SARA BENDER | Program Officer, Gordon and Betty Moore Foundation (sara.bender@moore.org)

Degree: When, where, what, and what in?

I earned my BA in biology from Rutgers University in New Brunswick, New Jersey, and then worked for one year as a research technician before moving west for graduate school. I completed my master's and PhD degrees in biological oceanography at the University of Washington in Seattle. My PhD work focused on the effects of nutrient availability on the metabolism of marine diatoms.

Did you stay in academia at all, and if so, for how long?

After earning my PhD, I moved to the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution for a WHOI Postdoctoral Scholar position. I was in the Marine Chemistry and Geochemistry Department, investigating how micronutrients impact phytoplankton physiology using proteomics. This postdoc was supported by the Cooperative Institute for the North Atlantic Region, and I collaborated with the Provincetown Center for Coastal Studies to conduct fieldwork in Cape Cod Bay. Overall, I was a postdoc for 18 months before starting my current position.

How did you go about searching for a job outside of the university setting?

Much of my job searching was done through informational interviews, networking, and online searches. I used my online research as a way to determine what skills the positions I was interested in required, and then sought out opportunities during grad school and my postdoc to diversify and enhance my resume. I applied for several positions and heeded the advice, "Don't let your first interview be for your dream job." In the end, this advice was very helpful as it allowed me to get some of the "kinks" out before I interviewed at Moore.

Is this the only job (post-academia) that you've had? If not, what else did you do?

This is my first post-academia position.

What is your current job? What path did you take to get there?

I am a program officer at the Gordon and Betty Moore Foundation in Palo Alto, California. I sit within the Marine Microbiology Initiative as part of Moore's Science Program. In this role, I work on a team to support scientific research in the marine environment through grant sourcing, grant making, and grants management. I spend about 30% of my time traveling to learn about the latest research in the field, to identify new potential project ideas, and to meet with grantees. I also spend a lot of my time communicating about possible research projects internally (primarily through writing and conversations), as well as working on a team to develop and implement strategy within the Initiative. My path was rather direct in that I transitioned from my postdoc to this position, just taking a week off to move across country.

What did your oceanographic education (or academic career) give you that is useful in your current job?

My current job relies on my knowledge of ocean science and marine microbial ecology—expertise I developed during graduate school and my postdoc. I also take a scientific approach to identify new potential areas of opportunity, develop a clear plan of inquiry and investigation, conduct research and analysis, and then communicate my results to my peers. My early project management experience (e.g., finishing graduate school by successfully balancing timelines, coursework, publications, and research collaborations) gave me a solid background for

the grants management I do today. While a broken pump or failed experiment at sea may have frustrated me at the time, those experiences taught me the importance of organization, improvisation, creativity, and intuition—all skills I employ now.

Is there any course or other training you would have liked to have had as part of your graduate education to meet the demands of the job market?

The training I most benefited from was the courses and seminars I took in science writing and science communication. If I could go back and take additional training, I would consider courses on negotiation and influence as well as on operational finances. These are topics that frequently come up at my current position.

Is the job satisfying? What aspects of the job do you like best/least?

My job is incredibly satisfying because it allows me to keep one foot in research (albeit from a different perspective), while having the other foot in the funder space. Each day I am challenged to learn about new topics on the fringe of my expertise, and as part of this process, I get to interact with colleagues from completely different fields. These interactions are energizing as they expand my horizons and allow me to spend a lot of time in a creative and collaborative space. I entered graduate school because of my love for science,

discovery, and the ocean, and I have been fortunate enough to weave all of those passions into my day-to-day at Moore.

Do you have any recommendations for new grads looking for jobs?

Of course.

1. *Put yourself out there*. Let people know you are interested in positions outside of academia
2. *Conduct informational interviews and network*. This will give you a sense for the types of positions you may want to pursue post-academia.
3. *Update your LinkedIn profile and get business cards*. These are currencies many sectors use for networking.
4. *Practice your elevator speech*. What are your skills and what excites you?
5. *Think outside the box and leave the "supposed to's" behind*. I have met hundreds of scientists since leaving academia who made a similar transition and are satisfied with their decisions—they hold positions in, for example, industry, finance, start-ups, and government. The career paths are endless.