

# Early Career Psychologist Column

## Perspectives from ECPs Entering a Nontraditional Job Market: Exploring Alternative Paths and Career Readiness During the COVID-19 Era

Jessie Greenlee, PhD, Emily Hickey, Allison Jobin, & Catie Sanner, PhD

Given the recent impact of COVID-19 on the career trajectory of ECPs, we gathered perspectives and input from current ECPs who were navigating the current job market or transitioning to new academic, clinical, and research positions during this time. While these perspectives do not encapsulate the experiences of every ECP in the field of IDD/ASD, these perspectives include experiences ranging from tenure-track positions, post-doc trainees, and research scientists. In addition to their specific roles and responsibilities, each have shared their insights on what the pandemic has meant to them and what implications it has had for their careers, research, personal life, and aspirations moving forward. While each Division 33 ECP member interviewed in this piece is incredible in their own right, these professionals also enjoy mentoring students and trainees in both clinical and research aspects, as well as conducting community-partnered research and engaging in collaborative and interdisciplinary research. We hope these experiences will normalize barriers many ECPs are facing during this time.



Dr. Jessie Greenlee is in her second year as an NIH-funded T32 Postdoctoral Fellow in the Waisman Center's Training Program on Biobehavioral Research on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (IDD) at the University of Wisconsin-

Madison. Her research examines inter and intrapersonal determinants of the socioemotional development and mental health in children with IDD with a particular focus on children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD).

Dr. Emily Hickey is an Assistant Research Scientist at UW-Madison Waisman Center - University Center for



Excellence in Developmental Disabilities (UCEDD), Madison, WI. Her main duties under this role include collaborating with other university and academic staff on research, evaluation, and dissemination projects.



Dr. Allison Jobin is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Psychology at California State University, San Marcos. She is also an investigator at the Child and Adolescent Services Research Center, as well as a licensed

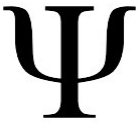
psychologist and board-certified behavior analyst. Dr. Jobin's research focuses on treatment for children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and their families and the effective delivery of evidence-based practices in community settings.

Dr. Catie Sanner is a Postdoctoral Fellow under the supervision of Dr. Cameron Neece in the Loma Linda University Psychology Department, Loma Linda CA. Her role includes the supervision of students in clinical aspects of two NIH funded randomized controlled trials targeting parenting stress in parents of young children with developmental disabilities.



**Q1: What were the most salient factors that influenced your decision to choose your current position and what do you like about it? What are some challenges you are currently facing in your position during this time?**

Dr. Hickey: A major factor in choosing my current position was to have protected time to build my independent research career, while also becoming involved in larger research, evaluation, and dissemination efforts within the center. One challenge I am facing in my current research-focused position is how to feel fully oriented to and engaged in ongoing research and evaluation efforts, while also balancing my own independent line of



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research. Because I have been fully remote since I began three months ago, I have found it difficult to find my role on the team and to understand the nuances of the expectations. It's easy to feel confused about what's expected and if I'm doing enough. One thing I am very appreciative of is the patience and support of my colleagues. I am also learning how to manage my time and my own expectations of what I can accomplish and when.

Dr. Sanner: One thing that has been really challenging in my current position as a post-doc is to know how to balance and prioritize opportunities and experiences. As a graduate student, varied opportunities and experiences were important while building a diverse and competitive CV, and I often said yes to too much. However, as a post-doc it has been critical to consider and weigh opportunities more heavily that directly align and will move me towards career goals and make me more competitive for funding opportunities and specific jobs. It has often been difficult to balance ongoing research and teaching opportunities, while trying to find time to work towards developing my own independent line of research. Open and ongoing discussions and support with research mentors and other faculty has been extremely helpful in weighing options and hearing about what training experiences were most beneficial when they were in the early stages of developing their own lines of research, and considering various job opportunities.

