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EXECUTIVE HARLEY RIDERS EXPLAIN THE JOY OF RIDING
Biotech Masters: 
UW launches program to produce bioscience leaders

BY JOSEPH VANDEN PLAS

A 2002 study on venture capital, issued by the accounting firm Smith & Gesteland, cited the lack of "serial entrepreneurs" as a reason why Wisconsin lags behind other states in attracting this important type of business financing. The term serial entrepreneur has nothing to do with business owners creating mayhem, but it does refer to people who start and play a role in managing multiple biotechnology companies.

A new Master of Science program in biotechnology offered at the University of Wisconsin may not be designed to mass produce serial entrepreneurs, but preparing students for leadership positions in biotechnology fields is at the core of the curriculum. The two-year program, which began last fall, attempts to provide a comprehensive overview of the business, science, and legal aspects of biotechnology. It is designed to develop the future leaders of Wisconsin's biotechnology industry, and several local bioscience firms have enrolled employees during the program's first year.

Without such training, these employees may someday find themselves far removed from the decisions that govern their companies. "We have several purposes for the program, but the overarching one, really, is to train new leaders for the biotechnology industry, particularly in the state of Wisconsin," said Richard Moss, chairman of physiology at the UW and director of the new program. "This grew out of a perceived need for additional scientific expertise in the biotechnology field. As we did market analysis, we discovered that this was only partly true, that actually there was a need on the part of biotechnology firms, at least in the Dane County area, for people who were prepared to take over leadership at, say, the project level. So we have actually crafted our curriculum to meet that specific need."

CLOGGING THAT BRAIN DRAIN

Concern about the departure of Wisconsin's educated young professionals was a critical motivation in the program's development. Its designers certainly did not dismiss the notion that there was an exodus from Wisconsin to both coasts. According to Moss, the university felt this very keenly in its own research laboratories.

"This is perhaps where we first sensed the need to train individuals to do research effectively in biotechnology, and after a couple of years, after we had imparted our apprenticeship and much of what we trained the individual to do, they would then move on to jobs in biotechnology and we'd start the process over," Moss explained. "We discovered also, as we started to investigate the needs of the biotechnology industry, that there was a similar kind of phenomenon occurring. That people perhaps were starting careers in biotechnology here in the Dane County area, but ultimately migrating to larger metropolitan areas and certainly to the coasts as well."

Program administrator Kurt Zimmerman said the course is for students who are looking to develop a broad range of skills that can be applied in a number of environments, and he suggested that the reverse of brain drain may be another benefit of the program. "We've had a number of applicants from out of state who are looking at the program, which is a part-time program for working professionals," he noted. "They're looking at relocating to Madison, establishing themselves professionally, and enrolling in the program. The program has definitely been a primary draw for them, so it does add to the attractiveness of the region."

There is more to it than the preservation of brainpower, however. The UW also heard loud and clear from biotechnology firms that there is a definite lack, even in the absence of brain drain, of people who are formally trained to assume leadership positions and lead mid-level project teams in their organizations. The program has several students who primarily are working in a laboratory setting, but who want to gain a breadth of knowledge of the biotechnology industry, enough to fulfill several roles in their respective companies.

CAJOLE AND ENROLL

Students have a variety of reasons to enroll, including the fact that they can continue working full time while they earn their master's degree.

Mark Harms already has a bachelor's degree in biological science from Northwestern, and he works as a produc-
tion scientist at Promega Corp. In the short term, he hopes the program will help him become more involved in the operation of his company. At the moment, he is focused on his department, but he’d also like to deal with any problems that arise in legal, finance, and marketing. “Those are things I haven’t been forced to think about before, whereas in this program we discuss them,” he said.

In the long run, his goal is to be a project manager of a product line, but he has not ruled out an entrepreneurial role. “I think this program gives us a huge head start on being able to say, ‘I don’t know all the answers, but I know enough about the factors in play that I can do this,’” he said.

The curriculum seeks to assure that all graduates have a standard level of scientific competency, but roughly 30% of the curriculum is devoted to the business expertise involved in taking a scientific idea and developing it into a commercially viable product. The third leg of the program is the legal aspect of biotech, including issues related to the ownership of intellectual property.

The program’s flexibility may give another student a better sense of career direction. Jennifer Fronczak, who holds a bachelor’s degree in biology from Macalester College (St. Paul, Minn.), works in the manufacturing department at PanVera. Fronczak enrolled in the program because she did not want to confine herself to a narrow area of science. She is not sure which path she wants to take in biotech—managerial, entrepreneurial, or other—and the program’s broad range of cutting-edge subject matter could help her decide.

“Currently, I’m a bench scientist, and I didn’t know if I wanted to become the leader of a scientific group or branch off into marketing, sales, or another route besides strictly science,” Fronczak said, noting that she has another year to choose her path.

Fronczak also said the course makes it more likely that she will settle in this area. “It’s exposed me to numerous industry leaders,” she said. “The guest speaker list for the program is amazing, and then I’ve gotten to know other students in the program very well, and so it’s turned into a networking circle.”

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sculpture, landscape design, and other artistic mediums. Beckwith's mosaics and garden structures are largely commissioned for homes; Bauer's are featured on Guild.com, and his paintings are sold in various galleries throughout the state.

While some entrepreneurs say that focusing on one endeavor is the key to success, Bauer and Beckwith would claim that finding a balance between many passions—native restoration, creating works of art, and practicing the art of soap making on State Street—is the key to a fulfilling career.

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