Nearing the job market was never this difficult for the postdoctoral community. In fact, in a distant 20th century period circa the ‘80s, some with Ph.D.s could skip the postdoc part and still land a faculty job. According to CSHL’s Director of Research, Dr. David L. Spector, who comes from this era and acknowledges the challenges that postdocs face today, CSHL has all the ingredients needed to create a recipe for a successful postdoctoral experience.

“I tell postdocs to think of this experience as a unique time in their scientific lives when they are free of the responsibilities of managing a lab and competing for multiple grants,” says Spector. “They are being given a chance to mix it up with the best minds in several research arenas. So the ball is in their court now. They just have to come up with great ideas, work really hard, and encounter a little luck in the mix.”

Echoing his mentor’s philosophy, Jan Bergmann, one of Spector’s postdocs, is taking full advantage of the amenities that give CSHL’s postdocs a huge edge over their peers elsewhere. “It’s a combination of having easy access to the world’s best scientific minds and the most advanced technology,” says Bergmann, who is studying how recently discovered pieces of genetic material called long non-coding RNAs regulate the way DNA is packaged within the cell’s nucleus and how this packaging changes as stem cells mature into different cell types.

Bergmann and his colleagues are benefiting immensely from CSHL’s purchase of a cutting-edge microscopy system that tracks RNA-related events occurring within cellular nuclei in real time. “Most countries have just a few minutes’ walk from my lab,” he says.

For most postdocs, the appointment of a faculty position is the goal. However, “shared” scientific resource facilities that provide services ranging from breeding mice with a desired genetic profile to churning out indispensable reagents such as antibodies.

Another big technological draw for the postdocs is CSHL’s Woodbury Genome Center, home to 16 high-throughput genome sequencing machines offering a broad array of genetic analysis applications that are constantly being innovated and improved upon in direct collaboration with the companies selling this technology.

In addition to the genomics hub, there are nine other “shared” scientific resource facilities that provide services ranging from breeding mice with a desired genetic profile to churning out indispensable reagents such as antibodies.

For postdocs running on a tight schedule and an even tighter budget, it’s tremendously time-saving and cost-effective to have such facilities right on campus.

Access to the leading scientists in any given field is just as easy, often simply a matter of tracking someone down at lunch at one of the cafeterias or Blackford bar, where ideas are routinely hatched over coffee or other stimulating beverages. “There’s a very strong culture of collaboration between scientists who work in different labs and across different disciplines,” says Jonathan Iqbal, a postdoc in structural biologist Leemor Joshua-Tor’s group, who has joined forces with postdoc Astrid Haase in cancer biology.

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For postdoc Kate Creasey, who is unraveling mechanisms of epigenetics in plant biologist Rob Martienssen’s lab, “it’s not just the in-house expertise but the chance to meet and network with the scientific leaders who come to CSHL meetings from all over the world,” that has been one of the highlights of her experience here. The CSHL meetings are crucial because this is where scientific discoveries are presented as breaking news. Hearing such information right away and not after six months when the discovery is published in a paper sometimes makes all the difference to a postdoc working in a competitive field.

Besides all these tangible factors, there’s “an atmosphere of excellence where it’s easy to be inspired,” says former Spector lab postdoc Tom Misteli, who now heads the Cell Biology of Genomes group at the National Cancer Institute. “CSHL is a place where creativity is encouraged, as is the ability to take risks, think provocatively and venture outside the mainstream.”

CSHL faculty takes an active role in promoting post-doctoral training with a view to improving their career prospects. Joshua-Tor, who until recently served as Dean of the Watson School of Biomedical Sciences, served on a National Institutes of Health task force that analyzed postdoc-related issues to frame a list of recommendations to improve postdocs’ training and ability to forge a sustainable career. CSHL also provides its postdocs with other types of training, such as workshops on grant writing, navigating review panels and opportunities in non-academic sectors, to name a few. [see sidebar: “Preparing for the post-postdoc life”]

“Most of those who come here have already made headway into accomplishing many of the things they need in order to achieve their career goals,” says Ipsaro. Wherever he and his peers land in the next stage in their careers, they will all do so with a nearly identical reflection on their CSHL experience. As Astrid Haase puts it, “the thought that we’re pushing science further and doing things that make our work useful to the community for a long time makes the postdoc experience, with all its challenges, completely worthwhile.”

Hema Bashyam