



CAREER PANEL

Insights on careers in government (**Chia-Suei Hung, PhD**), industry (**Mirjana Trifunovic, MS**), and academia (**Nazema Siddiqui, MD, Vanessa Hale, DVM, PhD, MAT, Nicole Gilbert, PhD**)

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY 08/21/2026 CAIRIBU Trainee Summer Camp

The third of 3 virtual events in this series

Academia

Clinician-scientist perspective

- [Nazema Siddiqui, MD](#) knew she was going to be a doctor, as both her parents were doctors.
- However, working in a cellular molecular biology laboratory as an undergraduate drew her to basic research.
- She completed a fellowship in urogynecology and initially focused on clinically-focused research.
- Receiving a K award allowed her to transition to bench science.
- Dr. Siddiqui finds conducting basic research while carrying out clinical duties fulfilling; strategically managing her calendar and leaning on her clinical team to manage patient care allows her to balance both.

Traditional path to academia

- Early on, [Nicole Gilbert, PhD](#) had an interest in science, and completing a summer internship at the University of Nebraska Medical Center sparked her interest in lab work. This led her to pursue a PhD, especially after learning that funding was provided.
- Following her postdoc, she expected to stay on as a senior person in her PI's lab, but her PI took a position across the country.
- Dr. Gilbert got two R01s in the same cycle and transitioned from a non-tenure track research position to a tenure track one.
- She was originally was opposed to becoming a PI, citing stress and family responsibilities. But as time passed, she was better able to manage stress and running a lab ended up not being as stressful as she had expected.

Non-traditional path to academia

- [Vanessa Hale, DVM, PhD, MAT](#) taught high school at first. During summers, she studied the primate gut microbiome.
- Her PhD work was in the gut microbiome and though her postdoc was in human colorectal cancer, she pivoted to studying bladder cancer to continue studying animal health (bladder cancer in dogs is similar to that in humans).
- Dr. Hale noted that her career path was shaped by chance and life factors, but the varied experiences shaped who she is today. She advised the audience to explore opportunities and not to feel like they need to rush to their career endpoint.
- She suggested being persistent and specific about why your interests align when mentor-searching.

Industry

Finding professional growth in industry

- As Director of Lab Operations at MilliporeSigma, [Mirjana Trifunovic, MS](#), oversees analytical and bioassay or immunoassay research. Her interest in molecular biology led her to pursue a research-based master's degree.
- Working as a lab manager after graduate school exposed her to more lab techniques and teaching, but pay was inadequate.
- After a stint at American Type Culture Collection, Mirjana brought her transferable lab skills to another role for MilliporeSigma.
- MilliporeSigma was growing fast, resulting in a high-stress environment with a lot of overtime work. She experienced a new level of attention to detail and fast decision-making she didn't find in academia.
- Main message → Experience in specific technologies and soft skills are important; a PhD or postdoc aren't necessarily required.

Government

- [Chia-Suei Hung, PhD](#) completed a PhD in biology and biomedical sciences with an immunology focus at Washington University in St. Louis. He studied retrovirus research and switched to studying bacterial pathogenesis, specifically pathogenic *E. coli*.
- Unable to secure a faculty position following his postdoc, he tried working in industry but found it monotonous and unfulfilling, so he returned to academia to work as a staff scientist in his postdoc lab. After several years, he found a job as an Air Force contractor to study bacterial biofilms on aircraft surfaces.
- He noted that the Air Force hires scientists for expertise that can be applied to different projects every few years. He advised trainees to learn new skills or knowledge at every training stage as they can be applied in different areas when opportunities arise.
- Dr. Hung noted that the Air Force hires scientists recently out of grad school as well as senior level scientists. Completing a postdoc is not necessary prior to working for the Air Force. Hires are based on current needs or projects of the program, and it's important that hires are willing to learn and pivot. The Air Force may send scientists to complete training and career development opportunities.
- The Air Force's research is in between academia and industry – not science for the pursuit of knowledge or science to develop a product and profit, but basic science for the pursuit of knowledge and technology development for translation to military use.