

Dr. Marquicia Pierce: Journey to Becoming a Business Consultant

Dr. Pierce was our seminar speaker for the month of November. With a background in both STEM research and business development, her talk centered around general advice to improve upon soft and hard skills that can translate to working on biotech startups. She broke these up into several categories including subject expertise, entrepreneurship, project management, communication, consulting, and network building. She outlined how she developed these skills through each phase of her career, which eventually culminated in her current role as a Program Manager at Spartan Innovations – Michigan State Research Foundation where she leads day-to-day operations of SBIR and STTR grant applications for MedTech companies and contributes to related incubator ecosystems.

While working on her PhD in molecular physiology and biophysics at Vanderbilt, Marquicia worked on many secondary projects to improve her abilities related to each of the categories. In addition to performing graduate level research to gain expertise in the life sciences, she also participated in tech venture challenges, audited engineering management courses, and worked with companies to gain some entrepreneurship experience. Contributing to the departmental newsletter and toastmasters (a public speaking-themed organization) helped her with communication. She even started a consulting club (She described Vanderbilt as a place generally receptive of student goals and understood not all students wanted to pursue academic or post-doc careers post-graduation. UW has a consulting club as well). All of these activities helped her build a broad network across multiple disciplines to lean on when transitioning to the next stage of her career.

Following her PhD, Marquicia began an industry/translational science-focused post-doc at Michigan State University. In this position, she was working with a team to develop small molecule therapeutics for cancer and build a spin-out company. She still performed research as scientific publications would help legitimize their technology. She also had to dedicate time to generate business plans and compile branded pitch decks to acquire investor funding. Although still rare, post-doc positions with a translational focus are becoming more common and may be an option for people interested in bridging the gap between scientific research and business development within a supportive environment. After leaving academia, Marquicia has had a fairly organic career progression through a few different program management or product development positions before arriving at her current spot at Spartan Innovations.

Some of the key takeaways from the talk were:

1. A career as a technology advisor combines complementary areas of expertise from PhD training that can be advantageous if you leverage those skills properly.
2. She is her own boss and it gives her advanced control over her schedule etc. to achieve her desired work-life balance.
3. Getting PMP certification can be a good way to shift career because it is more understood outside of academia as far as credentialing and you can most likely use PhD project work for minimum hours criteria, she did not get it because her MBA was a better use of time.
4. She suggests that even if your PI/advisor is supportive of non-research related activities, talking about them too much may subconsciously indicate that you are not being productive enough and may look bad if research is slow.
5. Customer discovery may be one of the harder skills for PhD students to learn as it requires a different type of thinking/method than traditional research.