

ESSAY

Research jobs for recent college graduates: A comparison between traditional lab technician positions and NIH's postbaccalaureate IRTA fellowship.

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The features that distinguish the Postbaccalaureate IRTA experience from a normal lab tech job are the enhanced educational opportunities, greater independence, more organized social outlets and networking opportunities, life in the DC Metro area, and the NIH itself. Also, research experience looks great on a CV when applying for research jobs or graduate schools, and the NIH name and Postbaccalaureate IRTA fellowship are impressive to potential employers and admissions committees.

On the other hand, lab tech jobs often require fewer commitments outside of a normal 9-to-5 work day and usually have better pay and benefits than the Postbaccalaureate IRTA fellowship. In addition, working at a specific university often carries the benefit of being closer to one's family, friends, and/or significant others. Someone who does not like cities can choose to work at a university that has ready access to the beach, mountains, or regions

of the country that are more personally appealing than the Washington, DC, area. Lab tech jobs also usually require at least a two year commitment, whereas the Postbac IRTA fellowship is generally a one year commitment (possibly two).

Regardless of which option you choose, you should be active in searching for a job that lets you fulfill the goals you set for yourself in the years between graduating and starting graduate or medical school. Whether those goals are to publish, get experience, save money, or just enjoy yourself, with careful questioning and circumspection, you should be able to maximize the possibility that you will meet your goals.

Key words: postbaccalaureate, intramural research training award, IRTA, lab technician, fellowship, employment, job, NIH, training award.

The traditional start of a career in biomedical research or medicine goes something like this: graduate from high school, go to college, then graduate with a science major. After college, enroll in graduate school and spend the next four to seven years working on your Ph.D., or go to medical school and get your M.D. or a combined M.D./Ph.D. After earning a professional degree there are postdoctoral positions, residencies, fellowships, faculty and senior scientist positions, earning tenure, etc. To many aspiring young researchers and health care professionals, this timetable seems like a daunting gambit wherein the best years of their youth are sacrificed behind stacks of books and piles of debt in exchange for the chance of an upwardly mobile and rewarding career in science and/or medicine.

Reasons to work in a research lab after college

Perhaps it is not surprising that an increasing number of college seniors are considering taking time off after earning a bachelor's degree and working in research-related jobs before going into graduate school or medical school. Many students feel exhausted from the rigors of an intense undergraduate science education, while others realize the great advantage applicants to graduate schools and M.D./Ph.D. programs have if they have already acquired lab experience and published in peer-reviewed journals. Some people also want to work in a research job as a way to gauge whether or not they will actually be able to cope with putting in the long hours of bench work it takes

to build a career in research before they make the substantial commitment of going back to school. Others decided too late in their college career to pursue a career in medicine or research and need time to take prerequisite courses required for admission to many of the country's top schools.

Whatever your motivations are, working for a while after graduation can give you a chance to breathe while you clarify the next step in your life. This time is also a good opportunity to take extra courses, build up some marketable job skills, earn valuable publication credits, and possibly gather up a little nest egg or purchase a car to help carry you through the coming lean years of graduate stipends or medical school loans. Because working in a research lab is not always a common or obvious career move, many students and college career advisors may be unsure how to take full advantage of the years between graduation and starting professional school.

I was faced with this same dilemma when I graduated with a neuroscience degree from a liberal arts college in 2001. I knew I eventually wanted to try to enter an M.D./Ph.D. program, but I also knew that I wanted to take some time off and enjoy being young for a while. I also needed to take the MCAT and complete a few prerequisite courses before I could apply to medical school. Of course, there were many jobs available that provided reasonable wages and would have allowed me time for MCAT preparation and night classes, but I wanted a job that would do more to benefit my career than I could

expect to get from serving lattes or waiting tables. I wanted to use this unique time in my life to continue building upon skills I had developed as an undergraduate and to give me an advantage when I applied for medical and graduate schools. Honestly, I also wanted a job with relatively few responsibilities outside the traditional work day so I could have the opportunity to start a band, travel, and do other the things I did not have enough time for in college. In order to make the most out of my work experience, I decided I needed a job where I could get valuable research experience and chances to publish, but still maintain a relatively benign work schedule.

