



Leaders' Update

A message from Devanand Sarkar, associate director for education and training

Dear colleagues,

I am pleased to share several updates on education and training programs at Massey Cancer Center.

First, Massey is participating in a new program – the RAM (Research Access through Mentoring) Opportunity Program – developed in collaboration with the VCU Grace E. Harris Leadership Institute (GEHLI) and VCU Graduate School to offer experiential learning opportunities for both VCU graduate research/teaching assistants and local high school students by pairing them as mentors and mentees. Through the program, high school students gain hands-on experience working in a research laboratory and grad students gain teaching and training experience.

The program grew out of interest from local high school students requesting to spend part of their summer breaks interning in VCU medical research labs. The RAM Opportunity Program pairs one graduate student with three high school students for a 10-day summer internship in which the grad student provides the high school students an overview of the disease they are studying and teaches them how to work in a lab and use lab tools and equipment. The grad student develops the curriculum with advisement from their research faculty advisor and supervises the high school students' projects and lab work.

The program charges high school students \$800 in tuition, which the grad student can use to help fund their attendance at professional conferences to further their career development. A scholarship fund will be developed to help students who need tuition assistance. With philanthropic funding, Massey has pledged to cover one scholarship per year for students studying in a cancer research lab.

The program was piloted in my lab this past summer. My grad student and the high school students she trained both found it to be a meaningful and helpful learning experience. Additionally, the RAM Opportunities Program is a great way to recruit high-achieving students to VCU and to instill passion for medical research in younger generations.

The Graduate School office will manage the RAM Opportunity Program and will work with local high school counselors to match the high school students with the VCU graduate research/training assistants. The program will launch in summer 2019. Look for an announcement about it coming in the spring.

In July, Massey Cancer Center members Bernard Fuemmeler, Ph.D., M.P.H., and Vanessa Sheppard, Ph.D., received a T32 grant from the NCI to support a postdoctoral training program in cancer prevention and control. This two-year fellowship is individually tailored and multidisciplinary. It offers a core curriculum in the science and practice of conducting CPC research, individualized training opportunities and mentorship through research experience. Areas of research broadly include behavioral cancer prevention and control and health services/outcomes research.

In addition, Massey supports two students per year in the Cancer and Molecular Medicine Ph.D. concentration, which is a doctoral program led by the C. Kenneth and Dianne Wright Center for Clinical and Translational Research (CCTR) and co-directed by me and fellow Massey research member Joyce Lloyd, Ph.D. The concentration is designed to train students in the research skills required to perform translational research in cancer and molecular medicine. Students are selected by the program directors.

Finally, Massey offers cancer research postdoctoral fellowships to provide mentored research training to promising scientists and physician-scientists who have the potential to become productive, independent cancer research investigators and successfully compete for peer-reviewed, extramural funding. The fellowships are offered within two separate tracks: (1) The Cancer Laboratory Research Track focuses on all theoretical and experimental research projects relevant to the study of cancer and the search for cancer causes, mechanisms, therapies and prevention; and (2) The Cancer Prevention & Control Track is focused on research projects related to topics in cancer prevention and control including (but not limited to) cancer policy and economics, communication and decision making, survivorship, disparities, community-engaged research and behavioral interventions. Given more philanthropic funding, we would like to expand this program. Massey's Education and Training Committee is currently reviewing applications for the 2019 fellowship.

If you are interested in getting involved in any of Massey's training programs or have input as to how we can improve our educational offerings, please contact me. Thank you to the research members who are helping Massey to teach our future cancer researchers and clinicians.

Sincerely,

Devanand Sarkar, M.B.B.S., Ph.D.
Associate director for education and training