

Lessons Learned

In this issue, JAB continues a series of editorials from highly impactful faculty and researchers on “lessons learned” throughout their careers or lives. The hope is that the rest of us can benefit from their experiences. I would like to thank these individuals for sharing their thoughts with us.

—Michael Madigan, Editor-in-Chief

It is a profound honor to be asked to share some of my life lessons with our biomechanics community. I was also encouraged to make it “light-hearted.” In this spirit, I will open by saying that 800 words is insufficient to document all of the hard lessons and mistakes I have made over the past 23 years as a faculty member. I am writing this with the hope that it will help others to achieve an equally fulfilling and satisfying career as I have enjoyed, albeit following an easier path. I still feel daily that I am trying to figure things out. One of the first lessons I would share is that there is no recipe on how to do things correctly or successfully.

One of my personal peeves is when I hear people answer the question of “how they became successful or ended up in their current position.” Inevitably they answer that it was fortuitous, or “I was in the right place at the right time.” This answer provides no help to young researchers starting a career. Having interacted with many successful people in my own career, I can share that in no way were their successes attributable to chance. They exhibit the common traits of being very committed to their interests, working hard, showing generosity and a willingness to help others, taking advantage of opportunities, and clearly drawing joy from their work. I have always summarized this to my own trainees as “good things happen to people who do the right things.” More simply put, doing quality work, being open to receiving and sharing knowledge, and being a good community member will always be recognized. Follow your own path and interests; this will lead to a “happy” career, and my belief is that successful people are successful because they truly enjoy all aspects of what they do.

You have entered a field that requires an advanced degree, whether clinical, industrial, or research focused. I am often asked about work–life balance. For most of us, our working positions have no formal oversight, with freedom to manage our time. I do not believe that work–life balance is the issue but, rather, work–career aspirations. You need to be honest about what you want to achieve and, no different than an Olympic athlete, you will not meet these goals without making sacrifices, committing the time and effort—regardless if the goal is research excellence, family, or

a balance. Decide what will fulfill you and make sure to prioritize the things that will help you achieve this goal.

I have been extremely fortunate to have worked with excellent mentors, collaborators, colleagues, peers, and, most of all, trainees. Early in my career, I approached research as an island, thinking I needed to individually drive the entirety of my program. Having individual expertise, a genuine interest, and curiosity will sustain a research program, enabling it to make meaningful contributions, continue to evolve the science underlying our discipline, and help solve societal problems in the long run. However, many current funding trends in Canada and other countries rely on fettered approaches that tie research to industry and often favor short-term incremental findings and immediate impact. These partnered approaches are important for transferring knowledge and providing return on the investment of public dollars into research. However, in the absence of fundamental curiosity-driven research to feed this approach, they will become unsustainable. Furthermore, projects to directly address larger societal issues rely on building bridges from your island to collaborate and leverage interdisciplinary or transdisciplinary knowledge. Collaborations work best when contributors bring together unique and diverse skill sets and there is a committed driver to the project. A collaborative effort will not get off the ground, no matter how good the idea is without an individual contributor willing to take the lead. Don’t hesitate to approach colleagues. I have always found our community to be extremely supportive, open in discussing our work, sharing ideas, or just providing a supportive ear and advice during a challenge. As a member of the biomechanics community, you are not an island. There is an abundance of generous and supportive colleagues willing to foster the development of young researchers and discuss collaborations. Some of my longest and most impactful collaborations started as informal conversations.

In closing, it would be my pleasure to meet each of you as I sit here eagerly anticipating the return to in-person meetings. I encourage you to approach other researchers, both more senior and more junior, to discuss research or potential common interests. A research career is a roller coaster with rapidly changing high and lows, and leaning on others will strengthen us all. I look forward to discussing biomechanics, research, cycling, or skiing when our paths next cross.

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