Lab Technician vs. Postbaccalaureate IRTA

General Differences

Two positions I considered early on met these needs: working as a lab technician at a research university or spending a year as a Postbaccalaureate Intramural Research Training Award (IRTA) fellow at the National Institutes of Health in Bethesda, MD. I decided to try a year at the NIH, and the following year, I got a job as a lab technician at the University of Virginia. I have witnessed some positive and negative aspects in both positions, and I hope that my experiences can help other graduating science majors choosing between being a lab technician job or being a Postbaccalaureate IRTA fellows make a well-informed decision.

How is being a Postbaccalaureate IRTA fellow at NIH different than a lab technician at an academic research lab? A general description of the Postbaccalaureate IRTA program can be found at <http://www.training.nih.gov/student/index.asp>. Information about other IRTA fellowships such as Technical, Predoctoral, and Interim IRTAs can also be found there. Briefly, Interim and Predoctoral IRTA fellowships are for students already enrolled in graduate or medical school. Technical IRTA fellowships are designed to give individuals with bachelor's or master's degrees who are interested in being career lab technicians specialized training in cutting edge lab techniques, and the period of the fellowship is longer than that for a Postbaccalaureate IRTA. These distinct fellowship programs are collectively referred to as PreIRTA fellowships, but for the sake of convenience, I will refer to the Postbaccalaureate IRTA fellowship as the Postbac IRTA program and Postbaccalaureate IRTA fellows as simply Postbacs or IRTAs hereafter.

The Postbac IRTA program is designed for recent college graduates planning on applying to medical school or graduate school in the next one to two years who want to get some research experience (and possibly a publication). The NIH regards its IRTAs as students, which means several things. First, you get numerous educational opportunities that a normal lab tech would not get. There are many lecture series, workshops, seminars, etc., run by the PreIRTA committee that are designed with IRTAs in mind. Information about the PreIRTA Committee, as well as the current schedule of events can be found at <http://preirta.nih.gov/>.

There are also regular NIH lectures, probably about 15 per day on every health-related topic you can imagine. Postbacs are encouraged to go to lectures and seminars and basically soak up what the NIH has to offer in this regard. They are also encouraged to take advantage of educational activities that are not directly related to their work in the lab, but that will help them in their long-term careers. Some Principle Investigators (PIs) allow Postbacs time off to study for the MCAT, GRE, or send them to special training retreats or courses.

Second, Postbacs are also encouraged to work on a project of their own with guidance from a PI, a staff scientist, or postdoc. IRTAs are encouraged to be somewhat independent, and not just do someone else's lab drudgery like you would in many lab tech positions. Furthermore, IRTA fellows should get to travel at least once to present their research at a scientific conference. Although the exact policy varies from institute to institute, Postbacs traveling to present work on behalf of their labs at NIH are generally eligible to receive a travel award paid for by the lab or by the Postbac's specific institute.

Third, the IRTA program is designed to foster networking connections that will be useful later in your career. Meeting visiting lecturers after seminars is a good way to get in touch with people who do research in your field of interest, and those connections may help you choose which graduate schools to apply to and may help get you get accepted if the researcher is interested in having you work in their lab. PIs will also be able to introduce you to many of the preeminent scientists in your field over refreshments after lectures. Also, one of the great benefits to being a Postbac IRTA is that you can meet and hang out with many other students like yourself who will be your future colleagues in research or medicine. There is even an IRTA social organization called Club PCR that exists to help IRTAs meet each other and plan group activities. For me, meeting other IRTAs and building friendships was the best part about my experience at NIH. Whether it was rubbing elbows at the regularly scheduled Club PCR happy hours after work or using the email listserv to link up with people interested in checking out concerts or going on art museum crawls, Club PCR made it really easy to find people with common interests.

