

Creating STEM Career Opportunities Through Mentorship and Networking



Odalis Castro, Bioengineering Student Graduating in May 2021

“When it comes to building your career, focusing on graduating isn’t enough to lead to new opportunities,” says Odalis Castro, dual-campus bioengineering student at the [University of Colorado Denver](#) and [Anschutz Medical Campus](#). As a first-generation college student, Colorado-born Odalis has practiced the art of relationship building to open doors to new experiences, including participating in the [Colorado BioScience Institute’s Mentor Program](#).

From her first chemistry class in college, she knew that she was called to pursue STEM. Not knowing anyone in a STEM field or where to start, Odalis cold-called and emailed several labs to find one willing to let her work. Her outreach paid off when one lab offered her the chance to work alongside and shadow a scientist. She has since continued working on research and has published some of her work in scientific journals and presented at conferences.

Odalis saw the results of having a mentor from her first lab experience and explored participating in other mentor opportunities. During the fall and spring of 2020-2021, the [Colorado BioScience Institute](#) virtually held its annual Mentor Program, a facilitated program for Colorado undergraduate students to connect with and learn from life sciences professionals. Odalis’ mentor, Michael Mestek, Ph.D., is the director of US marketing at [Medtronic, Patient Monitoring](#) and a board member for the Colorado BioScience Institute. He brings a wide variety of experience to share with his mentees, which initially piqued her interest when selecting a mentor.

“I enjoy participating in the Institute’s Mentor Program because I get to play a role in the professional development of Colorado’s next generation of life sciences leaders. I enjoy sharing my career experiences with students and learning from them at the same time. I’m continually impressed by students like Odalis who proactively seek mentoring early in their careers and love hearing about their successes,” explained Michael. Odalis aspires to attend medical school in the future and is inspired by Michael’s use of his scientific background with a medical device company.

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“The experience to connect with local talent and learn from professionals is a deeply valuable experience,” says Odalis. This program was helpful in fueling her network and future career path, including being introduced to other professionals by her mentor, and developing interview skills and resume tips.

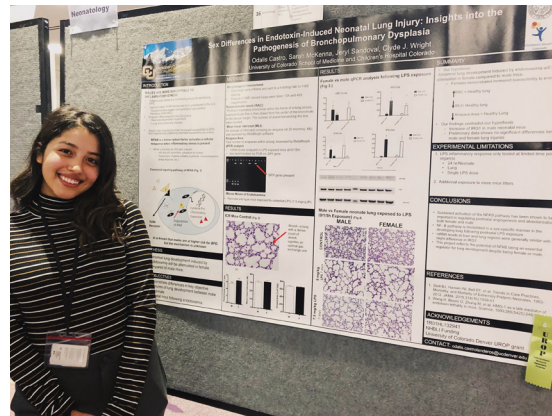
For Odalis, the way to create opportunities is to continue to take initiative, make connections, and bring her unique value to every project or situation. During her time in the Mentor Program, through a virtual bulletin announcement at her school, she noticed an opportunity to work in a lab overseas for an academic school year, and applied.

In Fall 2021, Odalis is headed to Poland to work in a prestigious university lab, Jagiellonian University, through the [Fulbright Scholar Program](#) to conduct skin cancer research. Odalis’ future lab supervisor for the program, Jolanta Jura, Ph.D., has experience with international scientific collaborations, working alongside scientists in other countries, and settling in to being abroad.

“I’ve always had male supervisors, so to be able to work with a woman Principal Investigator and see myself represented in STEM is what I’m most excited for in Poland!” She hopes to come back to Colorado and build her network with others that have participated in the same program to promote the opportunities and benefits of working with others across the globe and the value of collaboration.

To other students, her advice is initiative is key to being an advocate for your future. “If you aren’t sure the right path to take – take that class or reach out to that professor who might know someone that can help you. If you’re not afraid to take those extra steps, you’ll be surprised how willing others are to be a guide.”

Making connections and considering all opportunities to start getting involved and stay involved is always valuable. Colorado’s life sciences ecosystem continues to inspire future innovators and increase and diversify our talent pipeline through connections. The Institute cultivates a strong life sciences talent pipeline in Colorado through workforce development trainings and STEM education programs for students, teachers, and professionals at all levels.



Odalis Castro, Annual Winter Research Pediatric Poster Session at Children’s Hospital Colorado