Career Development Symposium

Thanks so much to everyone who made the symposium a success! About 40 postdocs and grad students came during the busy September grant-writing season to hear great advice about career progression in non-traditional career paths.
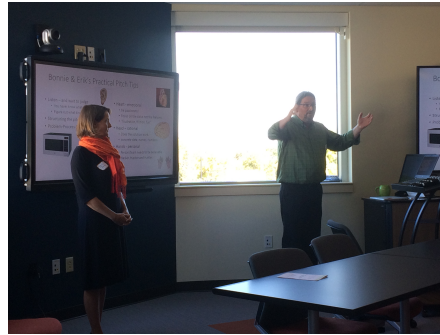
Bonnie Reese and Erik Monsen, left, gave pointers on crafting an elevator pitch, helping us turn descriptions of our research into action phrases that are more relatable. Check out their tips for success.

They also wanted everyone to know about the Entrepeneurship Forum's website which has resources for those of you interested in taking your ideas and turning them into a marketable innovation or company.

From left to right, Paul Held, Jeralyn Heraldson, and Cathleen Geiger gave perspective and answered questions regarding diverse career pathways in science. We were encouraged to adapt your career to life goals, and to use our PhD "wings" for good.

Alan Dove, right, gave a great talk reflecting on his time in media both as a freelance writer and as host of the podcast "This Week in Virology." He outlined the problems, perils, and promise of the current job market for PhDs and answered questions about the sustainability and future of internet media.

Steering Committee Update

As many of you know, the UVM-PDA is in it's infancy. We formed a steering committee in the Spring of 2017 with plans to expand and become "official" shortly after. Our long term goals included not only addressing the community's concerns, like inconsistent compensation, but also serving the UVM community through, for example, volunteering events. In order to best achieve these goals, we need a sustainable organization imbedded in the UVM community. To this end, we are currently working to accomplish the administrative and personal communication required to make this association viable for the long term. In this process, we've learned a ton about UVM and our fellow postdocs, and we are renewed our mission to be a great support for the changing postdoc community in the coming months and years. Here are a few of our biggest professional priorities for the rest of the academic year.

6-Month Outlook

1) Official UVM recognition
2) Annual Meeting with report and officer elections
3) Research and Assemble "postdoc handbook" with professional resources and information for incoming UVM postdocs.

Featured Postdoc: Zahra Mahoor
by Franzi Uhl

Today's interview is with Zahra Mahoor. She joined UVM in February 2017 and is currently working with Professor Josh Bongard in the department of Computer Science. If you haven't seen her around campus this might be due to the circumstance that she is located in Farell Hall across Colchester Avenue. If you are attentive you may be able to find her on one of the roads on her bike where she likes to spend her spare time.

Zahra did her undergraduate and master studies in Iran where she also taught computer science at a small college for 2 years. In 2010, after deciding to not go on teaching, she came to the University of Tennessee in Knoxville to do her PhD. There she used developmental robotics to improve the reaching and motor functions of robot arms. These arms need a "brain" which is resembled by a neural network controller. One can say that she did not really leave teaching with her PhD, since she mimicked the mechanisms with which infants learn how to reach and move their arms to "teach" those robot arms how to not be clumsy like a newborn puppy (yeah I know, they are cute). What I learned during this interview is that Python is not to be mistaken by its biological counterpart but is a programming language that can be used to communicate from man to robot.

Zahra's current project at UVM is in the field of evolutionary robotics. She built a crowdsourcing platform for users to teach virtual robots natural language in order to train them to obey human commands. This project is inspired by how we train our pets.

In the platform, users (potentially you!) decide on what words to teach and also provide positive or negative reinforcement to the displayed robots. Based on the users' reinforcements points are granted to the robot which will determine if it can be retained in the game or not. Every 31 days Zahra is looking at the data and working on an adaptation of the program for the next data generating cycle. The goal is to learn more about how humans and robots interact, how robots learn, and how to teach them morality. Since this study uses a "crowd mind" approach multiple online users are necessary. This can be a bit challenging and Zahra could really use some more data. In case I got anybody all excited about testing it, it is called "twitch plays robotics" and you should check it out at https://go.twitch.tv/twitchplaysrobotics. For more info, you can contact her at zahra.mahoor@uvm.edu.

Upcoming Events:

If you have a seminar, workshop, or social event that you think postdocs should know about, send us the info at Postdocs@uvm.edu.

Stay tuned for our next meeting date and a sponsored social event coming in December.

UVM LCOM Excellence in Research: Presentations by grad students and *postdocs!*
1-6pm, HSRF 300

Nov. 10

Excellence in Research
Keynote Speaker, Jon Lorsch
Director, NIGMS
Davis Auditorium, 4pm

Nov. 13

Call for Volunteers
The UVM-PDA strives to be both a professional resource and an encouraging community to actively grow the careers and lives of all postdocs. With this in mind, we are organizing several opportunities to share expertise and expand communication skills. Opportunities include ***group blogging, peer-led workshops, flash talk sessions***, and behind-the-scenes work ***connecting postdocs to new career growth opportunities on and off the UVM campus***. Email postdocs@uvm.edu for more information or to volunteer.

Join Us!
Meetings are in the Larner College of Medicine connected to Given and HSRF research buildings. A group email will announce our next meeting.

All postdocs are welcome! For more details, email postdocs@uvm.edu.

Postdocs@uvm.edu
www.uvm.edu/postdocs
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