As a lab technician you are an employee, not a student. That can have benefits and drawbacks as well. Some lab technicians are encouraged to take on an individual project, publish research, and attend seminars, but especially in a large lab, lab techs also have a lot of other responsibilities that include helping graduate students, post docs, and professors with their projects, making stock solutions, ordering, stocking, and autoclaving supplies for the lab, as well as cleaning and organizing glassware, bench tops, cabinets etc. Such responsibilities are critical to the lab's ability to function, but they may leave little time to work on your own research projects. A lab tech's responsibility for general lab maintenance also gives far less independence and flexibility to plan his or her own schedule than a Postbac IRTA would normally enjoy. Most departments will have regular seminars and lectures that lab techs can attend, but lab technicians generally do

not have the same freedom or encouragement to take advantage of these lectures as a Postbac IRTA at the NIH would. It has also been my experience that lab techs are far less likely to be informed about events that are not within the department they work for or directly related to the lab's research.

Another drawback to being a lab tech is that it is more difficult to meet people, especially if you are new to a city and do not know anyone. There is no organization in place to help make it easier to form social connections. As a lab tech you may be able to meet graduate students and other lab techs through work, but other than departmental holiday parties and tagging along to the occasional graduate school recruiting dinners, there are no social programs designed specifically for lab techs like those available for NIH Postbac IRTAs.

Length of Commitment

Because lab techs are often hired to perform specific duties that may take a long time to master, you will typically need to commit to at least two years in a lab tech position so lab supervisors can feel like they made a return on their investment in training you. The Postbac IRTA program, on the other hand, is usually a one year program, but it can be renewed for an extra year if the PI feels like there is still work that needs to be done on the IRTA's project. Depending on whether you are looking to make a one or two-year commitment, you may decide to take a lab tech position or Postbac IRTA fellowship based on your availability.

Employee Benefits

There are benefits of being an employee versus being a student. As a lab tech, it is generally assumed that because you are an employee, not a student, you can keep more regular nine-to-five hours than a normal graduate student. Although some extra hours in any lab are expected, extensive overtime work should be compensated by either extra pay or extra leave. Also, if you work for a state university, you should be able to take full advantage of state employee benefits that may include health insurance, dental insurance, life insurance, retirement plans with matched contributions, regular pay raises, and a variety of other options (Note: The benefits enjoyed by lab technicians vary from state to state and university to university so make sure to check before accepting any prospective job). In addition, as university employees, many lab techs will be entitled to free courses through the their respective universities, but many courses may not be offered at night, and lab techs may find it difficult to negotiate taking a lot of time off work to take classes, especially if the subject is not one directly related to the laboratory's research.

Postbac IRTAs do get free health insurance, but dental is not included, and there are no retirement or social security benefits. If you are interested in taking college courses, Postbacs are allowed to take free night classes through the Foundation for Advanced Education in the Sciences (FAES; <http://www.faes.org/>). These course topics range from Neuroimmunology to Italian to the

History of Medicine, and many can be taken for college credit. Some universities may not accept the credits from the FAES so be sure to check with any schools where you plan on applying if you are want to use these classes as prerequisites for admission.

Salary and Taxes

The single biggest (or should I say smallest) drawback to being a Postbac IRTA is the pay. The current stipend is \$20,500 a year. In contrast, if you have some research experience, you can expect to make at least \$23,000 to \$25,000 as a lab technician, and if you have a lot of experience, it may be several thousand dollars higher. In addition, the cost of living around most universities is much lower than the cost of living in or around Washington, DC. Unless you're an extremely frugal person, the Postbac IRTA stipend is not a lot of money to live on in one of Washington's wealthiest suburbs. It is possible to live in or near Bethesda on an IRTA stipend without financial support from your family and still go out and have a good time. Nevertheless, if you have grandiose visions of saving money from your IRTA stipend, don't kid yourself. Because of Washington's wonderful Metro rail system, you don't need a car, but if you do have one, you'll probably need some monetary help from time to time for insurance, payments, break-downs, etc.

