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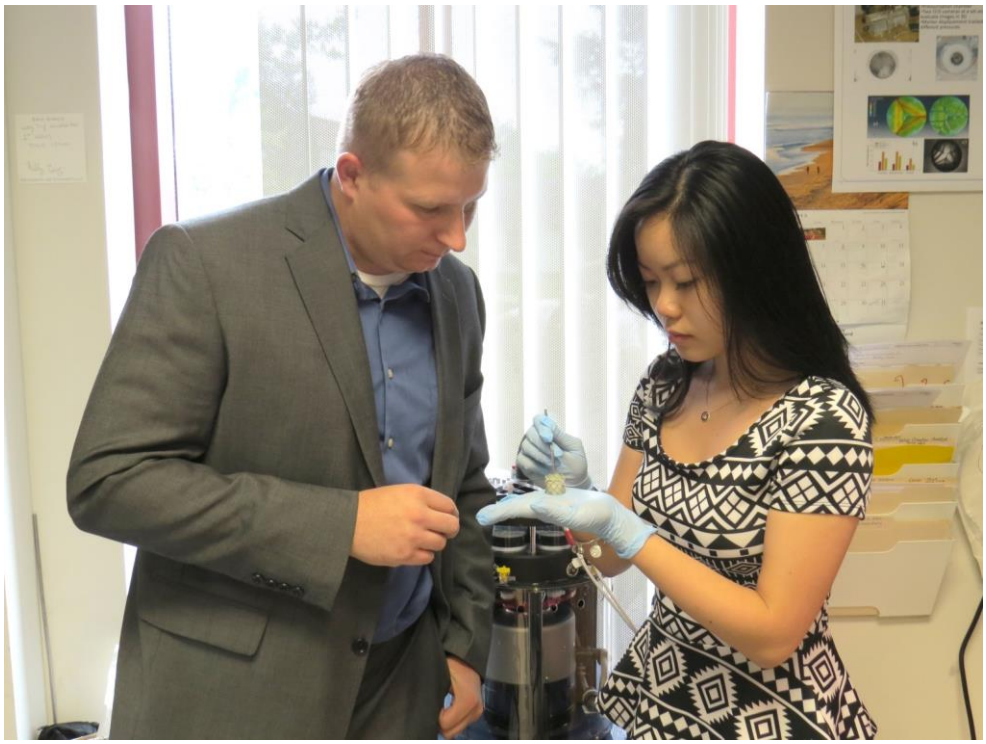
Interns Sample Tech World

Startups give students experience

By ZACH MELVIN



Eric Sirois, CEO of Dura Biotech, in Storrs, with UConn undergraduate Chia-Yi Jean, a summer intern this year.

(Photo Courtesy of UConn Technology Incubation Program)

When Eric Sirois was looking for an intern to handle marketing this summer at his heart-valve startup company, he combed through a list of MBA candidates to find the right one.

But it was UConn freshman Chia-Yi Jean, one of the only undergraduates to apply, who secured the position.

"Chia was one of the most impressive people we ever talked to," Sirois said.

Jean, a 2014 graduate of Farmington High School, created her own scholarship fund in high school, applying to more than 70 programs during her senior year.

"I didn't want finances to dictate where I wanted to go," she said.

She was able to cover her entire freshman year tuition at the UConn School of Business and attracted Sirois' attention when he reviewed her resume.

"From an entrepreneur perspective, that's what we need, that nothing-stands-in-my-way mentality," he said.

Sirois' company, Dura Biotech, is part of UConn's Technology Incubation Program, which offers startup companies access to university facilities. The program started in 2004 and provides incubator space to more than 20 companies at its campuses in Storrs, Farmington and Avery Point.

Four years ago, the program added an internship program after Caroline Dealy — an associate professor at UConn Health and a co-founder of TIP startup Chondrogenics — saw the startups as a great place for university students to enhance their education through work and research.

