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College students take giant step toward cancer science careers

by [Andrew Laque](#) — last modified 06/30/2009 09:47

(SACRAMENTO, Calif.) — Nine area college students are taking a giant step toward cancer science careers this summer -- and helping to address a shortage of under-represented groups in cancer research -- by working as interns in one of four UC Davis cancer research laboratories.

The students, who will spend eight to 12 weeks learning about cutting-edge cancer science, are part of the Engineering Technologies Continuing Umbrella Research Experiences (ET-CURE) program. They are working with mentors at laboratories affiliated with UC Davis Cancer Center and the National Science Foundation-funded Center for Biophotonics Science and Technology (CBST).

"The scientific community is diverse and international in and of itself, and the problems we are trying to solve require multiple perspectives," Ana Corbacho, assistant director of higher education at CBST, said of the program. "The more diverse the scientific community, the more likely it is that we will find approaches to complex problems in cancer diagnosis, treatment and prevention."

Starting last week, each of the nine ET-CURE students joined a research laboratory. In the laboratory of Kit Lam, chief of hematology and oncology, for example, students are applying combinatorial library methods for basic research and drug discovery.

Intern Lea Meza is working in Lam's lab for her third summer -- her first as an ET-CURE participant. She is culturing, isolating and staining cells so they can be tracked and targeted with therapies. She said her experience has sparked an interest in cancer research.

"At first, I thought I wanted to do something in pediatrics," said Meza, who is 21 and will be a senior in the fall. "Now I want to pursue an M.D./Ph.D. This program is really great for that."

As part of the ET-CURE orientation, Meza, her ET-CURE colleagues and 22 other interns who are part of the CBST Summer Internship Program, were asked to do some mentoring of their own with a talented group of high school students.

Sponsored by the National Institutes of Health, ET-CURE, is just one of the programs at UC Davis that seeks to increase the number of scientists from under-represented groups. Another program, called CURE High School Research Academy, connects UC Davis cancer scientists and clinicians with science students from St. HOPE Academy at Sacramento High School in Oak Park, giving them vigorous, hands-on science training.

On Friday, June 19, ET-CURE students judged scientific posters produced by CURE High School Research Academy students from Sacramento High School. For two hours, the CBST lobby was buzzing, as high school student teams explained their research to ET-CURE and CBST interns, who then met to evaluate the science on its merits.

The high school students tackled a range of subjects, from finding and quantifying a protein involved in prostate cancer to the comparative benefits of specially formulated shampoos and conditioners for improvement of the hair's texture and moisture versus non-standard products.

"It's great team building," said Tanja Dimitrijevic, a Sacramento High School science teacher. "My mission is to really keep my students interested in science and careers in science and then

how HIV spreads between immune cells

College students take giant step toward cancer science careers

Hobday named as founding director of Tahoe Institute for Rural Health Research

to come back to their communities. High-level researcher scientists, especially from under-represented communities, are hard to find."

The day's winners were Tiffany S. Tyson and Roger Dennis Johnson, who discovered in their experiments that soy protein helps the California black worm regenerate faster than regular protein.

"There are a lot of good ideas here," remarked ET-CURE intern Ngabo Nzigira, who is transferring to UC Davis from Cosumnes River College in the fall. "A lot of the students are getting the basics of scientific research. I like their curiosity."

UC Davis Cancer Center is a National Cancer Institute-designated cancer center that cares for 9,000 adults and children with cancer each year from throughout the Central Valley and inland Northern California. Its Outreach Research and Education Program works to eliminate ethnic disparities in cancer region-wide.

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NSF Center for Biophotonics Science & Technology
University of California, Davis
2700 Stockton Blvd., Suite 1400
Sacramento, CA 95817

TEL: (916) 734-8600 FAX: (916) 703-5012