Another pitfall related to pay that most Postbac IRTAs fall into is taxes. Because you are considered a student and your paycheck is considered a stipend, no taxes will be taken out of your paycheck, but you still have to pay taxes. In contrast, lab techs will usually have taxes taken out of their paychecks every month. Postbac IRTAs have to file what are called Estimated Taxes every quarter, which means you have to estimate your income for the upcoming year, calculate the amount of taxes you will owe to state and federal governments based on that estimate, and send a portion of that estimate off every three months, otherwise you can get penalized for not paying taxes throughout the year. Because Postbac IRTAs make so little money, it is very easy not to pay estimated taxes and to spend all of one's paycheck every month, leaving no money left over to pay taxes. If you do that, when April 15th comes around, you will be in big trouble. You can live on a Postbac IRTA stipend and still enjoy life, just plan your expenses very carefully and save up for taxes.

Location

Another important point to consider when deciding between a lab tech job and a Postbac IRTA fellowship is the location. If you are interested in lab tech positions at academic research centers, then there are hundreds of universities across the country each with its own unique mission, research emphasis, student body, local history, and geography. It is certainly beyond the scope of this article to describe the flavor of every major university, but keep in mind the specific locations and character of any institution for which you are considering working because the character of the institution and its population will probably be as important for your overall happiness over

the next couple of years as the job you finally decide to accept.

The NIH Itself

The main NIH campus is located in Bethesda, MD, which is just Northwest of Washington, DC. The Postbac IRTA fellowship is also available in locations including Baltimore and Frederick, MD, Research Triangle Park, NC, Phoenix, AZ, and Hamilton, MT. (Because my experience deals only with the main NIH campus in Bethesda I cannot evaluate the quality of the Postbac IRTA experience at these locations.) There are many advantages to living and working in Bethesda. First, there is the NIH itself. I have described it to many of my friends and relatives as Disneyland for scientists. The NIH is made up of 27 institutes and centers coordinated by the Office of the Director. The NIH has in excess of 75 buildings on more than 300 acres of land at its main campus in Bethesda. The total NIH budget appropriated for 2003 was nearly \$27.4 billion.

As I mentioned previously, there are a multitude of lectures, seminars, and workshops every day on topics varying from patients' rights to the mating patterns of fruit flies. The NIH also sponsors the PreIRTA Committee made up of Postbaccalaureate IRTAs and IRTAs from other fellowship programs that represent each institute, and the PreIRTA Committee's function is to provide programming that appeals to young up and coming researchers like you. The PreIRTA Committee holds several events every month including the Lecture series (where a prominent NIH investigator will give a talk on their field geared toward non-specialists), seminar series (where two PreIRTAs get to present their work every month), and career, medical school, graduate school workshops. One workshop I particularly remember was a panel on scientific careers put on by the PreIRTA Committee that featured a Scientific Director of the National Human Genome Research Institute, a Nobel Laureate, and an Assistant Director of Intramural Research for the NIH. It was a bit surreal to watch the members of the upper echelon of worldwide scientific research giving career advice to a bunch of people who hadn't even started graduate or medical school. It just goes to show how seriously the NIH takes its role in educating tomorrow's scientists. I attended another workshop in which graduate and medical school admissions directors discussed what they look for in applicants during interviews. While these opportunities may not be unique to the NIH, their variety and abundance certainly are significant advantages.

Another great feature of the NIH is its multicultural diversity. One might be tempted to think that given America's troubles abroad that a place called the National Institutes of Health would try to circle the wagons and primarily promote domestic concerns over international collaborations or multicultural diversity; in fact the opposite is true. The NIH draws top scientists from around the world, and the population of scientists, staff, and students at NIH is so diverse that it can be bewildering if you are not prepared for it. At NIH, you almost certainly work side-by-side with people from other countries and cultures.

