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Annual Postdoc and Graduate Student Retreat

The 14th Annual Postdoc and Graduate Student Retreat was held at Simmons College on Oct 4th. More than 120 DFCI postdocs and graduate students participated in the event where they had opportunities to network with colleagues, discuss their research work, and learn about careers in and outside of academia. The event started with an icebreaker game of “People Bingo”, for which participants had to find fellow postdocs or graduate students that fit the description in the bingo boxes. It was a fun way to interact with new people!

This year’s keynote talk was by Dr. Greg Verdine, Erving Professor of Chemistry at Harvard University and Harvard Medical School, and a pioneer in the field of chemical biology. He talked about his life’s mission of expanding disease treatment modalities by “drugging the undruggable”. He explained how the methods he and his colleagues have developed can be applied for the generation of novel therapeutics that can potentially target most of the human proteome.

He also shared his experiences in entrepreneurship, and in founding several successful biotech companies. It was an inspiring and thought-provoking talk that triggered a lively discussion.

The retreat also featured a session by Drs. Jenna Matheny, Janet Ralbovsky and Jing Zhang, representatives from the Belfer Office for Dana-Farber Innovations. They discussed the nitty-gritty of commercializing technology that is developed at Dana-Farber, and described their role in helping researchers with this process. This was followed by a Career Panel discussion led former DFCI postdocs, most of whom had participated in the DFCI-PGA mentoring program – the discussion was very interactive and informative, and highlighted several career opportunities available for postdocs after completing their fellowship.

DFCI postdocs and graduate students were able to present their own research during trainee talks and poster sessions. Participants enjoyed four excellent oral presentations as well as the poster presentations.

Con’t on page 4.
Mentor of the Year: Dr. Carl Novina

The PGA Post had the pleasure of meeting with the Mentor of the Year, Dr. Carl Novina and discussing his views on mentorship. Here is what he had to say:

PGA: What is your lab’s current focus?

Dr. Novina: My lab focuses on non-coding RNA biology, its dysregulation in cancers and its use to create biomedical tools. Over the past several years our energies have centered on technology development and engineered cellular therapies. My lab takes an entrepreneurial approach to translational research. We work closely with many clinical collaborators to understand unmet medical needs and develop the tools or therapies needed to address those needs. We also have a strong relationship with the Belfer Office for Dana-Farber Innovations and with the Office of General Counsel, specifically Robert Distel, Jenna Matney, and Hilary Libka who provide guidance on patenting, licensing, and commercializing technology being developed in my lab. This approach has increased the likelihood that my lab’s discoveries will ultimately be developed for human benefit.

PGA: How many mentees do you have currently?

Dr. Novina: I have 12 mentees including graduate students, postdoctoral fellows, technicians and clinical fellows.

PGA: What do you think are the most important lessons you can teach your mentees?

Dr. Novina: Be clear to yourself and others about your goals. If you are honest with yourself and your advisor, s/he can better prepare you for the career path you would like to take. This is especially true for mentees who are interested in non-academic careers, such as those wanting to become a scientist in a biotechnology or pharmaceutical company, a science writer, a patent attorney, a business development officer, or an associate at a venture capital or investment firm. I encourage my mentees to work closely with each other, despite having different expertise, so they can get the most out of their own research and can benefit from the success of their labmates and collaborators. I also encourage them to work closely with our clinical and entrepreneurial collaborators, so that they understand what is needed to translate research into a clinical solution.

PGA: What do you do to mentor the Harvard Biotechnology Incubator (HBI)?

Dr. Novina: Dr. Fred Mermelstein (an Entrepreneur-in-Residence at Dana-Farber), Dr. Bob Distel (Special Advisor on Technology Development at BODFI) and I co-teach Harvard Medical School students and postdocs the skills and knowledge required for evaluating technologies and developing a plan to translate and commercialize these. We perform due diligence exercises on real-world examples from technologies developed in an academic setting – typically my lab – and produce target product profile sheets, a business plan, pitch decks and other material that potential investors need to evaluate investment in a technology. Students can now receive a certificate in entrepreneurship from Harvard Medical School based on their experience.

PGA: What makes a successful “modern molecular biologist”?

Dr. Novina: Science has become more technologically driven. I believe that successful “modern molecular biologists” need to embrace technology and have an adventurous and possibly entrepreneurial spirit. The modern biologist does not exist in a vacuum, but instead participates in a team of researchers who use advanced technologies to examine biological phenomena and address medical needs. Modern biologists should have an interdisciplinary and collaborative approach to their work.

Con’t on page 4.
Attending a Conference? What to Know Before You Go

Attending a national or international conference is an exciting opportunity to present your work outside of DFCI, receive feedback on your science, and make new connections that promote research and career development. Conferences may be small and focused on a specific topic (such as the Gordon or Keystone Conferences) or they may be large with thousands of attendees (such as the annual AACR or ASH meetings). Regardless of conference size, here are some tips to make the most of this opportunity.