**Q2: The academic job market is stressful in the best of times. Due to hiring freezes, many tenure-track lines were no longer advertised or available. How did you adapt your goals and career aspirations in a time of crisis? What other options did you explore?**

Dr. Hickey: I adapted my search criteria to include non-tenure track and non-academic positions. In the end, I feel like the assistant research scientist position was actually a better choice for me personally, as it allows

me to focus on my passion for research, disseminating at conferences and in peer reviewed journals, and collaborating on other projects. It was also a nice step following a post-doc position, as I have time to finish manuscripts and other projects while transitioning and developing my own independent line of research. Like other research scientist and research professor positions, because I am still within academia, I also feel like my options remain open should I ever consider a tenure-track position in the future.

Dr. Greenlee: Preparing for the job market this year has been challenging. I have expanded my search to include departments I might not have otherwise considered while also trying to put together options for staying another year at my current institution, albeit in a different position. A byproduct of the limited academic job market has been an increase in conversations around options other than tenure-track jobs and I think that is really useful for students and ECPs. Flexibility has been the key so far - I am trying to keep as many avenues as possible open in hopes that one works out.

**If you did get a tenure track position during this time, how is the position different from what you expected? What have been some barriers or new realities during this transition?**

Dr. Jobin: I obtained my current position just months before the pandemic impacted us all. I began the position in an almost entirely virtual context, which is expected for the remainder of the academic year. This was certainly unexpected! It has been disappointing to not meet my students and colleagues in person, to experience the life and energy of the college campus, and to benefit from those informal hallway connections and conversations. It's also daunting to launch my research lab in an entirely remote world. However, I have been impressed with the support from my new colleagues and the institution, and the opportunities for training

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through virtual means. My institution offered new faculty training in the Summer to prepare for the adjusted semester, as well as many other ongoing training opportunities. Students have shown resilience and grit, and I do feel I've gotten to know them--even online.

**Q3: The early stages of any career post-graduate school can be difficult. In general, how has the pandemic impacted your research, clinical work, or career, particularly in the area of developmental disabilities? What have been some drawbacks or silver linings during this time?**

Dr. Sanner: As a post-doc, one area of my training that has been significantly impacted by the pandemic has been the more clinical aspects of my training. One goal I had for this year was to obtain research reliability in the ADOS-2. Given that the ADOS-2 cannot be administered reliably with a mask, these trainings and experiences were put on hold indefinitely. I was able to supplement my training in ASD diagnostic measures by attending a virtual clinical training in the ADI-R, as well as finding virtual seminars and trainings focused on ASD research and assessments during a pandemic. Many of these trainings would not have been feasible for me to attend if they had not been virtual, which has been a silver lining. Fewer clinical hours has also afforded me more time to focus on manuscripts and developing my own independent line of research. It's been really important to be flexible and open-minded during this time with an understanding that everyone is trying to adapt given the current pandemic.

Dr. Hickey: Conferences being virtual have also made it difficult to make connections, foster new collaborations, even catch up with old colleagues to support each other in our new roles/jobs as ECPs.

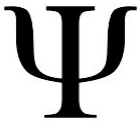
Dr. Greenlee: A silver lining in all this has been the opportunities that have come up via virtual events, training, webinars, etc. that I

would not have attended in person due to time or resource constraints. There are a lot of things I miss about in person conferences but some doors have opened with the advent of all virtual spaces, particularly around professional development.

Dr. Jobin: I am definitely having to adjust my expectations around new research projects and student involvement. Starting a new position in a virtual world has also made it more challenging to feel integrated into a new Department and institution, although I recognize growth in my ability to connect with others through alternative avenues--certainly an important professional skill. As we are all experiencing these uncertainties in one way or another, this has led to common ground with my new colleagues and students.