Depending on where you choose to live, you may also get to experience this diversity at home. When I was at NIH, I lived in one of NIH's many group houses, which are houses in and around Bethesda that have several bedrooms that are traditionally rented out to young scientists at NIH on a per room basis for terms of a month or more. In the 10 months I lived in that four bedroom house, I had roommates from five countries other than the US. One of the great advantages to living situations like that is that you can learn a great deal about other cultures from around the world if you pay attention.

Washington, DC

There are definitely some pros and cons to living near a big city like DC. Washington can be a very interesting city, especially if you have never spent much time there before. Like NIH, DC is itself is very diverse. I'm not much of a city guy, but I really enjoyed the cultural diversity in DC. Just walking into a grocery store, you can find ethnic foods that you can't get in other parts of the country. Bethesda has a vast array of restaurants serving a plethora of ethnic cuisines, and with just a short Metro ride into in DC, there are even more options for exploration. For nightlife, there are several areas each with their own flavor. Capital Hill, Adams Morgan, DuPont, Georgetown in DC have a vast array of dance clubs, funky blues bars, trendy lounges, college scenes, art galleries, hip cafés, jazz clubs, dive pubs, and nearly anything else you could want. In the summer, there are free concerts and festivals. The Smithsonian museums and art galleries, the National Zoo, various city parks, and monuments in DC are all free and readily accessible from Bethesda by Metro. Bethesda is so close to the city that it feels more like a part of DC than a separate place, and the Redline Metro goes from the NIH campus into downtown Bethesda, then on to Adams Morgan and DuPont Circle, therefore further diminishing the barriers between the lifestyle in Bethesda and within the District.

Most of the problems associated with living in the DC area are problems that you would encounter in any big city. Bethesda is pretty safe, but depending on where you live or like to hang out, crime can be a concern in the District. The traffic around DC is awful, especially if you have to commute on the Beltway. Many people who work at the NIH and live in Northern Virginia prefer to ride the metro, but the metro from Alexandria to Bethesda can still take an hour. The NIH provides carpooling programs and money to commuters who surrender their parking passes through a program called Transhare. It can save you over a hundred dollars a month if you ride the Metro every day. If you insist on driving to work, the NIH does provide free parking, but as with any major city, parking anywhere else in Bethesda or Washington is either very difficult to come by, very expensive, or both. Another problem with DC is that there is a significant amount of air pollution. In the hot, dry summer months, it is not uncommon for the air quality to be so bad that the government issues advisories against being outside.

Housing

The cost of living in DC is very high compared to living in most university towns. Gas, groceries, bars, dining out, and especially rent are inflated. Affordable apartments, especially in Bethesda, can be very difficult to find. There are some cheaper places to live in the Northern Virginia area, but it is a long commute. The most affordable way to live in Bethesda is to live in a group house. It can be a very rewarding experience, but it can be very difficult to find a place to live unless you know where to look. If you want to live in Bethesda, the best way to find a place to live is either search out fliers on Bulletin boards near the NIH cafeterias or to get on the Club PCR email listserv. Club PCR regularly has emails from people looking to fill vacancies in group houses or apartments. You do not have to be at the NIH to be signed up for the Club PCR listserv, and you should sign up before you arrive so you can use it to find a place to live and get acquainted with some of the social options available. Directions for how to subscribe to the Club PCR email listserv can be found under "Valuable Resources" at the PreIRTA Committee website (<http://preirta.nih.gov/>). I found trying to use the internet, local papers, and the NIH housing site frustrating and not very productive. The only drawbacks to living in a group house are that you will be living with a group of strangers (at least until you get to know them), and roommate conflicts may be difficult to resolve if the two roommates do not share the same primary language or values.

