

Careers in industry panel discussion

Summary by Kaitlyn Alimenti, Ph.D. Student

At Boston University (BU), all early-career biomedical scientists are provided the opportunity to participate in the BU's Broadening Experience in Scientific Training (BEST) program, developed with NIH-funding. As part of BU's BEST programming, panel discussions are organized to emphasize the wide variety of career paths available in the biomedical field. On March 22nd, 2023, four Ph.D. alumni from BU's Graduate Medical Sciences spoke to current students about their positions in the biomedical industry. In a discussion facilitated by Dr. Barbara Schreiber, Associate Professor of Biochemistry, the central message from the panelists was to follow one's scientific interests when deciding on a career path.

To begin the session, the panelists described their career trajectories up to the present day. After earning a bachelor's degree, Dr. Alexander Barron worked for 9 years as a research assistant in a variety of academic settings before returning to school to complete his Ph.D. at BU under the mentorship of Dr. Jeffrey Browning. Upon graduation, Dr. Barron secured a position as a post-doctoral fellow at Pfizer where he has risen in the ranks; he currently serves as Principal Scientist working in their Leukocyte-Tissue Interface group. The connection of BU alums to Pfizer was strongly represented on the panel, as Dr. Claire Steppan also works at the biopharmaceutical company. Dr. Steppan enrolled in graduate school immediately after undergraduate and upon completion of her Ph.D. with Dr. Deborah Dobson, she did post-doctoral work and became a faculty member, secured funding but decided to move into industry. She took a position at Pfizer 18 years ago and she has worn many hats, working in various roles to support their small molecule therapeutic space. Currently, Dr. Steppan's title is Senior Director of Primary Pharmacology. Realizing his passion for science, Dr. Andy Hoss switched his undergraduate major as a senior and had to complete an extra semester. Upon graduation, he secured a job as a lab technician at MIT (now Broad Institute) and he learned a lot about sequencing platforms. Although Dr. Hoss conducted classical genetics research during his Ph.D. work with Dr. Rick Myers, he learned and embraced the computational aspects of his work and in his current role, he serves as Director, Computational Biology at Yarrow Biotechnology. Dr. Elissa Everton also worked for a couple of years after obtaining her undergraduate degree before returning to graduate school. Like Dr. Hoss, Everton stepped away from bench research after completing her dissertation work at BU in liver regeneration with Dr. Valerie Gouon-Evans. Now, Dr. Everton is a Senior Associate Consultant at Clarion Healthcare, a life sciences consultancy.

Next, the panelists gave their recommendations for early career scientists who may wish to pursue similar career paths. Overall, the panelists emphasized a need to develop a sound research background and soft skills such as time management, professionalism, networking, resiliency and even a sense of humor! The most mentioned recommendation from the panel was to develop communication skills, as science is often conducted in a team environment. In a more specialized field, Dr. Everton mentioned that a career in consulting requires forethought and that it's

important to “get your feet wet” in the business world. She started a consulting club at BU, took a business class and participated in short internships. Dr. Everton recommended early career scientists that are interested in the business side of the biomedical field seek out opportunities to learn about the technology transfer process and patent procedures.

With the impressive resumes of the panelists, Dr. Schreiber asked if work-life balance was possible for the four BU alums. Each answer was highly personal and dependent on the panelist’s home situation. However, all agreed that setting boundaries and carving out time away from work is essential to maintaining mental health when working demanding jobs in the biomedical industry. In addition, having a passion for the work and developing strong connections with co-workers makes the workday much more enjoyable.

When asked if they would choose to relive their careers, it was nice to learn that all four of the scientists said they would do it over again. Dr. Barron mentioned that that the trajectory to his current position was not linear, and he is grateful for the journey he has taken to find his research interests. Although all the panelists think back on their early careers fondly, they all expressed excitement about planning their next career decisions. The panelists enlightened us on a variety of jobs in the biomedical industry sector and they left with the recommendation that trainees pursue what motivates them. We want to thank the panelists for their insights!