**Q4: Thinking about the different types of support that are beneficial to each of us, what type of support mattered to you most during this time? What words of wisdom would you share to other ECPs currently navigating the job market or those who are uncertain of job options after graduate school?**

Dr. Hickey: The best piece of advice I can give, and what ultimately led me to my current position, is to spread the word that you are on the job market. Tell everyone; meet up (zoom) with previous and current mentors and colleagues and ask them to spread the word that you're looking for a position, too. Talk to as many people as you can to get insight about what jobs are out there and how you might best prepare yourself to apply to them. That way, when a position does come up, they will be more likely to reach out to you and you'll know whether it is worth putting the time in to apply. Alternatively, if you find an organization that's a perfect fit and they are in a position to hire, it is possible that they might work with you and get creative about crafting a position that is tailored to your experience, expertise, and goals. Additionally, if you're adapting and/or broadening your search criteria to include non-tenure track and non-



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academic positions, many conferences offer workshops and/or panels on job searching of this kind. I would highly recommend attending them, and making connections with any presenters who seem to be in positions that might interest you. Setting up a one-on-one zoom call with them to learn more could be very beneficial, and who knows - they might have other job openings within their organization.

Dr. Greenlee: The best piece of advice I've received is to be flexible but don't try to force yourself into a position that doesn't meet your goals. It is easy to feel overwhelmed by this process and there are times when any option seems like the best option. Keeping the lines of communication open with trusted mentors and advisors is also important - sometimes they can see through the clouds when we are in the middle of the storm. I've also found a network of other ECPs that has been a great source of support and information. We have a writing group once a week and it is a mix of writing and talking about job searches, applications, and troubleshooting new situations.

Dr. Sanner: One piece of advice that I've received is that your first job does not have to be your "dream job" or your job for forever. While it is important that a position aligns with your goals, having a more open mind and some flexibility takes a little bit of pressure off these stressful decisions especially during this time of uncertainty and hiring freezes.

Dr. Jobin: For anyone finding themselves in the position of navigating a new position in these uncertain times, I would recommend reaching out proactively to introduce yourself to those you will be working with, as this will not happen as organically as it would in person. Ask questions of your colleagues, even though it feels you have to be more purposeful when you can't stop by someone's office. Keep in mind, this is a new context for everyone, including for those who are tasked with orienting and supporting you. Leaning on my existing network of peers has been a

necessity, in addition to establishing a support network of other new faculty at my new position. This has been critical for real life and professional advice, but also solidarity, levity, and release.

**Q6: What recommendations would you give to someone exploring career opportunities or positions (e.g., academic, research, clinical) during this time? What resources would you recommend for those who do not know where to start or have struggled with the disruptions on their path to getting that "dream" job?**

Dr. Hickey: It was very helpful to hear from a variety of professionals about their own career trajectories - none of which were completely smooth. There are a lot of paths to get to your "dream" job - and you might learn along the way that there are other options that work even better for you. Considering the current uncertainty, I would encourage flexibility and open-mindedness.

Dr. Greenlee: Professional societies and groups also have online events for students and early career folks about different career options and I would encourage folks to look at groups you may not be affiliated with. I'm finding people are very willing to talk and answer questions.

Dr. Jobin: I would encourage flexibility and openness to unexpected opportunities. You never know what your next decision might lead to down the road. At this last hinge point, a mentor of mine reminded me, "There is no one last great opportunity. You are just making the next choice." Ask your colleagues and mentors about the career landscape in their settings, to learn from the source about the barriers and opportunities.

**Q7: What have been some rewarding experiences or memories that you will take from your current experience as an ECP?**

Dr. Greenlee: I think working through a pandemic as an ECP has made me appreciate



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what I *do* instead of what I could be (or think I should be) doing. There is a perception in academia that you have to do all the things all at once to be successful and I buy into that a lot less these days. I also think that it's a really exciting time to be an ECP in IDD and ASD research - there can be a steep learning curve when moving into a new position (particularly right now!) but it's also an exciting time to explore new ideas, meet new people and begin to develop your own program of research.

Dr. Jobin: Living through a pandemic has required me to rely on my family and personal and professional support networks, and to be more purposeful with my own self-care. I am

grateful for my fellow ECPs and senior mentors, who have saved me through a series of quick emails or text threads--either with light diversions or much needed guidance or advice. Given my increasingly thinned bandwidth, the pandemic has tightened the alignment of my day-to-day work with my core values. I try to channel this when new opportunities arise. It has also been poignant to experience "work" with my young daughter by my side. We get to see a bit of each others' lives we wouldn't have otherwise experienced. Although challenging for parents and children, I hope this time will also inspire young minds.

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