews is that I can almost immediately get the “vibe” of a department, knowing if I would fit or not. Virtual interviews are more about scientific interactions: Zoom seminar presentations are surprisingly effective and people can see my slides much better on their own screens. Virtual talks are less exhausting.

My original start date was delayed since the pandemic slowed down the renovation of my lab space. To prepare for the lab opening, I worked as a postdoc while figuring out how to perform the PI job: writing my first big NIH grant, recruiting personnel,



Dani Cai. Image courtesy of Danfeng Cai. <https://www.cai-lab.net>. Twitter: @DanfengCai.



Javier Fernandez-Martinez. Photo courtesy of Javier Fernandez-Martinez. <https://biosfika.org/>; <https://lab.rockefeller.edu/rout/>.

and purchasing lab equipment. To make up for the lost in-person scientific interactions, I learned to create a larger virtual presence: building a lab website to showcase our science, presenting at virtual scientific meetings, and being more active on science Twitter.

Javier Fernandez-Martinez

The Fernandez-Martinez lab focuses on the structural and functional characterization of macromolecular assemblies, and specifically the massive protein complex that acts as the “gatekeeper” of the nucleus, the nuclear pore complex (NPC). The lab applies an integrative approach that combines multiple types of data into a single, coherent determination of the structure to study NPC biology and evolution.

Javier: Back in late February 2020, right before the COVID-19 pandemic hit us in New York, I accepted a position as Ikerbasque Research Associate and junior group leader at the Basque Center for Biophysics (University of the Basque Country, Spanish National Research Council) in Bilbao, Spain, where I will start in July 2021.

I was very lucky that I finished the whole interview process and accepted the position before our world was turned upside down by the pandemic. Interviewing for an academic position is a challenging endeavor that I can imagine must have become nightmarish with the actual restrictions and limitations. In my case, both The Rockefeller University and the Basque Center for Biophysics have been extremely helpful and are doing everything they can to make my transition as smooth as possible. The logistics of moving and starting a new lab are going to be challenging, which means that



Taka Nojima. Image courtesy of Taka Nojima. https://www.bioreg.kyushu-u.ac.jp/mib/labo_list_e.html. Twitter: @Taka_Nojima.

we will have to spend a lot more time than usual planning and arranging everything. At this point, I would say that the biggest problem for scientists looking for or starting a new position is the uncertainty. Rules and regulations change on a daily basis; for example, depending where you go, you might be severely limited in hiring good people due to immigration limitations. On top of that, reconciling work and family is becoming harder and harder. To the usual workload, we now have to add the fact that (at least here in New York City) kids cannot attend school normally and have to stay home most of the time. This is adding a whole new level of stress and complications for families, as we have to juggle our time around these obstacles and still remain a productive scientist. Trying to look on the bright side (if there is any during a pandemic), I think that people around the world are starting to appreciate the real value of having a strong scientific research system. Hopefully, governments and funding agencies will see the same and seriously commit to promoting science, from early education all the way to top scientific institutions.

Takayuki Nojima

The Nojima lab opened its doors at the Medical Institute of Bioregulation (MIB), Kyushu University, in Fukuoka, Japan, in February 2021. The lab explores how coding and noncoding RNAs are synthesized in health and disease, with an emphasis on cancer and viral infection, using newly developed methods for profiling nascent RNAs.

Takayuki (Taka): The COVID-19 pandemic has changed our lives, including the academic job hunt. I was lucky enough to get one offer to become PI before the COVID-19

pandemic began, which I eventually accepted. Those interviews happened in person, but I was invited for interviews by two other research institutes during the pandemic. The interview process completely changed due to the rapid growth of COVID-19. To prevent viral spread, both interviews were shifted from in person to Zoom, which was a bit awkward for me since, at the time, I had limited experience with that platform. My first Zoom interview did not work out, possibly because of the unusual situation. I presented my work from the corner of my bedroom while my daughter was being homeschooled in another part of the house. This kind of job interview is more challenging for a non-native English speaker. Fortunately, the second interview was more successful. I received an offer from that institute, which I ultimately turned down. I learned a lot from Zoom lab meetings, presentations from international scientific meetings, and also from my previous unsuccessful virtual interview. The interview process via Zoom had pros and cons. In my view, other than limiting viral spread, the biggest benefit of this interview style is in saving money and time for traveling. You can meet people and present your work from home even if you live on the other side of the world. It is very convenient, thanks to technology! However, there were also significant problems. I could not get a feel for the atmosphere of my potential new workplace through the monitor. I really wanted to meet my future colleagues in person, but I was not able to visit or meet anyone there. These were critical reasons not to take the offer from the successful virtual interview.

The COVID-19 pandemic also delayed everything. I was supposed to start my lab on December 1, 2020. In late 2020, I was located in Oxford, UK, which had the toughest restrictions in the country. Moving to another country became far more difficult than expected. Hopefully, now that the lab has opened, the next steps won't be interrupted by additional unexpected challenges.

