

NEWS

Job training program proves useful to grads in real world

Christine McCall

As Melinda Sanchez tells the story, she had an interest in science but didn't really know how to make a career of it. She was working as an administrator at the Boston University Pediatric and Dentistry Center when a co-worker told her about City Lab Academy.

All of a sudden, Sanchez was excited about the chance to learn about biotechnology, something that she knew little about. But she gave it a shot and the program worked out better than she thought. Sanchez recently received her certificate from City Lab Academy in biomedical science.

"I don't know where I'd be if I didn't take this course," Sanchez, 25, said.

The City Lab Academy was founded in 1996 and the initial mission of the program was "to reach out to the community and make biotechnology available to those who couldn't afford college," said City Lab Academy Program Director



City Lab Academy graduates of 2006 celebrated the completion of their nine-month job training program in biotechnology and biomedical science in May. (City Lab Academy photo)

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Connie Phillips.

The program allows people to go to school for free for a nine-month job training program in the biotechnology and biomedical science field. City Lab Academy also provides the student's books, a scientific calculator and a monthly bus pass free of charge.

"Our two goals are to get them a job and to get them in the college pipeline, either here at BU or elsewhere," Phillips said.

"[City Lab Academy] affords them an opportunity to get into a significant industry in Massachusetts, [and currently] biotech employs a huge number of Boston residents and it's only growing. It also starts many students on the road through college to obtain a bachelor's degree."

Prospective students for City Lab Academy must meet certain standards. In order to qualify for the program, applicants must be Boston residents at least 18 years old, have a high school diploma or equivalent, write an essay, submit transcripts and two letters of recommendation, interview with the City Lab Academy admissions staff, take and pass English and math tests at the tenth grade level and attend a week-long math tutoring workshop at BU a week prior to the start of the fall semester.

Students are required to take four classes: Medical Terminology, Introduction to Biomedical Laboratory Sciences, Biotechnology and Cell Culture Techniques. Classes are split up into two semesters and run from September to May, Monday through Thursday in the evenings. During the spring semester, students take part in a two-week internship in a research or hospital lab at the BU Medical Campus.

Sanchez says her favorite part of the program was attending the internship. She said that the internship gave her "a chance to learn the real deal in a laboratory and how much attention you had to pay to projects."

When the four courses are completed at the end of the school year, students receive a certificate and 12 credits from the Boston University Metropolitan College. Students are further assisted after the completion of the program in finding a job with a biotechnology company or medical center.

Phillips says that graduates of City Lab Academy generally become lab technicians, animal care technicians, research assistants, quality assurance or manufacturing associates. Graduates work at both small and large biotech and pharmaceutical companies or at medical centers.

Recent graduates have worked at the BU Medical Center and other companies like Biogen Idec, Inc., Genzyme Corporation, AdipoGenix, Vertex Pharmaceuticals, the Dana Farber Cancer Institute and Harvard Medical School.

A graduate student mentors each student in the program. The graduate mentor aids the student in learning study skills, studying for tests and making sure the student understands the work being done in class and in the laboratory.

“The program has grown in the sense that our retention has improved enormously,” said Phillips. “The mentors, tutors and case management have made a huge difference.”

Sanchez adds, “If it wasn’t for [the BU PhD student mentor], I wouldn’t have done as well.”

City Lab Academy also provides its students with weekly seminars which feature guest speakers. The seminars help students with procedures for writing resumes and cover letters, tips for interviewing and advice for entering the professional world.

Sanchez speaks very highly of the program and says that she would definitely recommend it to others. She added that the City Lab Academy courses opened her eyes to a different world. Sanchez is now pursuing her undergraduate degree in medical science. “[City Lab Academy] taught me how to study, concentrate and look forward to doing something different in my future,” Sanchez said.