How to Find a Job

If you are interested in applying for a Postbac IRTA position, you should fill out the online application found at http://www.training.nih.gov/onlineApps/afpi/application/AFP_IApp.asp?appType=P. The application will ask you about course work, field of interest, ask for recommendations, and ask you to write a cover letter, which is a brief description of why you want to work at NIH, what your long-term goals are, and what field you are interested in studying.

Once you send in your completed application, it goes into an applicant pool. PIs looking to hire a Postbac IRTA review applicants from this pool and select individuals to contact about setting up a phone or in person interview. Each PI uses his or her own criteria for selecting applicants, but some general things they tend to look for are some research experience, interest in their lab's area of research, strength of recommendations, grades, etc., and features in your cover letter which indicate you might be a good match for the lab.

While the process of applying for a Postbac IRTA fellowship is fairly streamlined, the best way to find a lab technician job is a topic that deserves an article of its own. There are numerous online resources available. David Sander has put together a good list of online scientific job resources in the following article: <http://www.virology.net/Articles/jobs.html>. Many of your undergraduate professors may be able to use their connections with PIs at other institutions to find out if their colleagues have any positions available. If you know a

university where you want to work, a good place to start is that university's human resources website. I found my current job at the University by submitting an online application for lab technician jobs to human resources, and much like the NIH, PIs looking for employees could view my application and contact me.

Choosing a lab

Whether you decide to become a Postbac IRTA or a lab tech, one thing that will make a huge difference in how much you enjoy yourself is the quality of the work environment in your lab. Regardless of whether you are a lab tech or a Postbac IRTA, you should not have to be in the lab 12 hours a day and be too busy to take advantage of the things going on around you, and your supervisor should respect the fact that you have interests and goals that extend beyond work. Both Postbac IRTAs and lab techs run the risk of working for someone who expects unreasonable work hours, has unrealistic demands for productivity, or tries to exert too much control over lab members' personal lives.

Remember that finding a job is like a dance. The person holding the interviews is going to be the lead, but as the other partner, you can see that there are other partners available, and you can decide whether to continue dancing with the same partner or sit the next one out. Like a dance, there are steps you should go through when looking for a job that can maximize your enjoyment of the years you spend between your undergraduate and graduate school years.

First, if you already know someone at a university or the NIH with whom you would like to work, then you can usually work something out to make sure you get hired by that person. If you find yourself in a position to choose between several prospective employers, you should start by asking what projects they have in mind for you and compare those projects to your scientific interests. Nevertheless, keep in mind that an interesting and involved PI will be able to make a project engaging for you even if you haven't worked in that field before, so don't be afraid to try working in an area that was nothing like your undergraduate thesis topic if you think there's a chance it could be interesting and productive. Also, find out if previous lab techs or Postbac IRTAs had the opportunity to publish. If you decide to become a Postbac IRTA, and your goal is to be published, you should definitely try to get into a productive lab because a year may sound like a lot of time, but in research it isn't. It is easy to spend a year just getting trained and trying to get a difficult experiment to work, without actually producing any publishable results.

Although there are exceptions, if you have an inquisitive mind and the drive to publish, you should not have a problem finding labs in which you get publications and work on a research question that interests you. When you have narrowed down potential positions based on work you could see yourself enjoying, then the real work of choosing a lab begins. Every lab is different. Some are wonderful, others are stressful, and some are too lackadaisical. The NIH is no different from universities in this regard. Some people thrive on stress; others are

miserable under pressure. You need to figure out which type of person you are, then try to find a lab that has a balance between work and fun that mirrors your own. The trick is to find a lab that fits who you are, and not to try to think about labs in terms of "good" or "bad." A person whose sole purpose in working before school is to get several publications for their CV will get just as frustrated in a lab where nothing happens as a person who only wants a 9-to-5 job they can leave at the door but ends up working for a slave-driver. The best way to avoid a negative employment situation is by not getting into one. You don't have to be clairvoyant to choose the right lab; you can do several things to figure out if a lab is a good fit before you join.

