

TIBBS Career Blitz - January 2012

Career Profile of Principle Investigator at a Non-Profit Institute: Alison Harrill, PhD

What is your current title and how long have you worked in your current job?

My current title is Research Investigator in the Institute for Drug Safety Sciences at the Hamner Institutes for Health Sciences. I've been at the investigator level for 1 year, but have been an employee at the Hamner for 3 years. I also have an appointment as an Adjunct Assistant Professor with the UNC School of Pharmacy's Division of Pharmacotherapy and Experimental Therapeutics.

Where did you get your PhD and what discipline was it in?

I earned my Ph.D. from the Toxicology curriculum at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (2004-2008).

Did you do a postdoc?

I completed a one-year postdoc at the Hamner before transitioning to Research Scientist for a year before being promoted to the investigator level.

What are your main daily responsibilities?

My main daily responsibilities are: completing project update presentations for collaborators and funding sponsors, reviewing data and writing manuscripts, mentoring technicians and postdocs on staff, and seeking/applying for funding opportunities.

What are the keys to success in your career field?

A positive attitude and inquisitive mind are the best general tools for the young scientist. Toxicology is really more of a toolkit than a discipline in and of itself. In order to succeed in Toxicology, you need to have broad, cross-disciplinary training in a number of fields. You have to accept that mastery of other disciplines related to your thesis area of study (*i.e.* genetics in pharmacogenetics or neuroscience in neuropharmacology) is only a start and that you must be willing to continue with self-education in other disciplines as you progress through your career. This is true in any field, but is particularly salient to Toxicology careers.

What were the most important factors in choosing your career path?

The single most important factor in choosing Toxicology was the immediate impact that the field has on preserving (in the case of drug safety) or maintaining (in the case of chemical safety) human health.

What 1 or 2 pieces of advice do you have for people who want to land a job like yours?

It cannot be emphasized enough: *learn to give a good talk/seminar on your research and practice whenever possible*. The reasons that I recommend developing this skill are three-fold: (1) a research talk is the most important part of almost any job interview, (2) you will be giving talks or project updates in some form or fashion for the rest of your career and it helps to be comfortable doing it, and (3) giving a great talk can help you to build connections and generate enthusiasm for your work among colleagues. Start by presenting at lab meeting or local meetings and work your way up to national meeting presentations, even if it is a poster presentation. The other piece of advice that I would give is to apply for any research or conference travel awards for which you are eligible. It is great practice for applying for funding, although in a smaller scale, and helps to elevate your CV to the top of the stack of potential candidates.