Purdue intern program assists biotech startups

By Chuck Bowen
Star correspondent

Tim Hott graduated from Purdue University this month with a great deal of book knowledge: a bachelor's degree in biochemistry and minor concentrations in management and biotechnology.

Interns for Indiana
The Interns for Indiana program started in the summer of 2004 with $3.5 million from Lilly Endowment. Since then:

• 331 interns have worked at 115 companies statewide.

• Interns have contributed an estimated 142,200 hours of labor.

• 70 percent of interns who graduate stay in Indiana.

• 56 students have been able to continue working part time at their internship companies outside the program.

• 5 students have been hired full time by their internship companies after graduating.

• Five former interns even started their own companies.

To learn more, visit www.purdue.edu/dp/learningcenter/.

Source: Purdue University

But during the 2006-07 academic year, Hott gathered something at least as valuable for his long-term goals: practical experience with a life-sciences company, while doing quality-control experiments for Quadraspec, based at Purdue Research Park in West Lafayette.

"This is something I've never done before, and it really opened my eyes," he said. "Biology and chemistry classes teach you the theory, but they don't really prepare you for the business world."

This fall, Hott will start law school classes in Michigan, where he will study intellectual property law and its application to the life sciences.

Students in Purdue's life-sciences internship program don't just fetch coffee or make copies of reports. They're much more likely to be writing business plans, doing market research or performing lab work.

Purdue began its Interns for Indiana program three summers ago to match highly skilled students with shorthanded startup companies. As a side benefit, they hoped to persuade those students to stay in the state once they graduated.

The interns come from diverse areas of study: computer science, engineering, communications, marketing and business. The program is open to any degree-seeking Purdue student with junior standing or higher (including graduate students) and with a grade-point average of at least 2.8.

Nearly three-quarters of the Interns for Indiana graduates stay in Indiana, according to data from the program, compared with just more than half of other Purdue grads.

Hott, a native of Kokomo, said the internship helped him realize that there were companies and jobs here in the state to suit his goals.

"Being in Indiana, when I start a family, is important to me," he said. "I always wanted to stay in Indiana, but I would not have known of the different opportunities available.

"Hopefully, I can find my way back here. That's my goal."

David Johnson, president and chief executive of BioCrossroads, an Indianapolis-based organization that promotes and funds life-sciences startups, said the program offers students a rare chance to work with companies that have few openings.
"They are really lean on the management side," Johnson said of typical life-sciences startups. "It’s not like a traditional corporate enterprise, where you have many layers. (The program) is one of the few opportunities they’ll have to see how these companies operate."

Joerg Schreiber, chief operating officer of Quadraspec, which makes disease diagnostic tools based on blood analysis, said the program gives his company a solid, high-quality resource to help employees.

"What we cherish in interns . . . you get cutting-edge-trained young people," Schreiber said. "If I would not have the interns, I would have a gap in my personnel lineup, or I would have to hire someone. In today’s time, hiring people is not easy."

After an intern’s summer stint is up, he said, the company will hire him or her part time to continue running programs and experiments during the school year.

"Some of them become part of the team, truly," he said.

That sort of inclusiveness carries over to many companies in the Interns for Indiana program.

Sue Hetzler, director of corporate communications for the Suros division of Hologic, said her intern last year, Natalie Litera, took over a big project and other daily tasks, freeing Hetzler to focus on long-range planning.

Litera went to work for Suros, located on Indianapolis’ Northwestside, after it had been purchased by Massachusetts-based Hologic, and Hetzler was trying to integrate the two companies’ brands and corporate cultures.

"To have her in here helping do that tactical work was a huge help to me," Hetzler said. "Natalie allowed me to help lead that integration effort."

Litera, a Highland native who graduated in May with a degree in communications, starts work on a master’s degree in the same field this fall. She said she appreciated the work she did at Suros -- which makes products to improve the collection of breast biopsy tissue -- because she knew it was valued by the company.

It wasn’t a stereotypical internship, Litera said, where "you get handed the dirt work and you don’t feel like you’re making a difference. You’re not doing any of that. Because these companies really want the students and the students really want the job.

"The program helped me realize: This is what I want to do."

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