U.S. DEPARTMENT of ENERGY | Office of Science

Felicity Wheatly

Accelerating A Career

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Chicago native learns valuable lessons through her two WDTS internships at SLAC national laboratory

By Allan Brettman

From the time she was a high school student in Chicago to her internships at the Department of Energy's SLAC National Accelerator Laboratory , Felicity Wheatley has followed three career guideposts.

Work, learn, grow.

"You only learn as much as you push yourself to learn," said Wheatley, who is in her second internship at SLAC, one of 17 Department of Energy (DOE) national laboratories. "Sometimes you need to be your greatest advocate."

Wheatley, though, credits her community college advisor for alerting her to the DOE Office of Workforce Development for Teachers and Scientists (WDTS) internships programs.

At the time, in late 2022, Wheatley was pursuing an associate's degree in biology at Malcom X College in Chicago . Also at the time, she was in the midst of a biology internship at the University of Illinois-Chicago.

After Hillary Freeman (WDTS STEM Education Program Manager at SLAC) reached out to Malcom X Community College, Felicity's academic advisor, Kristen Godinez, sent an email to all the students she worked with. Wheatley recalled, "It immediately caught my eye. I thought, 'Oh, I need to see about this.' When opportunities come up, I make sure I check them out and give myself a chance."

Wheatley, a lifelong Illinois resident, also was intrigued with the idea of living and working in California during a 10-week internship. So, she directed her Community College Internships (CCI) application toward SLAC, located in Menlo Park, Calif. (CCI is one of six core WDTS programs.)

She was selected and assigned to projects involving SLAC's legendary 2-mile-long particle accelerator as well as the Linac Coherent Light Source (LCLS), an instrument that takes X-ray snapshots of atoms and molecules. The experience offered Wheatley—whose education

has focused on biology—a first-hand and first-time introduction to physics.

Wheatley's desire to work, learn, and grow was obvious to colleagues.

"One of Felicity's many gifts is her boundless growth mindset that is perfectly balanced with her unwavering deep roots," said Hillary Freeman, STEM education program manager at SLAC. "She is open to new ideas, fresh perspectives, learning new skills, and developing and testing ideas. She looks forward and marches toward her scholarly interests while simultaneously remembering to reach back to her rich heritage for guidance and stability."

The strong connections Wheatley formed during the internship motivated her to apply again to work at SLAC. This time she applied through the WDTS Science Undergraduate Laboratory Internships (SULI) program. Her work assignment this time has a direct connection to her future career goals.

This fall, Wheatley will enroll at the University of Illinois-Chicago, pursuing an undergraduate degree in biology. Post graduation, she plans to enroll in medical school, envisioning a career as dermatologist.

A year before enrolling at Malcom X Community College, Wheatley became a certified esthetician. Through assisting clients with skin care, she became intrigued with the deeper health-related issues her clients faced and the medical explanations behind those issues. The experience prompted her interest in biology and, ultimately, a medical degree.

This summer, Wheatley's project assignment is again closely aligned with the SLAC accelerator.

"But this time, it's more biology based," Wheatley said. "The assignment is sort of a combination of data analysis, accelerator physics, and cancer research. It's right up my alley."

Freeman, the STEM program manager, noted the applicability of this summer's assignment to Wheatley's career goals. "Felicity's broadened knowledge of human-centered STEM career possibilities, juxtaposed with her natural confidence and grounding, create the perfect storm for post-degree employment options at one of the national labs," Freeman said.

Wheatley noted her path through the national laboratory system may not have even started if not for that pivotal email at Malcom X College.

Godinez, who sent that email to several students, not just Wheatley, said she is not surprised that Wheatley pursued the opportunity and has thrived.

“Throughout her time with us, Felicity demonstrated exceptional responsibility, resilience, and leadership,” said Godinez, an advisor in Advancing Opportunities for Women in STEM at Malcom X. “From the outset, Felicity was an engaged and proactive student, consistently seeking out opportunities for STEM exposure and growth. She managed to balance her rigorous academic schedule with several STEM-focused internships, excelling in both without compromising her GPA. Her ability to maintain high academic standards while gaining practical experience is a testament to her extraordinary work ethic and time management skills.”

A sense of awe characterized her first summer at SLAC, Wheatley said.

“It was amazing to see what these people could do. They are so capable. I felt like I am so small, but these people are so big,” she said. “But it’s the people I worked with who taught me that they had to start somewhere, too. Everyone is a regular person, until they’re not.

“For anyone else starting an internship, I’d tell them to relax and be yourself,” she said. “And definitely be collaborative and open to learn. And be open to helping where you can. That just might lead to somewhere you never thought of before.”