

Career Series

Interview with Dr. Patrick Brandt, Director of Science, Training, and Diversity at UNC



Dr. Patrick Brandt is the Director of Science, Training, and Diversity at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Dr. Brandt received his Ph.D. in Biochemistry from the University of Rochester and completed a one year postdoc at the National Institute for Environmental and Health Sciences before taking a job at UNC.

Basic job description:

In my job as Director of the Office of Science, Training, and Diversity (STaD) at UNC I wear many hats. STaD focuses on recruiting a diverse student body to UNC's biomedical and biological sciences programs, offering training and career development programs for life science graduate students (eg. how to find a postdoc, effective science writing, alternative careers, etc), and science outreach. We run academic programs such as institutional training grants funded by NIH and certificate program for students who are interested in translational medicine or teaching. We are heavily involved in grad student support from the admissions process and orientation, through the training period and postdoctoral placement.

Type of education/training required:

There is no special certification required for my job, but it sure helps to have experienced grad school and a postdoc. I was hired at the program director level, which at UNC requires a PhD. I'm now the director of an office of 6 PhD trained program directors. During graduate school and my postdoc I participated in things that would help me with administrative duties in the future, such as outreach activities and organizing symposia.

Special talents or skills that contribute to career:

I believe the most important quality for someone in my position is to be concerned for every student's success, and to eagerly promote access to science for students from all backgrounds. In addition to those personality characteristics, organization and time management are also essential since we all have overlapping deadlines for multiple projects.

Average income range for people working in your area (entry level through experienced persons):

At UNC an entry level income for this type of position is \$50,000-\$60,000. A director position can pay about \$20,000 more than that.

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What is involved in a typical workday?

The work day is different every day! I spend a great deal of time emailing. I plan and present at events, workshops, and symposia. I also attend lots of meetings with faculty. Right now (fall 2012) we're in the thick of reviewing applications of new PhD candidates. Every applicant from an underrepresented group is read by a member of our office who attends the admissions committee meeting to advocate for that student. Throughout the year I also have one on one meetings with students to talk about CVs, cover letters, career paths, or job searching.

What do you like the best about your work? The least?

What I like the best is seeing a student succeed, hearing from them because they got the job they wanted, or a great postdoc, or a really great publication. I also like to start new programs, it is very appealing to me to create programs that help students prepare for and succeed in non-traditional careers.

There's nothing that I can't stand about the job - all in all it's a very rewarding career path. However, the times I like the least are when there are a *whole* lot of meetings, or I have a day of solid emailing. I'm also not super fond of grant writing, but I do like it when a proposal we write is funded!

How does your current position compare to working in other settings, like academia or industry?

My position has an academic feel to it; it's very flexible, but very demanding. Lots of people in the office have young families so there is flexibility and opportunity for creative work schedules. Similar to academia, we write grants, but our grants are not about research projects. While it might affect our jobs if a grant doesn't get funded, it's not like a lab where 5 peoples' salaries are dependent on the grant.

One unique aspect of the job is that there is a lot of travel - especially during the fall recruiting season. We exhibit at the Annual Biomedical Research Conference for Minority Students (ABRCMS) and the annual conference of the Society for the Advancement of Chicanos and Native Americans in Science (SACNAS). We also visit smaller historically black colleges and universities with which we've established relationships.

Why did you choose this career?

In some ways the career chose me, in other ways it is exactly what I had been looking for, but didn't know existed. I went through graduate school thinking that I wanted to be a professor, but when I saw the pressures my advisor was living under I wasn't sure that's what I wanted anymore. I thought maybe I would aim for an industry

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career. I learned something important about my skills and strengths as I went through graduate school and postdoc training. Some scientists are really good at planning projects and experiments. I wasn't as excited by pushing the envelope of scientific research as those trainees—I was excited about getting other people interested in science and supporting science. I realized that I most enjoyed the times I was advising or helping other students or planning career symposia, for example. As luck would have it, a dream position tailored to my skills and strengths opened up at UNC, which was not far from where I did my postdoc. I was in the right place at the right time.

What are your career goals?

I'm really happy with the progress our office has made. We started off very small, and at first the faculty didn't know much about us. Over the years the faculty have seen the value of our office, the value of recruiting a diverse student body, and the value of preparing all students for the realities of the present day work force. In terms of the future, my short term goal is to maintain the grants and faculty buy-in that are essential to the success of our office. For me personally, in ten years I would be happy if I were still leading this office. I could also see myself in an associate dean or similar position where I can have a broader impact on graduate education. A position such as that might have higher pay, but would also be further from the students, so it's both appealing and unappealing.

What path did you take to get to your current position?

I got my bachelor's degree in biochemistry from Brigham Young University. I then went to the University of Rochester, where I received a PhD in Biochemistry. I did a one year postdoc at the National Institute for Environmental Health Sciences, and I've now been at UNC for four years.

In what ways does your degree help you with this job?

Earning a PhD teaches you a lot more than simply how to run experiments. It also teaches critical thinking, problem solving, and project management skills. I learned how to communicate with faculty, present my point of view in a factual and logical way, mentor younger scientists, and I learned first hand the challenges grad students face as they choose a career path and look for postdoctoral training opportunities. I call on all these skills in my position every week, if not every day.

If you could begin again in your career, what would you do differently?

I personally have no regrets about my crooked career path; but that's not the same as saying that I wouldn't do anything differently. Would I tell my kids to go down the same path I did? Probably not, but I'm happy where I am and I love working with and seeing the UNC grad students succeed.

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What would be your career advice to someone who is currently in a genetics Ph.D. program? To someone who is currently a postdoctoral associate?

My blanket advice for any trainee would be to think about and decide early on what your career goal is. Then identify a Plan B since the original plan often doesn't work out. Find ways to make yourself competitive for those careers while you're a grad student and postdoc. For example, go to biotech networking events, help judge exhibits at a local science fair, organize a science policy student interest group, volunteer in your tech transfer office, arrange to teach an interactive lecture in a course your PI teaches, etc.

Don't be scared of failure or a crooked career path. No one has a straight career path; in most cases, you're not closing the door on *everything* else if you choose one path. Your first position after your postdoc or grad school does not have to be your final position.

If you're interested in pursuing a position like mine, I'd say go to professional development workshops if you are lucky enough to be at a university that has them. Be the student that says "I want to know about Science Policy and I am going to contact this policy analyst via LinkedIn and invite them to come down and talk to our grad students." Be on symposium planning committees or invite a seminar speaker for your department in order to learn about logistics. And finally, make your own events if there aren't any available.