



CAIRIBU ARCTICS COMMUNITY FORUM

MAKING THE MOST OF YOUR RESEARCH TRAINEE EXPERIENCE

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY
May 5, 2026



ARCTICS COMMUNITY FORUM
FEAT: DONALD DEFRANCO, PHD

GOAL: Maximize your research trainee experience

Summary

Lessons from the Trainee and Mentor Perspective

Introduction

- **Dr. Don DeFranco** (University of Pittsburgh, project leader of the prior CAIRIBU Urology O'Brien Center at University of Pittsburgh) opened by reflecting on his training experiences, including while earning a PhD at Yale University and as a postdoc at UC San Francisco. He has held a faculty position since 1985. Throughout his career he has trained dozens of undergrads, PhD students, medical students, postdocs, and clinical fellows, and served on numerous PhD thesis committees. Dr. De Franco has received research funds from the National Cancer Institute, National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases, and other agencies.



Training under mentors with different approaches

- He shared his experiences as a trainee, including working with his PhD advisor, Dieter Soll, and his postdoc advisor, Keith Yamamoto.
- He described the different approaches of his mentors, Dieter and Keith, and how he learned from both. Dieter was often away travelling and Keith was very present and closely oversaw his lab.

Navigating mentorship and project challenges

- He described how he convinced his advisor to allow him to pursue transcription work despite initial resistance.
- His first publication as a grad student demonstrated the influence of external sequences on transcription.
- He discussed the **importance of being honest with mentors** and exploring projects that align with one's interests.
- He reflected on the lessons learned from his mentors, including the importance of reading outside one's comfort zone and the value of persistence. Because of his persistence, he found a gene that worked well for transcription despite his mentor wanting to move away from transcription.

Transition to Mentorship

- As a mentor, he realized the importance of reading outside one's field and the value of collaborations.
- He had a student who was reluctant to change his thesis project but ultimately found success in a new direction.
- **Trusting data and being open to new interpretations and collaborations is critical.**

Navigating Authorship and Collaboration

- Authorship and collaboration bring unique challenges, which is why it's important, he said, to have conversations about expectations.
 - For example, when 2 of his students couldn't agree on authorship order, Dr. DeFranco explained how he stepped in to adjudicate; having clear conversations about authorship **ahead of time** is critical, he said.
 - Additionally, consider the potential impact of leaving a lab as authorship may shift after leaving.

Networking and Career Advancement

- Dr. DeFranco, stressed that networking with confidence and persistence and taking chances can open new doors in one's career.
- Supportive colleagues and mentors can help you to foster collaborations and build a successful career.

A recording of this and prior CAIRIBU ARCTICS Community forums is available on the CAIRIBU YouTube channel [HERE](#)