"It really was a whole new world for me, and an exciting world," she said. "By having this internship program, we're able to bring students into that world."

The internship program connects TIP companies with qualified students and recruits them for part-time work. On top of their work schedule, students in the recently completed session were required to attend at least one educational seminar a week and were responsible for two presentations summarizing their experience.

TIP is part of the push at UConn to spin off more companies. Like many universities, UConn has come to emphasize spinoffs and affiliations only in recent years. "The bridge between academia and industry is becoming so important," Dealy said.

Until this year, an intern's stipend was split between employers and the interns' school. This summer, many interns had their stipends — $3,500 for undergrads; $5,000 for masters students — fully covered by their university programs.

"The internship experience is academic in nature and frankly takes a lot of work to mentor the student," Dealy said. "That's why the university is willing to invest, because it's academic, first and foremost."

Jean was one of 12 interns participating in the program this year — up from three its first year. She was responsible for identifying customer segments for a Dura Biotech software product and forming networks with Connecticut hospitals.

"I enjoyed my experience. It was definitely challenging since I didn't have any prior knowledge," she said. "As of right now — since it is an early stage in my college career — I don't think it has specifically shaped me in a certain direction. However the skills I picked up will be very useful."

The program offers positions in science, technology, engineering and mathematics — particularly in biomedical research and computer science.

Sravani Kambam and Jagriti Das, two computer science masters candidates, interned at Voda, a water cooler startup co-founded by recent UConn graduate Matthew Cremins. The company needed help building a website from the ground up, and turned to Kambam and Das for help.

"When I brought on Jagriti and Sravani, I brought them on because I believe in their technical abilities to do great work," Cremins said. "It's not really my job to manage their technical work. In a startup company, you need people who are self-motivated and can work and learn on their own and really contribute from day one."

The two lacked any real-world experience in web design, but took the challenge head on.

"Every day it was like we decided, 'Oh, now we have to learn this technology,' and the next day, again, we had to learn a new technology," Das said. "Now that I look back, I'm feeling so good about it, because like every week we had a new technology to learn and implement."

Both said it was an immersive experience they likely wouldn't have had if they were working at a larger company.

"If we had an internship at a big company, not a startup company, then we may get a little knowledge or training or we might be working a small part of a project," Kambam said. "But here, we are taking care of the website entirely. It's a steep learning curve."

In addition to their work on the website, Cremins involved Das and Kambam in overall discussions and provided them with information on the product and the company's business plan.

"They're getting a much broader experience since they are startups than they would normally at a larger corporation," said TIP Director Paul Parker. "They're involved in business, they're involved in the lab work."

In high school, Jordan Williams participated in Yale's Discovery to Cure program, which allows students to experience the university's biomedical laboratories.

Now a junior at the College of Agriculture, Health and Natural Resources, Williams spent the summer at IMstem Biotechnology Inc. — a startup developing a stem cell treatment for multiple sclerosis. There, he was directly involved with the research, developing an assay, or tracer, to find human stem cells and help the company complete its toxicology studies.

"Whatever your treatment is, you have to see what it does when it's in the body. It may cure whatever you're trying to cure, but at the same time you have to see what negative effects it has as well," he said. "To be able to track these cells within the mouse, we're able to see how many cells are in each organ and what they're doing within that organ."

Williams said his work this summer broadened his ambitions in the medical field.

"Being able to go in, work for a startup company and actually get the experience on bench work and doing pretty much the science behind it, it really influenced me to research further into medical school, maybe go become a doctor, maybe get a Ph. D. in a certain area."

Some of the interns, including Jean, plan to return during the school year for part-time work. A few graduates are coming back to their companies full time.

That is what Dealy envisioned when she created the program — a way for TIP companies to connect with and test potential hires while providing students with experience in their field of interest.

"It basically serves as a gateway to a longer relationship," she said. "The university is really supporting it and recognizes that there's tremendous value in exposing students to this world."

Interns and mentors in the 2015 UConn-TIP Summer Intern Program