FelCom’s Career Development Seminar ‘Careers in Teaching’ offered an opportunity for NIH fellows to learn more about this career choice from five panelists who shared their experiences as teachers and provided their view on teaching as a profession.

Dr. Julie Takacs was the first of the panelists to share her experience. Dr. Takacs received her B.A. in Chemistry from Franklin and Marshall College in Lancaster, PA in 2004. Afterwards, she joined the Johns Hopkins graduate program and worked in Dr. Jon Lorsch’s group investigating start codon selection in eukaryotic translation initiation. While studying at Johns Hopkins University, she started getting involved with the community outside the campus and realized that she could make an impact in society by teaching. She joined the ‘Teach for America’ program just after graduation in 2011 and has been working in Carver Vocational-Technical High School in Baltimore City ever since. She strives to inspire interest in Chemistry among her students. She informed the audience about the ‘Teach for America’ program, which trains college graduates for classroom teaching and then supports them financially for two years. She urged the audience to “think about the society we live in and contribute to it in the best way we can.” To learn more about ‘Teach for America’ program, please visit their website http://www.teachforamerica.org/

Next in the panel was Dr. Nathan Wright, Assistant Professor at James Madison University, VA. Dr. Wright got his bachelors degree in biology from Haverford College and masters in Cellular and Molecular Biology from the University of Pennsylvania. After a stint as a lab technician in a crystallography lab at Thomas Jefferson University, he joined the PhD program at the University of Maryland Baltimore. As a graduate student, he worked in Dr. David Weber’s lab and wrote his thesis on “Solution structure and cellular function of S100A1.” He then did a two and half-year postdoctoral fellowship in Dr. Joel Schildbach’s laboratory at Johns
Hopkins University studying the structures of proteins involved in bacterial conjugation before joining James Madison University as a faculty member. As a faculty member, he divides his time between teaching, writing grants (both research and educational) and guiding undergraduate students in the research laboratory. Dr. Wright's decision to join James Madison University was a very planned one. He was an adjunct faculty member at Loyola College during his postdoc, which provided him with experience in teaching. He stressed the importance of the job search and interview process. He advised aspiring teachers to learn more about the department and the University to evaluate personal goals with the institute's mission. As a faculty member in a department that does not offer a graduate program, he is expected to devote time to teaching but has to write grants too.

Dr. Lori Kelman was the next speaker. Dr. Kelman is a Professor at Montgomery Community College in Germantown, Maryland. She did her Ph.D. in Molecular Biology at Cornell University and received an M.B.A. in management from Iona College. She also has a masters in Biology from St. John's University. Dr. Kellman has been teaching since 1991. She is the recipient of numerous awards like the National Institute for Staff and Organizational Development award of Excellence (2009), Yokeley Faculty Service Award (2009) and Faculty Outstanding Service Award (2008). She is an author of a textbook and editor of BIOS; a quarterly journal of biology. Dr. Kelman was a faculty member at Iona College (a four year undergraduate college) as well, so she painted a comparative picture of teaching responsibilities and expectations in a community college versus a four year college. She explained that while most of the courses in community colleges are 100 and 200 level courses, a 4-year college offers more variety in types of courses, and this alters the teaching requirements. Generally, teachers in a community college teach various sections of the same course, whereas in a 4-year college, teaching multiple courses is common. Community colleges do not provide research facilities, but 4-year colleges do. Therefore, in community colleges, teaching is the largest responsibility whereas in a 4-year college you have to juggle between teaching and research.

Next, Dr. Cecilia Bonagelino spoke to the audience. Dr. Bonagelino is currently taking time off, but previously taught honors and AP courses at Georgetown Preparatory School. She received her Ph.D. in
Biochemistry from the University of Iowa in 1999 and was a postdoctoral fellow in Dr. Juan Bonifacino’s lab in the Cell Biology and Metabolism branch, NICHD where she studied protein trafficking. During her postdoctoral fellowship, she discovered an interest in teaching while interacting with postbaccalaureate volunteers and summer interns in the laboratory. After that she explored her interest further by teaching a night class in Biology at Montgomery Community College. She started teaching full-time in 2006 at Georgetown Preparatory School where she remained until 2011. While responding to a question about job security of teachers in high school, Dr. Bonifacino said, “high schools have a need for science teachers and the jobs are more secure than other positions.” She also shared with the audience resources to get certification. Maryland government has a certification program and institutes like Montgomery College, Johns Hopkins University and the University of Maryland offer courses to get Teaching certification. Certification can be obtained on your own too. The process requires the evaluation of your transcripts by state educational boards and scores on the PRAXIS test. GRE scores can be an alternative choice for the PRAXIS-I test, but the PRAXIS-II and III have to be taken.

The last speaker of the panel was Dr. Katie Tift. She received her undergraduate training at Vassar College and then joined NIH as a postbac fellow. She did her Ph.D. at Johns Hopkins School of Medicine and was a post-doctoral fellow at NIH for 2.5 years. Now Dr. Tift is a non-tenure track lecturer in the department of Biology at Johns Hopkins University (JHU). As a lecturer in JHU, she has teaches big classes and coordinates with other faculty members and teaching assistants. She encouraged the audience to explore the opportunities available before deciding on a career, and recommended the NIH OITE as an excellent resource. She emphasized networking and obtaining first-hand experience in teaching. She also talked about reformatting resumes to emphasize one’s qualification for the job.

In summary, if you are considering a career in teaching, you should be passionate about it. Prior experience in teaching is vital to familiarize yourself with the expected tasks and demonstrate your commitment to the profession.