Trainees Plan BioTech Symposium

The Rocky Mountain BioTechnology Symposium (RMBTS), to be held at AMC on May 12th, is brought to you by graduate students, postdocs, and PRAs invested in expanding our career opportunities as trainees in science research. This event is about discovering the projects and accomplishments of more than 40 local biotech companies (out of the 400 in Colorado). Based on our survey last November, the vast majority of graduate students and postdocs have a very limited knowledge of the biotech world. Only 16% of us know more than 5 local companies. This event should provide the perfect opportunity to change this statistic.

The RMBTS is also about finding out what kinds of jobs exist in biotech companies and learning how our scientific skills and knowledge can be applied to these jobs. Despite our passion for Science, more than 90% of us (Nature, Vol. 511, July 2014) will have to look for a job outside academic labs. In parallel to heartily pursuing our current research projects, it is wise to prepare ourselves for potential careers outside academia.

Many CEOs, R&D directors and project managers who transitioned from Academia to Industry will tell us how they did it and what their current projects are. After giving short presentations organized in sessions on digital health, diagnostics, pharmaceuticals and biotechnologies, they will be available for one-on-one conversations at their company’s booths (posters or tables).

Because 80% of jobs in Industry are found through personal relationships, interacting with these entrepreneurs will give us a tremendous opportunity to radically expand our professional network. The creation of the RMBTS 2015 would not have been possible without the constant support of the PostDoctoral Association, the Graduate Student Council, the BEST Program, the CBSA, the SoPE, and the new group we just created, the Science Industry Alliance (SIA).

Contributed by Etienne Danis, PhD

Book Corner

“Forget a Mentor, Find a Sponsor: The New Way to Fast-Track Your Career” by Sylvia Ann Hewlett

Sponsors differ from mentors. While mentors give you free advice and wish you luck, sponsors actively invest in you so both parties advance their careers. In other words, mentorship is a gift while sponsorship is an alliance.

Given this distinction, how do you find sponsors in the scientific community? Who advocates for your career advancement? According to the author’s definition PIs are sponsors, not mentors. You have already taken the necessary steps to gain their sponsorships: practice open communication, be loyal, and go beyond his/her expectations. But, to benefit from the sponsorship, you have to be able to discuss what you need/want from them (visibility at conferences, connections to influential people, etc). You’ve got to keep your eye on the prize.

The author makes another point worthy of consideration. In the U.S. and Europe, people in power typically invest in members of their own cultural background, resulting in mostly male (and pale) leaders. This so-called “the old boys’ club” is a sponsorship system that has allowed talented young white men to succeed in the business world for many years. So, if you want to succeed and assume leadership roles, you need to be able to recruit sponsors like these regardless of the barriers and in some cases across a different cultural background from your own.

Contributed by Chiharu Graybill, PhD

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Email: sarah.e.clark@ucdenver.edu or chiharu.graybill@ucdenver.edu
Science at the Capitol with the Careers in Science Club

On Monday, March 2nd, several members of the Careers in Science Club ventured outside the lab and into the world of policy. In partnership with Dr. Stephanie James of Regis University, the Careers in Science Club organized the First Annual Lunch and Learn at the State Capitol, during which our elected officials had the opportunity to learn about some of the amazing biological research being conducted at universities around the state.

Contributed by Juliette Petersen

The event provided a forum for top scientists in Colorado to communicate with elected officials about our work, and for our legislators to ask questions about why and how we conduct science. Perhaps most importantly, it was an opportunity for scientists to practice talking to non-scientists, a skill that many of us scientists lack, but one that is increasingly important in a period of decreasing funding.

Dr. Lee Niswander (CU Anschutz) talked about the importance of basic research, highlighting the advances her lab has made in understanding neural tube defects, such as spina bifida, and how these discoveries translate directly to our understanding of human development. Dr. Seth Frietze, from the University of Northern Colorado, did an excellent job explaining how the power of genomics can guide researchers to develop new cancer therapies. Tyler Sherman, a Master of Science candidate from UNC, discussed the importance of using animal models. In light of the recent Ebola outbreak, Dr. Gregory Ebel’s presentation on emerging viruses was extremely topical, and helped reiterate the importance of the biomedical research. Finally, Dr. Stephanie James and Dr. Robert Haight discussed some of the science behind ‘herd immunity,’ which seemed to clarify for several legislators the importance of vaccinations.

Our audience, which included Senators Michael Merrifield (District 11), Andy Kerr (District 22), Nancy Todd (District 28) and Mike Johnston (District 33), as well as several legislative aides, seemed to find the event informative and engaging – a promising sign for increased communication between scientists and policymakers!

Interview: Matthew Pink Ph.D. at Technology Transfer Office

The Technology Transfer Office (TTO) at AMC facilitates the commercialization of intellectual property for the academic community. The services TTO provides are vast: intellectual property administration, marketing and communications, policy development, legal advice, compliance, financial management and more. It is an exciting job. TTO’s staff gets to interact with faculty who are contagiously passionate about their work and witness how cutting-edge research evolves into commercial products.

Dr. Matthew Pink works as a senior licensing manager at the Anschutz TTO. He was initially exposed to a university-based TTO as an undergraduate student at the University of Wisconsin, where the America’s first TTO was founded. “Technology transfer was appealing to me because I really liked the blend of business and science,” said Dr. Pink.

