

Mentors of Success

A Growing Alumni Mentoring Program in MCB is Helping Students Map Their Careers

By Dave Evensen, College of LAS Office of Communications and Marketing

A college education opens many doors— sometimes it seems too many. As Leah Schmelkin (BS, '13, molecular and cellular biology; psychology) might have attested to early in her undergraduate studies at Illinois, she didn't know what she wanted to do. Then she received notice from the School of Molecular and Cellular Biology about a new opportunity to job-shadow a doctor and alumnus named Richard Berkowitz (BS, '79, biology; MD, '83) as he made his rounds as an anesthesiologist at Community Hospital in Munster, Ind.

Schmelkin applied, was accepted, and now, as a medical student at Mayo Medical School in Rochester, Minn., she has the distinction of being one of the first students to go through the MCB's Pathways to Health Careers Mentorship Program. Within a few short years the program has grown from one founding mentor—Berkowitz—to dozens of them. They include doctors, pharmacists, dentists, and other Illinois alumni in the health care industry who are willing to lend their time and knowledge to help undergraduate MCB students map their future.

Tina Knox, who coordinates undergraduate instruction and advising for MCB, said last year the program matched 33 MCB students with alumni mentors; some 41 students were matched the year before. There was a dip in applications this year, which Knox attributed to timing (the application deadline came during an exam period), but said feedback on the program has been "wonderful."

Any MCB undergraduate student who seeks this rare opportunity must submit an essay to apply. Berkowitz goes through the applications and, with Knox's help, matches students with mentors in their field of interest.

Response has been strong, according to Knox, with alumni mentors agreeing to bring the student to work for job shadowing. When they are not together, mentors are encouraged to keep in touch by phone or email to provide the student with career advice.

"They're matched for a year," Knox said. "But most of the mentors have agreed to see the student through graduation if the student chooses."

Joining the program was one of the most important career decisions Schmelkin made. During mentoring, she shadowed Berkowitz several times as he worked with patients at Community Hospital. When she was not at the hospital, she corresponded often with Berkowitz as he offered her career and academic advice.

Berkowitz eventually wrote her a recommendation letter that helped her get into Mayo. Most importantly, Schmelkin added, the program helped her decide that she wanted to go to medical school. She came to that conclusion while trailing Berkowitz about his job.

“His job is very technical, but when he interacts with people he is able to connect with them on a very human level, and that’s not about science. That’s about comforting them in a time when they’re scared before surgery,” Schmelkin said. “And when I saw that really delicate balance between the science and the human side of things, I was really excited to do that myself one day.”

Stories such as Schmelkin’s have made the Pathways program one of the most well regarded at Illinois. The Illinois Academic Advising Committee recognized it as an Outstanding Established Program and Knox was invited to present it at the National Academic Advising Association’s annual conference in October 2014.

It started when Berkowitz decided he wanted to create a way to help students find their direction during their undergrad years. He knew what it felt like being on your own in college. He was the first in his family to go to college for a significant amount of time, and he felt that he had nobody to ask for advice about academics or setting a career path.

“I really didn’t have anyone to query to get that information,” Berkowitz recalled. “It worked out for me, but if we can make it easier for these students and teach them what’s expected of them while they’re vetting the process out, it goes such a long way.”

The first year Berkowitz, the only mentor in the program, mentored three students, including Schmelkin. With help from the School of MCB and College of LAS Office of Advancement, he began growing the program by sending emails to other Illinois alumni in the health care field to enlist their help. Gradually over the next six years, about 50 alumni joined the cause.

“We’d like to do a better job adding mentors, because we’re looking at about 1,100 MCB majors, and it would be nice for the ones who do want mentors or guidance to have somebody they can talk to,” Berkowitz said.

“The time commitment itself is really not that great,” he added. “If I were an alumnus, I would think it’s very attractive. It’s a way for me to shape the career of a student and at the same time get re-engaged in the university.”

To benefit students who do not necessarily want to become doctors the program has evolved over its lifespan to include mentors from different aspects of health care. Nicole Raucci (BS, ’12, molecular and cellular biology) who applied for the Pathways program as a senior, intended to go to medical school.

After shadowing Berkowitz, however, she started considering an alternate path. Berkowitz put her in touch with a nurse practitioner and physician’s assistant at the hospital where he worked and this past August she began her first job as a registered nurse at Northwestern Memorial Hospital in Chicago. Her science background has helped her as she works the general medicine unit and has plans to earn a doctoral degree as a nurse practitioner.

“The networking piece and the job shadowing experience was really so important for me,” Raucci said. “Without having the background and those experiences, I don’t know if I would’ve necessarily been so quick to jump on this pathway.”