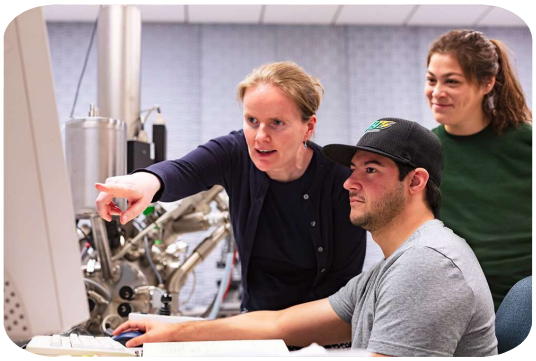
MSE Students and Alumni

Winter 2019

Latest News

The first Alumni Homecoming event was held on November 2019 and if you weren't there than we dearly missed you. Activities included a networking session, research seminars, and a panel.

NSF has granted $1.1 million through the Bridge to the Doctorate program, providing funding for 12 students from underrepresented minorities to pursue graduate education at UT Dallas. Dr. Amy Walker is the principal investigator on this NSF project.



If you have news to share or would like to stay in touch with the MSE community you can join our monthly newsletter here.

Five answers from...

Audrey Hammack, PhD

Process Engineer at UTDallas

1. Recall your last year in gradschool, what were the options you were considering as a career?

To be frank, my last year in grad school was pretty dismal and a very dark time. A lot of conversations I had with a counselor revolved around the anxiety that I had about finding jobs. **I was committed to finding a job in industry, but why? I had zero interest in staying in academia, so it seemed like industry was the only other way to find "success" and a paycheck to validate all the hard work.** My counselor wondered why I would be so committed to being employed in an environment that seemed toxic to me.

With that in mind, **I began to seek out opportunities to learn about "alternative" careers for PhDs.** I came to a point where I could very honestly say that the thing that I enjoyed the most about grad school was my time spent as a TA. It feels like a foolish thing to admit, because no one goes to grad school to learn how to be a TA, but I legitimately did enjoy leading lab sections, giving students feedback on lab reports, training students on lab equipment, and teaching review/problem solving sessions.

As the final thesis experiments were wrapping up, **I pushed pause on applying for industry jobs, and began to seriously consider what it would take to be employed as a college instructor or high school teacher.**

2. How did you land your first job?

This is the part where I encourage the readers to show up for your collaborators as much as you do for your own work; **the connections you make with collaborators can have just as much of an impact as anyone else in your professional network,** and you should not discount the value of who knows whom in your network.

One of my collaborators was at UTD, and was the VP for Research. He held

weekly roundtable with his research group, and eventually I started coming to them. One day, another student in the group mentioned that some equipment in the cleanroom was down, and the outage was affecting her work. The cleanroom is a campus resource that falls under the responsibility of VP of Research, and **the PI lamented that if the lab continued to struggle in this way, then a very valuable resource could find itself in a crisis.** After he said that, my brain went into overdrive. I spent many hours in the lab as a user and I was eager to teach. I could see myself training other users and helping them troubleshoot their experiments, the same way that the cleanroom staff had helped me.

At the end of the lab meeting, **I half-jokingly suggested to the PI that efforts to be proactive against the "cleanroom crisis" could present an interesting opportunity for a young person that wanted to exchange work for money, ie a job for me.** This casual remark got the ball rolling on some interesting conversations between my adviser, the VP of Research, the cleanroom director and assistant director; all of these people knew each other previously and were familiar with myself and my work in some capacity, so everyone was in agreement that I had a skill set that would serve me as a process engineer in the cleanroom.

3. Describe your transition from graduate school into the workforce.

Literally? I just moved from the 4th floor of NSERL to the 1st. But beyond that, **I had to take an active role in learning what goes on behind the scenes in the cleanroom that users do not see**, because that was where my biggest knowledge gap was. There is a lot of hard work that goes into keeping the space safe and functional, that is not very obvious to the casual user.

4. What is your plan for the future? Are you staying at UTD or would you like to move on to something/somewhere else?

I am most interested in staying at UTD. I am interested to see how my responsibility expands as the lab undergoes changes to support a growing user base.

5. Was there anything special about UTD and the department that has helped in your professional career?

Did I mention the cleanroom already? In addition to having fabrication equipment that was necessary for my thesis research, the lab also has a staff of engineers and technicians with unparalleled experience. The staff works very hard to educate users on tools, minimize tool downtime, and ensure that the lab continues to adhere safety standards. The care that the staff puts into the lab is one of the features that separates the lab from other research spaces on campus, and distinguishes the cleanroom as one of the more valuable resources on campus.

Thank you Audrey for highlighting the importance of considering the career paths available to PhDs that do not wish to pursue academia or industry positions. These "alternative careers" are just more ways of finding success. As we have seen through the stories featured here, never underestimate the power of having a network.

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