Sinem Saka

The Saka lab opened in December 2020 at the EMBL Heidelberg Genome Biology Unit, Germany. The lab aims to develop new tools and methods to investigate the spatial and molecular organization of cells across scales by using new labelling approaches,



Sinem Saka. Image courtesy of the Wyss Institute at Harvard University. https://www.embl.de/research/units/genome_biology/saka/. Twitter: @SinemKSaka1.

fluorescence and super-resolution microscopy, and DNA nanotechnology.

Sinem: While putting together my application package in 2019, I certainly knew that the road to independence would be challenging. What I was not prepared for was going through this period in a rapidly unfolding pandemic with all the uncertainty and anxiety it brought upon us. I was fortunate to be almost finished with my interviews right when the pandemic started to hit the United States. My original plan was to spend the remaining approximately nine months of my postdoc time at the Wyss Institute at Harvard University, Boston, MA, wrapping up multiple projects I have been working on. But after my last interviews, I landed into a five-month-long lab shutdown. This was followed by a gradual reopening process with lab members dispersed over two shifts per day. I was in a privileged position to be able to return to work on site. In this period, I devoted some time to help out our team with urgent COVID-19 projects to develop better solutions to the global testing crisis. The unexpected loss of months of experimental time resulted in many unfinished projects, hence, I will continue to work in close collaboration with my postdoc lab for an extended period after my departure to ensure that our work is complete.

The difficulty of making plans in 2020 also meant that the transition to my new position heavily overlapped with the busiest time of my postdoc. For several months, I have been wearing two heavy hats and virtually living in two time zones. In Boston mornings (and Heidelberg afternoons), as a



Maria Tokuyama. Photo courtesy of Maria Tokuyama. <https://www.microbiology.ubc.ca/research/labs/tokuyama>. Twitter: @maria_tokuyama.

budding PI, I tried to take care of the needs of my future position: running job ads, interviewing potential lab members, e-meeting new colleagues and collaborators, planning renovations and purchasing, and writing proposals. In the evenings, I got back into postdoc mode and headed to the lab for my night shift slot to do experiments against a ticking clock. The fact that social life and travel plans were crushed by the pandemic made it somewhat easier to sustain the long workdays and weeks, but also removed the opportunity to relax and maintain a support system. What really helped was Zoom chats with friends and colleagues sharing similar experiences and online peer groups such as Future PI Slack

or following the large scientific community on Twitter.

I never imagined my switch to a faculty position would include drawing plans for a lab that I haven't seen, hiring lab members I am yet to meet in person, leaving Boston without proper goodbyes, or spending the first days of my PI-hood quarantining alone in a guesthouse. Overall, the pandemic painted my long-awaited experience of stepping to the other side a bit darker. But it also changed the way we treat borders and physical distance, making the world and knowledge more accessible. And it rendered the science ever more important and worthwhile. My hope is that having gone through this experience will make the future look brighter for all of us.

Maria Tokuyama

The Tokuyama lab uses a multidisciplinary approach to uncover interactions between endogenous viruses and the immune system that impact antiviral immunity and excessive inflammation. The lab's goal is to design novel immune modulators to treat infections and inflammatory diseases. The lab opened on March 1, 2021 at the University of British Columbia (UBC), Canada.

Maria: I began the 2019–2020 job search feeling comfortable with the process, as this was my second job cycle. In contrast to the previous cycle, I had applied broadly geographically and in terms of department types and went on multiple in-person interviews before March 2020. Then the pandemic hit, and the entire process came to a standstill.

I had built a lot of mental resilience from the previous job cycle, but the cloud of hiring freezes caused by the pandemic was a

level of uncertainty that I was not prepared for. There were extended periods between March–May where I did not hear from search committees and additional in-person interviews were suspended indefinitely. Naturally, I started to question, “Could I go through another search adding one or two more years to my ‘training?’ Could my family bear more uncertainty?” Meanwhile, my day-to-day work shifted to helping lead the saliva testing project for SARS-CoV-2, which contributed to the development of SalivaDirect and other COVID-19-related projects at Yale University. In parallel, I was preparing activities and snacks to occupy my three year old, who was now at home full time.

Luckily, I had already interviewed at UBC in person in January 2020 and was very excited about their research environment, students, and progressive culture. I was absolutely delighted when Dr. Michael Murphy, the head of the Microbiology and Immunology Department at UBC, offered me a faculty position in May 2020. Having gone through a prior job cycle gave me a better perspective on a good overall “fit” and my family and I were very happy to accept this position.

The pandemic has added extra layers of paperwork for immigration and moving. I had to resort to interviewing future postdocs and students over Zoom and meeting my new colleagues via little grids on my computer screen. Shipping large equipment has taken many months, and many essential lab items are still backordered or priced much higher. Despite these challenges, I am very excited to start my own lab and have learned that every obstacle is an opportunity to become more resilient.