

Program helps students find the perfect life sciences internship

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Cambridge —

When looking for an internship in the science world for this summer, Joelle Sacks did not want to play the role of “the summer intern” anymore.

“I really want to get involved in the lab working with all the other sciences,” said Sacks, 21, a chemistry major who graduated from Boston University in May.

After receiving an e-mail from one of her chemistry professors, Sacks submitted an application to the inaugural Internship Challenge hosted by the Massachusetts Life Sciences Center (MLSC). Through the site, Inman Square-based Phylonix Pharmaceuticals contacted Sacks for an interview and she began interning with them in mid-May.

“It’s exactly what I was looking for and trying to do,” said Sacks, who is helping the company use zebrafish to test the safety and toxicity of drugs. “It was a great match.”

According to MLSC spokesman Angus McQuilken, the Internship Challenge serves as “the Monster.com of Life Sciences”. Through the online applications filed by interested STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) students, MLSC posts ad for companies responses based upon their needs.

The MLSC received over 500 applications, McQuilken said, and have, in turn, made over 60 matches with 70 participating companies.

“Usually public projects, I don’t want to say ‘don’t work’, but it’s true,” said Frank Reynolds, CEO of InVivo Therapeutics Corp., a spinal cord injury research group involved in the challenge. “It’s amazing to see how smoothly and quickly this kind of idea has worked in a public setting.”

On June 1, MLSC hosted the Internship Challenge Launch event at The Whitehead Institute. The event included a panel discussion with Life Sciences heavyweights Carmichael Roberts, partner at North Bridge Venture Partners and Lydia Villa-Komaroff, CEO of Cytonome, Inc. The panel also included MLSC board members Joshua Boger and Harvey Lodish. There were also workshops where interns met representatives from their match companies: some for the first time.

“We wanted to give an opportunity for interns to connect directly and get orientated with both their companies and the MLSC,” McQuilken said.

“Studies have shown that it is extremely important to provide internship opportunities for undergraduates in the life sciences field,” said McQuilken citing studies done by the Massachusetts Business Alliance for Education, MIT and Northeastern. “Especially in this economy.”

McQuilken added these studies sparked the idea of an internship challenge.

“[An internship challenge] is getting more common, but is still new to the life sciences world,” he said. “This is our new approach to getting people trained, out there in the field and connected with each other.”

Reynolds has already used his research intern, Janise Ye, to make a scientific poster, a task he said his company has needed for a while, but has put off due to “lack of bandwidth”. He added his business intern, Heather Cormier, helped create a “financial forecasting model” for the company.

“We aren’t just using [our interns] for idle time work, they are involved in tasks crucial to this company,” Reynolds said. He added that the interns participate in all the company’s internal meetings, allowing them to see the inner workings of business and the logic behind the company’s decisions.

Reynolds explained this level of immersion helps the interns enter the working world more prepared, not requiring the up to 90 day orientation typical employees need. “They are really ready to go,” Reynolds said.

Sacks agreed the training aspect of the internship is the most valuable.

“[This internship] puts your skills to use, gives you a feel for what you want to do in your career,” Sacks said, who hopes to enter a Ph.D. program in the fall of 2010. “Academia can only teach you so much. This is a whole new kind of learning.

Another strength of the challenge, Sacks said, was the advantages it gives to smaller companies.

“When you apply to large companies, there is such a large pool of applicants it is hard to stand out,” she said. “Here, smaller companies, who normally might not have the funds, have a chance to bring in students.”

After spending her 2008 summer working at the Douglass Hanly Moir Pathology Lab, the largest pathology lab in Sydney Australia, Sacks realized smaller companies provide a different “environment”.

“[At Phylonix], I get to know everyone who works there and learn from equally, well-established scientists,” Sacks said. “There is much more mentoring than basic learning. Working here I get the intricate details more than formulas for learning.”

The challenge is open to juniors, seniors and recent graduates who either live in Massachusetts or go to a public or private 4-year school nearby.