From early on in his scientific career Dr. Pink knew that he didn’t want to be a bench scientist. To expand his business background during graduate school, he took classes related to bio-entrepreneurship and regulatory affairs. He attended patent law and business development seminars whenever possible. He joined the Colorado Biosciences Association (CBAS) and networked with people in the community. He also did a paid internship at the AMC TTO. This is an opportunity available to all CU graduate students, and information about it is typically sent out during the spring term. Dr. Pink’s supplemental career training paid off. He landed his job when a position opened up, and started work three days after his defense.

The AMC TTO is a place where people with strong background in basic research (like us!) could pursue a career in technology transfer. What should you do to get your foot in the TTO door? “Do the internship with us, become a member of CBAS, network with people, and take classes about business to learn about the process of patent.” says Dr. Pink. “Be proactive and take actions to show your passion on your CV.” Are you being proactive about your career training? Perhaps now is a good time to invest in your future.

Contributed by Chiharu Graybill, PhD

Brain Teaser:

During the recent BrainBashers cipher convention, a binary code contest took place. The contest consisted of a binary code transmission where the spaces between the letters were missing and there was no punctuation. Each letter of the alphabet was translated into its binary equivalent based on its position in the alphabet:

a=1, b=10, c=11, d=100, e=101, f=110, g=111, h=1000, i=1010, j=1011, k=1100, m=1101, n=1110, o=1111, p=10000, q=10001, r=10010, s=10011, t=10100, u=10101, v=10110, w=10111, x=11000, y=11001, z=11010.

What is the answer to the question being asked?

Contributed by Chiharu Graybill, PhD
A Cultural Exchange with our International Researchers

University of Colorado Denver has “300 postdoctoral fellows and 40% of them are international postdocs. I have been an international postdoc at AMC for 3 years now. During this time, I have attended and organized several events hosted by the Postdoctoral Association (PDA). There was one thing that caught my attention, and it was that international postdocs were not participating in many of those events. This lack of participation motivated me to conduct a survey for international postdocs to learn about their interests. The survey was launched in October 2014. Usually, getting 10% of the population to respond to a survey is a big deal. Not 10 but 44% of the international postdocs responded to my survey. The results are listed below based on rank:

1. Day visit to a place in CO
2. Social event
3. Networking event
4. Brown bag information session
5. Ski trip
6. English speaking skills
7. Cultural event
8. Social service
9. Social exchange with an American family
10. Coffee and conversation

Most of the international postdocs are on a J-1 visa. This visa is issued to exchange visitors to participate in programs to obtain medical or business training within the US, and it is a federal requirement that these programs promote cultural exchange. Taking this fact into consideration and with the support of PDA, Postdoctoral Office (PDO) and International Student & Scholar Services (ISSS), I kick started the international initiative with the event titled “Essence of India”.

The “Essence of India” event was organized in three weeks with the help of five postdocs from India and several volunteers including faculty, staff and students. The get-together was held on February 6th, 2015 from 3:30pm to 5:00pm in the Trivisible room in RC2 2nd floor. The celebration of Indian culture was free and open to the CU Denver Anschutz community. This international feast was a first-of-its-kind on the AMC campus that facilitated cultural, social engagement and networking. We had estimated that 150 people might attend and ordered food (samosa, gulab jamoon and chai) from Chai & Chai. Food ran out in the first 30 minutes but that didn’t stop people from coming to the event and enjoying the demos (henna, rangoli & saree draping) during the event. 300 people including faculty, postdoc, student and staff attended. The event was sponsored by the PDO.

PDO’s Program Manager Valerie Saltou said, “I was pleased to host an event that was clearly of interest to our constituents, based upon the hundreds who attended. The fact that 40% of our postdocs are visa holders at any given time, it is important to bridge the cultural gaps, creating camaraderie that includes a legitimate pride of origin. The diversity of our researchers adds strength to research teams as they bring a broader and more varied perspective to the research questions. We hope to continue the cultural exchange through these events.”

Michelle Larson-krieg, Director of ISSS, commented that “It was obvious that a significant amount of work went into putting together this intellectually engaging and visually impressive event. The Postdocs were so excited to be able to share a piece of their home country with attendees, and their enthusiasm was contagious. Learning how to drape a sari correctly was a highlight for me!”

Altogether, this event was the perfect example of what can be achieved when a group of people act together with the same and great goal.

Boston Postdocs Get Organized

A conference led by postdocs, for postdocs

This past October, Boston area postdocs hosted a conference to contribute to the national conversation about the future of biomedical research. Concerned with declining research funding, coincidental with increasingly large graduate and postdoc trainee numbers, organizers aimed to provide a platform for junior scientists to offer their ideas on how to improve the status of the scientific research enterprise. The conference, titled “The Future of Research,” focused on four key issues identified by the organizers as impeding scientific progress; “…funding for biomedical research, training of the scientific workforce, the structure of the workforce, and incentives and rewards for scientists” (McDowell et al., 2015, F100 Research).

The conference opened with panel sessions involving administrators as well as scientists from both academia and industry. Afterwards, participants were distributed into several workshops, where groups led by moderators discussed and proposed solutions for the four key issues quoted above.

A synopsis of the discussions that took place in all four workshops and the recommendations outlined by the conference attendees can be found in the F1000Research publication titled “Shaping the Future of Research: a perspective from junior scientists,” written as the defining document of the conference. Both the conference and publication have garnered national attention, and attendees have kept the conversation going on the conference website, futureofresearch.org. With a second annual Future of Research conference in the works, the organizers and attendees of this postdoc-initiated conference are making sure the voice of the postdoc does not go unheard.

Contributed by
Sarah E. Clark, PhD

Contributed by A Ranjitha Dhanasekaran, PhD