

## Alumni Profile

### Heather Wright – Cellular and Molecular Biosciences Gateway PhD Program



#### Career

Please provide a brief overview of your career path since graduating from UCI.

*I just finished my first year as a post-doc at Fred Hutch.*

What made you get into the career that you are in?

*I enjoy doing research.*

What do you see yourself doing in five or ten years?

*Five years: probably finishing up a second post-doc and applying for a faculty position at a non-profit... Or if that doesn't work out, applying for a teaching position at a liberal arts school... or starting a traveling tutoring company.*

*10 years: trying to get tenure? ... or traveling and tutoring.*

How do you hope to make a difference?

*By curing pancreas cancer... or teaching the next generation the skills to do it.*

#### Your Time at UCI

When did you attend UCI?

*From 2012-2017.*

What program were you in?

*I came in through the Cellular and Molecular Biosciences umbrella program and then joined the department of Molecular Biology and Biochemistry.*

Why did you choose to come to UCI?

*Because they offered the most diverse umbrella program of any of the institutions applied to and I was not sure of the trajectory that I wanted to go, research-wise, so it was nice having all of the options.*

## Reflections

What made you decide to pursue a graduate degree?

*I enjoyed research and wanted to get paid to learn more.*

What is your most memorable moment/experience at UCI?

*Meeting my PI, Olga Razorenova, at the CMB Recruitment weekend while I was in my second rotation because, in my perspective, we hit it off immediately. When we met later that week, it was the first time in grad school that I felt really confident that and probably too boldly told her I was rotating with the intention of staying, to which she responded, "well, we'll see how it goes." Second most memorable: defending, because I also felt very confident then, probably because Olga and I were on the same page. I guess what I'm saying is Olga is awesome and should be nominated for a mentoring award.*

Was there one thing or one person at UCI that really helped or made a difference in your graduate/postdoctoral career? If so, tell us about whomever or what it was?

*See above: Olga Razorenova. But I also had another very influential mentor, Peter Donovan. He helped me get independent funding and was almost always available when I needed advice, etc., which I think is pretty crazy, considering his schedule. He and Olga were both really good at treating me and my opinions with respect, which was instrumental in building my confidence as an independent scientist. He should also be nominated for a mentoring award.*

Did you do any research while at UCI and what was it?

- How would you explain your research to your grandparent? How would you help someone understand the importance/significance of this research?

*I studied one of the worst subtypes of breast cancer, triple-negative breast cancer. It is called triple-negative because it does not express the estrogen receptor, progesterone receptor, or HER2 receptor, making it resistant to all of the treatments commonly used for other breast cancer subtypes. I specifically studied how the cancer progresses to grow in distant organs (metastasizes), which ultimately kill a patient. I uncovered a few mechanisms that triple-negative breast cancer cells use to metastasize, which can be targeted therapeutically to prevent the process and improve triple-negative breast cancer patient survival and quality of life.*

- What has impressed you most about the subject matter that you chose for your research/degree while at UCI?

*I was impressed at how terrible triple-negative breast cancer is. I really understood how terrible the prognosis is compared to other breast cancer subtypes when I was attending these weekly Tumor Board meetings, where all the doctors involved (surgical oncologists, radiologists, medical oncologists, plastic surgeons, etc) solidify individual plans of attack for all of their patients that include the chemo and radiation regimens, surgical interventions, and post-*

*surgical reconstruction options. The discussions were never straight forward for triple-negative patients like they were for patients diagnosed with other types of breast cancer.*

## **Alumni Life**

What are you currently up to?

*Post-doctoral scholar.*

How did your education at UCI benefit you in your current life?

*It made me a competitive candidate for a post-doc position and, hopefully, for more independent funding.*

What book or podcast would you suggest to someone who is just getting started with their graduate career at UCI? (Examples – *Podcast: Happier with Gretchen Rubin; Book: Who Moved my Cheese*)

*Podcast: Professor Blastoff, it is not around anymore, but is likely archived (it is 3 comedians that have science experts on.. there is a lot of riffing).*

*Comedy Bang Bang: It is around still but I would recommend listening from the beginning for all the inside jokes.*

*Book: Slaughterhouse 5, graduate school can be a real bummer at times. You shouldn't take anything you do too seriously. We exist in a vast multi-verse and our contributions in life may not matter at all, so you should just enjoy what you do. Also, stay well-rounded.*

What advice do you have for a new graduate student?

*See above: Graduate school can be a real bummer at times. You shouldn't take anything you do too seriously. We exist in a vast multi-verse and our contributions in life may not matter at all, so you should just enjoy what you do. Also, stay well-rounded to maintain perspective.*

What advice would you give to a current graduate student as they look towards their future careers?

*You have options, academia is not the only one! Politics, teaching, non-profit, industry, entrepreneurship, changing career paths completely (i.e. opening a bakery).*

What was your biggest obstacle transitioning from life of a graduate student to your career?

*I moved from SoCal to Seattle soo.. Moving is expensive and regional cultures are unique, even within the same country. It was rough fitting in up here but after a year I am starting to feel comfortable. But I always consider my first year in a new place a wash because change is hard and it usually takes me a couple of years to really judge the fit.*

What is the most unexpected life lesson that you gained from your time at UCI?

*I am capable of much more than I thought I was.*

What are your hobbies/passions outside of your work/research?

*My family, my friends, being in nature (running, backpacking), yoga, traveling, art*

How do you balance work/life?

*By partaking in all of the above.*

What person inspires you?

*My dad.*

Is there a typical 'down' weekend for you—how do you relax?

*I go hiking.*