

Careers in academia panel discussion

Summary by Kaitlyn Alimenti, Ph.D. student

Boston University's Broadening Experience in Scientific Training (BU's BEST) was an NIH-funded award that launched programs to aid in the career development of BU's biomedical Ph.D. trainees. BU's BEST hosted four spring, 2023 panel discussions featuring panelists employed in a variety of careers for Ph.D. trained biomedical scientists. On April 19th, the final discussion was held, hosting a panel of four BU's Graduate Medical Sciences Ph.D. alumni. All the scientists are now working in academia. The discussion was moderated by Dr. Barbara Schreiber, Associate Professor of Biochemistry, and provided a glimpse into the lives of scientists in various career paths in an academic environment.

The panelists first described their career trajectories that led to their current positions. Dr. Fadie Coleman earned her Ph.D. from BU in Microbiology. After completing a postdoctoral fellowship in pathology and transfusion medicine at Boston Children's Hospital, Dr. Coleman transitioned from the bench to a leadership position as Director, Biomedical Laboratory & Clinical Sciences Program at BU School of Medicine. She is currently Assistant Dean of Diversity, Inclusion, and Belonging at Harvard School of Dental Medicine. Initially, Dr. Aditi Gurkar considered a career as a physician but as an undergraduate at the Florida International University, she joined the lab of an inspiring professor, Dr. Mathee, and she was hooked on microbiology research! Dr. Gurkar completed her Ph.D. in Pathology/Cell & Molecular Biology at BU, studying DNA damage and repair processes with a focus on translesion DNA synthesis. After completing postdoctoral fellowships at Harvard Medical School, Massachusetts General Hospital, the Broad Institute and The Scripps Research Institute, Dr. Gurkar was recruited as Assistant Professor to start her lab at the University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine, where she studies molecular mechanisms in aging. Dr. Chris Seh Hong Lim is a first-generation college student and as an undergraduate biology major at the National Chung Hsing University in Taiwan, he happened upon an anatomy lab while wandering around campus and he developed a passion for veterinary medicine. Dr. Lim moved to the United States to complete his Ph.D. in Anatomy and Neurobiology at BU. Currently, he is an Assistant Professor, Department of Physician Assistant Studies in the School of Health and Rehabilitation Sciences at the MGH Institute of Health Professions, where he teaches anatomy while also conducting neuroscience and educational research. Dr. Richard Giadone is the most recent graduate on the panel. He earned his Ph.D. in Molecular & Translational Medicine/Biomedical Sciences under the mentorship of Dr. George Murphy, where he studied regenerative medicine. Currently, Dr. Giadone is a postdoctoral fellow in the lab of Dr. Lee Rubin at Harvard University studying disease mechanisms in the nervous system.

The panelists were asked to think forward and speak about their hopes for the future. Excitingly, Dr. Gurkar and Dr. Lim are soon up for promotions at their respective institutions. Dr. Coleman hopes to continue to have an impact with her goal of increasing diversity, equity, and inclusion in STEM. Dr. Giadone aspires to start his own lab and help train the next generation of scientists.

The BU alums were asked to provide recommendations to those attending the panel who might wish to pursue similar careers. Dr. Coleman suggested focusing on developing self-awareness. She said once you recognize your weaknesses, you can strategize to improve. She also advised developing strong communication skills. Drs. Gurkar, Lim, and Giadone all focused their answers on building resilience. They emphasized that academic research can be complex and sometimes feel impossible. However, you can learn from failures and become a stronger scientist by developing resilience. Dr. Lim also emphasized the importance of being a team player, while Dr. Giadone reinforced developing a network of mentors that one can rely on for advice.

Dr. Schreiber then asked the scientists to reflect on their careers and consider if they would change anything. Dr. Gurkar shared that her outlook on life is to never look back or have regrets. Instead, she prefers to believe that every life decision presents new opportunities. Dr. Coleman shared a similar mindset and mentioned that she has no regrets. However, she did note that she wished she had sought out mentors earlier in her career. Dr. Lim acknowledged that life at the beginning of his career was challenging and stressful. Nonetheless, he wouldn't have changed a thing because those grueling hours at the bench made him the scientist he is today. Dr. Giadone shared that Ph.D. training is not easy and he assumed he was the only one struggling, so he worked non-stop without letting on that he was "burning out"; finally knowing that others were experiencing the same, he realized that being open about struggles enabled him to strategize solutions.

Finally, the panelists were asked if they achieve balance in their lives. The scientists were very transparent about the difficulty of finding time for their personal lives. In particular, sharing his struggles with finding balance during his Ph.D. research, Dr. Giadone's advice to current Ph.D. students was to set boundaries to ensure there is time for personal interests and hobbies outside of science, something he now makes certain to do. If the balance starts to shift too much toward work, Dr. Giadone suggests being proactive and seeking help, whether from peers, mentors, or the variety of resources available through BU. Dr. Lim's position affords him a good work/life balance, enabling him time with his son. Dr. Gurkar says that she thinks of her mentees as her "kids" and as with her own children, she wants to set a good example to have them follow their own passions at work and home. Dr. Coleman strives to answer "yes" to the questions; "Am I happy?" and "Am I on track?". She advises making sure to take time for oneself.

These accomplished panelists left the audience with their precious insights into career options within academia and advice on how to pursue these interesting careers.