

THE OFFICIAL MAGAZINE OF THE OCEANOGRAPHY SOCIETY

Oceanography

CITATION

Marcus, N.H. 2016. The Individual Development Plan: A tool to help graduate students assume control of their futures. *Oceanography* 29(1):31, <http://dx.doi.org/10.5670/oceanog.2016.06>.

DOI

<http://dx.doi.org/10.5670/oceanog.2016.06>

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The Individual Development Plan: A Tool to Help Graduate Students Assume Control of Their Futures

By Nancy H. Marcus

An Individual Development Plan (IDP) is a personalized strategic plan. IDPs have been used extensively in government and business to help employees improve their skills and leadership potential, and to progress in their careers. The Federation of American Societies for Experimental Biology (FASEB) first introduced the approach to help provide postdocs with guidance about career preparation. Those materials were subsequently incorporated into a Web-based online career-planning tool, MyIDP, managed by the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS). The first step in the development of a personal graduate-student IDP is to identify long-term career goals, which can then be used to shape the graduate experience. Next, a graduate student would need to undergo a realistic self-assessment of her/his knowledge and skills to identify strengths and weaknesses. With this information in hand, the student would be well prepared for a discussion with a mentor/major professor to flesh out how the strengths and weaknesses relate to the ultimate career goal. The plan would then lay out a deliberate and specific approach to address the weaknesses and to further enhance the strengths, for example, courses to enhance content knowledge, workshops to enhance communication skills, teaching to gain instructional skills, presenting at a meeting and publishing a paper to disseminate one's research, and internships to gain practical experience.

We expect students to enhance their content knowledge in a discipline by pursuing a graduate degree, but graduate study provides an opportunity to also acquire a host of important transferable skills to

prepare for success in a range of job and career settings. Desirable skills include excellence in oral and written communication as well as experience in team building, project management, data analysis, and leadership. By taking deliberate action to become a disciplinary expert and to build transferable skills, students will increase their competitiveness in the job market and likelihood of career success. Like any strategic plan, an IDP should not be rigid or fixed but rather should be re-evaluated on at least an annual basis to determine if modifications are needed. The mere process of developing an IDP provides excellent practice in strategic thinking and organization.

RESOURCES

- **Florida State University Individual Development Plan**
<http://gradschool.fsu.edu/Professional-Development/Individual-Development-Plan-IDP>
- **FASEB Individual Development Plan for Postdoctoral Fellows**
<http://www.faseb.org/portals/2/pdfs/opa/idp.pdf>
- **MyIDP**
<https://myidp.sciencecareers.org>

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ARTICLE CITATION

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