

Nemucore raises the bar for biotech interns to produce results



Nicole Baker, a summer intern with Nemucore, a biotech company in Worcester. Nemucore interns typically work for about 12 weeks and are paid. T&G Staff/Christine Peterson

• • • **By Lisa Eckelbecker**
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Posted Jun. 25, 2015 at 7:08 PM

WORCESTER – Mackenzi R. McHugh sits at a horseshoe-shaped table and types on a laptop computer, nearly six hours into a shift that typically starts with a scientific meeting, continues with laboratory experiments and ends with data analysis.

At 20 years old, the Worcester Polytechnic Institute biology major from Corinth, Maine, is working with other interns at Nemucore Medical Innovations Inc. on projects critical to the biotechnology company.

“I never expected to have the responsibility I have here, but I’m glad that I do,” she said.

Ms. McHugh and her peers, many of them also tapping away at keyboards and thumbing through lab books one afternoon last week, are part of what Nemucore calls its “summer surge.” The

company's internship program, now in its fourth year, has more than doubled Nemucore's regular staff of nine workers by bringing 11 young women and two young men to the Union Street offices.

Internships are nothing new. Companies in a range of industries take on college students or recent college graduates for short periods to help the youthful workers gain experience and to build a pipeline of future workers.

But Nemucore expects its interns to produce.

Most of them attend WPI and are majoring in fields such as biology, biomedical engineering or chemistry. All had to take an in-house science test and pass an interview with President and Chief Executive Timothy P. Coleman to get their jobs.

"They don't just come here to make buffers and get me coffee," said Mr. Coleman, referring to solutions used in laboratory experiments. "They come to do the projects."

Nemucore is developing treatments for cancers that have developed resistance to multiple drugs. The privately held business, formed in 2008, has been mostly funded by foundation and federal grants.

One of its products has undergone early tests in humans. Nemucore is aiming to start human testing of a second product in a year.

Nemucore interns typically work for about 12 weeks, according to Mr. Coleman. All are paid. The Massachusetts Life Sciences Center, the quasi-public agency overseeing the state's grants and loans to life science entities, supports two of the 13 internships, Mr. Coleman said.

Nemucore interns were among the authors on the last four scientific articles published about Nemucore's work, and the work of interns is wide ranging. Some work with lab animals and measure tumors. Others are trying to figure out how to scale up production of Nemucore compounds.

"It's definitely getting thrown into the seat and (being told), 'Do your work,'" said Arianna J. Nitzel, 21, of Farmingdale, Maine. A major in biology and biotechnology at WPI, she called the work "less like an internship and more like a real job."

The interns said they also feel pressure to contribute to Nemucore as it grows.

"I just think there's higher expectations for us," said Corin A. Galati, 21, of Las Vegas, who is majoring in chemistry and chemical engineering at WPI.

"As the company pushes forward, they're looking for us to push forward, too," said Taylor A. Elias, 20, of Wayland, who is majoring in biology at Boston University.

Operating with so many interns can have its challenge. Mr. Coleman said summer interns last year bonded so well, they chatted freely in the lab and started a Facebook page. Problem was, he said, they weren't as productive as he had hoped.

His solution: Create a work area with the horseshoe-shaped table where interns could do their paperwork.

"Last year we did less writing," Mr. Coleman said. "This year there's more writing."

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