In July 2016, TRB piloted a workshop in an unusual location—a transatlantic cruise on the Queen Mary 2. The Chan Wui & Yunyin Rising Star Workshop convened an accomplished group of academics to explore research at the nexus of mobility and communications and to discuss best professional practices.

The workshop offered two tracks. Junior fellows, or Rising Stars, comprised the majority of the participants. The Rising Stars were early-career academics working in transportation fields, each with one to three years of postdoctoral experience. The second track was for senior fellows—senior transportation academics with at least 30 years of academic experience.

Applications for junior and senior fellows came from around the world. An anonymous sponsor underwrote all expenses for the workshop and for each fellow’s travel. The five junior fellows and two senior fellows came from four countries and two continents: Candace Brakewood, City College of New York; Yupo Chan, University of Arkansas at Little Rock; Greg Erhardt, University College London; Ke Han, Imperial College London; Eric Miller, University of Toronto; Rolf Moeckel, Technical University of Munich; and Rajesh Paleti, Old Dominion University.

Launching the Workshop

The anonymous sponsor of the Rising Star Workshop approached TRB in 2013 and provided funding and general guidance; TRB staff developed a plan to accomplish the sponsor’s vision. Workshop announcements were distributed widely, starting in summer 2015, with the deadline for applications in late fall 2015.

TRB staff and a group of volunteer advisers reviewed the applications and chose seven outstanding candidates in early 2016. That spring, the seven fellows participated in regular planning sessions with TRB staff to ensure fruitful discussions onboard.

The workshop took place July 6–13, 2016, during a transatlantic crossing on the Queen Mary 2 of the Cunard Cruise Line. The ship sailed from Brooklyn, New York, to Southampton, United Kingdom, without intermediate stops, providing time for in-depth technical and career discussions, a sheltered environment that encouraged a focus on the workshop goals, and an informal atmosphere that facilitated networking.

Although the research discussions focused on telecommunications, the ship itself had no cellphone service and limited Internet—participants disconnected temporarily from their regular responsibilities to focus on the workshop. Immersion in a workshop is a rare experience today—as Eric Miller commented, “Being locked up is good.”

The setting also allowed participants to take advantage of the many opportunities available onboard a luxury cruise ship. By the end of the week, the fellows had established relationships, both socially and professionally, that will continue long beyond the one-week voyage.

Workshop Goals

The Rising Star Workshop had two distinct goals. First was to host a series of in-depth discussions among the junior and senior fellows about critical research questions stemming from changes in transportation and telecommunications. Participants framed the policy issues, identified emerging research, assessed the quantitative relationships to be explored, discussed applicable data, and proposed new analytical techniques. Both junior and senior fellows presented their research ideas to the group and discussed potential avenues for solo work and research partnerships.

The workshop’s second goal was for the senior fellows to provide advice and guidance to the junior fellows on the skills essential for success in academic careers. The career development discussions covered such topics as identifying emerging professional issues, developing contacts and peer networks, refining personal and communications skills in the workplace and in the classroom, and promoting and obtaining research support.

Contemporary career building requires skills that extend beyond an individual’s technical expertise. Some young professionals may find mentors who invest the time to discuss not only technical issues but career paths and planning. Many other young professionals, however, struggle to find trusted advisers, and the lack of timely advice may limit their academic careers.
Workshop Results

Junior fellows learned how to formulate a plan to guide their future research and career activities and gained a deeper understanding of the factors for career success, both in the classroom and in the research arena. The group discussions included time management strategies, both for their own research and for working with students. Senior fellows provided advice on changing institutions, handling problem students, teaching virtually, presenting at conferences, and choosing journals for paper submissions based on the paper topic and audience.

The senior fellows built strong connections with a talented group of young academics and potential research collaborators. Through their interactions with the five junior fellows, the two senior fellows gained new understandings of the challenges that young academics face and insights for mentoring younger colleagues to respond effectively to these challenges.

Both sets of fellows strengthened their understandings of the history of mobility and communications. They also gained a stronger sense of the future directions of research in this area and strong connections to a new-found peer group.

Workshop Follow-Up

As a follow-up to the workshop, each of the seven fellows authored a paper describing his or her own research; the papers underwent rigorous peer review and will be published in the 2017 series of the Transportation Research Record: Journal of the Transportation Research Board. Topics include a synthesis of past research, an assessment of the effects of technological advances on mobility and communications, an exploration of the ways that advances will change research needs and the conduct of research, and a description of future research directions.

The workshop participants enjoyed the chance to interact informally on a luxury cruise with high-achieving peers who face similar issues. Fellows described the workshop as a safe place to explain “half-baked research ideas” and gain “non-judgmental career advice.”

One junior fellow may have summarized the aim of the workshop when he told another: “I’d be keen to see what data you have and how I can help you build off of it.” Collaboration is a desired outcome of all TRB convening activities, and the Chan Wui & Yunyin Rising Star Workshop has piloted a new course to that success.