Make a plan: Before the conference, go through the schedule to identify presentations of most interest to you. At many conferences, multiple sessions occur concurrently, making it impossible to attend every talk you are interested in. By checking the schedule in advance, you can decide which sessions are most important, and identify presenters to speak with. Also pinpoint vendors you want to meet to discuss experimental reagents and protocols. At a smaller conference, you may be able to attend every talk and view all posters, but generating a highlighted list of interesting speakers helps with networking connections.

Set goals: Networking at a conference may be intimidating, but setting smaller concrete goals can help. For example: Meet 1-2 specific professors from whom you want advice. Give your business card to five people. *(Don’t have business cards? Order them before you go at Staples or a similar store.)* Visit five posters. Tweet daily about the conference. Attend at least one talk in a field different from yours, and at least one career development session.

Practice: Be prepared to present your work, and have your brief elevator pitch ready and practiced. If you are selected for a poster or oral presentation, rehearse it with your labmates, or with friends from a different field, before leaving for the conference. Preparation helps combat nerves, and improves your networking interactions.

What about funding? Hopefully, your PI is willing and able to support your conference attendance. However, if your lab’s budget cannot cover your travel, there are a few other options. Some postdoc and graduate student fellowships have funding for travel. For graduate students, your program may offer one-time funding to attend a conference. In addition, a conference may have trainee fellowships available; for example, AACR has “Scholar-in-Training” grants for attendance at the annual meeting. Lastly, you can apply for the PGA Travel Award (applications are due on February 1 or August 1). However, you can get to a conference, be inspired by the science and don’t forget to have fun!

Sources for this article and more advice:

http://pharmaliterati.blogspot.com/2016/04/share-your-experiencenetworking-at.html?m=1

2018 Retreat Best Poster winner Anjali Sheahan (left) and Best Oral Presentation Elaine Oberlick (right), both with Dr. Sonal Jhaveri, Science Program Director of the Postdoc and Graduate Student Affairs Office.

Special thanks to Jennifer Molina, Sonal Jhaveri, Lorraine Barnes as well as members of the PGA for comments. If you are interested in contributing to the PGA Post, or have comments and suggestions, email dfci_pgapost@dfci.harvard.edu

Editorial Team: Alison Taylor and Sondra Downey-Kopyscinski. Shibin Mathew contributed.
The retreat concluded with a cocktail reception during which awards were presented to the winner of the 7th Annual Mentor-of-the-Year (Dr. Carl Novina), and to winners of the best oral presentation (Elaine Oberlick), and the best poster presentation (Anjali Sheahan).

The retreat was organized by the Retreat Committee of the DFCI Postdoctoral and Graduate Student Association (PGA) and the Postdoc and Graduate Student Affairs Office (PGSAO). We are very grateful for generous contributions from Syndax, Thermo Fisher Scientific, Syros pharmaceuticals, Blueprint Medicines, Harvard University Employee Credit Union, Foundation Medicine, Bio-Legend, AAAS, New England Biolabs and several local businesses.

We would like to thank everyone who attended the retreat. Thanks also to those who provided feedback on the program – we greatly value this and will use it to guide the Retreat Committee’s planning efforts to enhance and improve future sessions.

See you in Fall 2019!!

Retreat, con’t from page 1

PGA Calendar

PGA Travel Awards – Deadline Friday, February 1st. Applications are now being accepted! http://dfcionline.org/departments/pgsao/pga/travel-award/

February PGA Meeting
Date: Thursday, February 7, 2019
Time: 1:00 – 2:00 pm
Location: Yawkey 308

February Brain Lunch Seminar
Presenter: Anjali Sheahan, Ph.D., Oncologic Pathology, Ellis Lab
Date: Friday, February 8, 2019
Time: 12:00 - 1:00 PM
Location: Smith 304

Responsible Conduct of Research (RCR) Lecture Series:
Lecture #1: "Ethical Issues: The Scientist as a Responsible Member of Society"
Presenter: Jonathan M. Marron, MD, MPH, Instructor in Pediatrics, Dana-Farber/Boston Children's Cancer and Blood Disorders Center
Date: Wednesday, February 13, 2019
Time: 2:00 - 3:30 PM
Location: Smith 308/309

What it takes to Publish a Paper in a Top Tier Journal
Presenter: Elizabeth Phimister, Deputy Editor, New England Journal of Medicine
Date: Monday, March 4, 2019
Time: 2:00 - 3:30 PM
Location: Yawkey 306

Research Integrity
Presenter: Kristin Bittinger, Director, Office of Research Integrity
Date: Wednesday, March 6, 2019
Time: 2:00 - 3:30 PM
Location: Smith 308/309

For more information please visit: http://dfcionline.org/departments/pgsao/events/

Mentor, con’t from page 2

It takes time to develop and maintain all of these relationships, but it is worth it.

PGA: What do you plan to do with your team with your Mentor of the Year award?

Dr. Novina: I would like to take the team for a team-building trip - either kayaking or canoeing.