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Fishing for Success

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Fishing for Success

Katherine Beaufait

When I applied for the BioTrain program, I really did not think I stood a chance. Here I was, 19 years old with no research experience or even a college biology class under my belt, applying to a world class research institute. A friend claimed I had a better chance of being struck by lightning than getting the internship. And so, when I eventually did receive a letter stating that the program had an opening for me, I could not contain my excitement. To top it off, the spot was in Dr. Myers' lab - I would be working with the president of the institute himself.

The first week of the internship was titled Biotech Bootcamp, where each intern learns the basic skills needed to thrive in a research lab: pipetting, serial dilutions, plating bacteria, and electrophoresis just to name a few. However, as soon as I met with Kelly Williams, PhD, of Dr. Myers' lab, I began to learn more complex techniques. For example, I was taken down to the fish room where I learned to feed the fish and to change the system's water to ensure they were kept in optimal conditions. Very quickly, I was pulling out tanks and moving fish around to set up crosses, which is the term for breeding. Initially, I have to admit, it was quite frightening as a fish accidentally fell out of the net, and in shock, all I did at first was stare at it flopping on the table. However, it did not take long to overcome the fear and feel confident to move the fish around like the other two technicians.

Meanwhile, up in the lab, I continued to acquire new techniques and procedures, like the BCA and acetylcholinesterase assays I would be using as a major data source for my poster presentation later that summer. My favorite procedure was definitely the Western blotting technique, even when we could not match a primary anti-body that worked well with our samples. It seemed strange at first to put up with a two-day process only to find out at the end that it did not work as intended, but I soon realized these struggles are just part of the whole research experience. As with any kind of scientific discovery, to make progress, you must fail many times first.

Upon returning to UAB, I was so grateful for the internship opportunity. Not only was I put into a renowned research facility, but I was also put in to a lab that cared about my learning and wanted me to grow as a scientist. As I continue my research on campus, I often think about the people I got to spend my entire summer with. Every one of them treated me as an equal, despite my lesser knowledge on the research matter. They also helped me understand how and why I was performing the experiments. I still talk to most of the lab technicians and post-doctoral fellows I worked with during the summer of 2011, and I plan on going back to visit once or twice this year. I am so proud to call the Myers lab my first research lab experience and if possible wish to return in the coming summer.