One of the major problems with the Postbac IRTA program is that a lot of people get stuck with supervisors who do not understand the point of the program. The program is meant to be a learning experience, and you should have a project that you have some control over. You should be encouraged to travel, take courses, attend lectures, and go to workshops in areas that interest you and will help you advance in your career. Unfortunately, not every PI at the NIH understands what separates a Postbac IRTA fellowship from a normal lab tech position.

When talking to your prospective employer over the phone, try to get a sense if they're too intense or too relaxed for your taste. If they are, you may want to shop around for another position. If you want to be a Postbac IRTA, ask a potential PI about what they think the Postbac IRTA program is about, i.e. will you get to travel, present your work, go to lectures, etc.? If they do not know, or give answers that you disagree with, then you may want to look elsewhere. It is important to make a list of questions before you get on the phone so you don't forget to ask about anything important. A sample list is given in the "How to Apply" section on the PreIRTA Committee website (<http://preirta.nih.gov>).

Perhaps the most important and most often overlooked component during the interview process is speaking with other Postbacs, lab techs, and graduate students in the lab when you go for your interview. If they're stressed out, unhappy, etc. you should find out why. They may not give you a straight answer right away, but if you ask probing questions like what they like least about the lab they're in or what's the biggest challenge of working in the lab, not "How do like the lab?," then you should be able to get the information you need. Keep in mind that a lot of lab techs and Postbac IRTAs will have different interests and goals than you. Some will be happy working 12 hours a day and never having time to go out and see the city or its night life. Others will only be happy if they can lounge around and check ESPN.com all day. Ask them what they do with their spare time outside of work, and if their PI discourages outside interests that are not related to the lab. If there are no lab techs or Postbacs currently in the lab, try to get the contact information for people who have left.

Another important factor you should figure out is if you will actually work with your PI directly or if you will be supervised by a postdoc or staff scientist. This often

happens at the NIH, but can also happen just as frequently in a university lab tech position. If someone other than your PI is going to be working closely with you, it's not necessarily bad, but you really need to spend time getting to know that person and find out if they're too stressed, unstable, too demanding, etc. Postdoc positions are usually temporary positions for people who have just finished their Ph.D.s so that they can make a name for themselves while working in the lab of an established investigator before they try to strike out on their own and start up their own lab. Postdocs may be under a lot of pressure to get published in top tier journals in the short time they are there in the lab so that they can get a prestigious faculty appointment. Many Postbac IRTAs really enjoy working under a postdoc because postdocs typically spend a lot more time in the lab than the PI and have a more direct connection to a specific research project. Their intensity and drive can be inspiring, but nevertheless, keep in mind that many postdocs are supervising someone for the first time and may not know how to be a good boss yet. They may not understand the goals of the Postbac IRTA program or be able to reconcile your personal career goals and outside interests with their professional goals. A lot of Postbac IRTAs I knew were supervised by postdocs who were under a lot of pressure, and they treated the Postbac like they were just a pair of hands or had not learned how to keep from taking their stress out on their subordinates.

Ideally you should find a lab in which your personal life and work habits do not clash with the general atmosphere of the lab. Keep in mind that as individuals move up the career ladder in science, they have to adapt to new responsibilities and pressures. Some PIs have a difficult time getting used to spending more time on grants and writing than at the bench, and some postdocs have a difficult time making the transition from being students to being mentors. Your supervisors also have their own career goals that may conflict with your own or may benefit you both. If you want a low-key job that gives you a couple of years to relax before medical school, you should be careful about joining a lab in which the PI is trying to publish as much as possible in order to secure tenure. On the other hand, if you want to get as many publication credits as possible, the same lab could be ideal. With a little circumspection and direct questions, you should be able to find a lab that is a good match for you.

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