

18 High Schools Throughout New Jersey Participate in First Ever Young Women in Bio Event at Rutgers

Rutgers University hosted one of the first Young Women in Bio (YWIB) events in New Jersey Oct. 20 at Robert Wood Johnson Medical School. Approximately 270 high school women from 18 schools throughout New Jersey attended the event to learn about career options for women in biomedical sciences. Janet Alder, PhD, associate professor of neuroscience and cell biology at Robert Wood Johnson Medical School and assistant dean for graduate academic and student affairs at School of Graduate Studies, Rutgers University, organized and executed the event, which was the largest YWIB event ever held in the United States or Canada. Young Women in Bio is a part of the national Women in Bio organization, designed to introduce school girls to careers in science, technology, engineering and math (STEM).

Dr. Alder, who is a mother to two teen-aged daughters, realized that high school students are not exposed to the wide range of career paths in science and medicine, which motivated her to plan a large event in New Jersey. The goal was to introduce young women to science careers and the steps to take to pursue those careers, while giving them hands-on experience and opportunities to meet women in different areas of science. “We wanted students to understand that if you want to help people, you can do that in many careers. While physicians treat patients, researchers cure diseases. People don’t realize that there are vast career options with a degree in science. Science writing, public policy, patent law, and business consulting are just a few of the paths open to budding scientists,” says Dr. Alder.

During the event, high school students listened to a panel of six women in diverse areas of science, who shared their experiences and answered questions about their careers. Panelists included Tanaya Bhowmick, MD, assistant professor of medicine, Robert Wood Johnson Medical School; Debbie McCluskey, RN, nurse manager, Rutgers Clinical Research Center; Estela Jacinto, PhD, associate professor of biochemistry and molecular biology, Robert Wood Johnson Medical School; Valerie Fitzhugh, MD, associate professor of pathology and laboratory medicine, New Jersey Medical School; Karen Akinsanya, PhD, clinical pharmacology, discovery research and business development, Merck & Co Inc.; and Ina Nikolaeva, PhD, senior medical writer, ClinicalThinking.

Broader than only Rutgers, Liberty Science Center, Student2Science, Curious Science Writers, WestchesterBiotechProject and the Association for Women in Science-Central Jersey participated in hands-on learning experiences for the students and organizing the event. Demonstrations included forensic anthropologists in charge of discovering the identity of bones found at a crime scene and extracting DNA from strawberries. The high school students also had the opportunity to speak at lunch with current MD and PhD students, who shared what it is like to be a woman in STEM at Rutgers.

The first YWIB event was hugely successful and impactful for future generations of women in STEM, with the maximum number of schools participating. “Women are still underrepresented in science. Giving young women attainable options they can achieve, with role models who show them how to get there is important for their future.” says Dr. Alder, who hopes to host this event at Rutgers again in the future.