

Zeldin urges proactive learning among 2013 summer interns

By Ian Thomas

“Experience is why you’re here, so don’t be afraid to pick up the phone and get involved.”

That was the opening day message June 13 from [NIEHS Scientific Director Daryl Zeldin, M.D.](#), to this year’s crop of students in the [NIH Summer Internship Program \(SIP\) at NIEHS](#). Operating from June through August, the SIP gives high school and college students interested in biomedical science the chance for hands-on learning in a world-class research setting, by pairing them with mentors from the NIEHS intramural science team.

“During the next several weeks, you’re going to experience a lot, so don’t be shy about asking questions,” Zeldin added. “Ultimately, your time here will be what you make of it, so be proactive and get involved in everything that you can.”

Education by experiences

Throughout the summer, students will run the gamut of activities, from seminars and career panels to extensive lab-time with an active role in real research — all designed to help students sample the different career paths the field has to offer.

“Environmental health is an extremely broad subject,” said Zeldin, who named DNA repair, bioinformatics, and clinical research as just a few examples. “Some of these you’ll find interesting, and some you won’t. The trick to success in this field is finding that one specific area that most excites you, then building your career on it.”

As in years past, the highlight of the program comes in late July when students get to showcase their newfound research skills via the summer-ending poster session before mentors and peers in Rodbell Auditorium.

The history of the NIEHS mission

In addition to Zeldin’s breakdown of NIEHS infrastructure, including its [intramural](#) and [extramural](#) research divisions plus the [National Toxicology Program](#), students also received an in-depth explanation of the institute’s mission.

“Some organizations, such as pharmaceutical companies, spend money on drugs to treat things like asthma,” said John Schelp, a member of the [NIEHS Office of Science Education and Diversity](#). “Our mission here is to understand what in the environment triggers asthma so we can try to prevent it altogether.”

A noted area-historian and longtime resident of Durham, Schelp also spoke of history of NIEHS within the local community.



Zeldin opened his talk with a collection of comedic images from his childhood and college years. (Photo courtesy of Steve McCaw)



Schelp works as a special assistant for NIEHS community outreach programs and deals extensively with students and educators from around the Triangle. (Photo courtesy of Steve McCaw)



From left to right, interns Meredith Parker, Thomas Woo, and John Parker listened as Schelp chronicled NIEHS history as a research institute. (Photo courtesy of Steve McCaw)

“In the mid-1960s, 48 states competed to get NIEHS before it eventually settled into an old tobacco field right here in North Carolina,” he explained. “Six weeks later, IBM became the next major tenant to join NIEHS in the new Research Triangle Park, and RTP has been here ever since.”

Looking ahead

“Between now and the fall, you’ll be exposed to everything from bench-work in a lab to clinical research,” said Zeldin, who elaborated on some of the pros and cons of earning an M.D. versus a Ph.D. “The hope is that by the time you leave here, you’ll have found that niche that’s right for you, and you’ll then be able to use that to guide your studies moving forward.”

(Ian Thomas is a public affairs specialist with the NIEHS Office of Communications and Public Liaison, and a regular contributor to the Environmental Factor.)



Like their SIP colleagues, Scholars Connect interns Melissa Kerr, left, and Toyosi Oyelowo clearly enjoyed their orientation. (Photo courtesy of Steve McCaw)



Elena Douglass listened as Zeldin explained the many learning opportunities the interns will encounter throughout the summer. (Photo courtesy of Steve McCaw)



Intern Willa Chen reflected on the possible career paths ahead. (Photo courtesy of Steve McCaw)

Education takes center stage at internship career panel

This year's internship class reassembled on Thursday June 20 in Rodbell Auditorium for the SIP's annual career exploration panel — a two-hour Q&A session allowing students to interact with experts from across the biomedical research field.

This year's panelists included:

[Mercedes Arana, Ph.D. \(NIEHS\)](#)

[Michael Fessler, M.D. \(NIEHS\)](#)

[Mike Humble, Ph.D. \(NIEHS\)](#)

[William Higgins, Ph.D. \(http://biology.umd.edu/faculty/williamjhiggins\)](http://biology.umd.edu/faculty/williamjhiggins) (University of Maryland)

Among the major subjects of discussion was the pending decision of many students on graduate school versus medical school after graduation.

"I began as a pre-med major in undergrad, but took a job in a lab to help pay for my studies and loved it from the start," said Arana, a biologist with NIEHS who encouraged students to get involved in everything they could while in school. "Even once you decide on a career path, having a diverse background of experiences still helps you in a lot of ways, particularly if you ever hope to run your own lab."

Still, while research topics and fields of study were obviously hot topics of interest, the panelists agreed that students should never forget the basics.

"No matter what you choose to do for a living, take the time to learn to read, write, and speak effectively," said Higgins, an associate professor with the University of Maryland's biology department. "So many of our students today don't spend enough time developing these simplest of skills, and they're absolutely vital to success in any field, public health included."

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