

## Dr. Will Conrad: The ‘Cell’-fless Mentor, Collaborator, and Partner

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Dr. Will Conrad is an Assistant Professor in the Chemistry department at Lake Forest College (LFC). When the Biochemistry and Molecular Biology (BMB) major first became official at LFC back in 2018, he joined the College to help the program grow as one of its co-founders. He specializes in teaching the Molecular Biology lecture and lab sections at the College, along with a senior seminar course whenever possible. He also teaches numerous other courses including Intro Chemistry Lab and Molecules, Genes and Cells. He loves getting to know students at all levels of experience at the college.

Like Lake Forest College students, Dr. Conrad is also a student of the liberal arts. Dr. Conrad obtained a B.A. in Biology at Macalester College in Saint Paul, MN, where he also minored in English. Following the completion of his B.A., Dr. Conrad obtained his PhD in Pharmacology from the University of Washington in Seattle, WA. Lastly, he studied Microbiology and Immunology for his Postdoctoral Fellowship at the University of Washington and the University of Cambridge in Cambridge, UK. Here, he worked closely with Dr. Lalita Ramakrishnan and together, overturned an assumption in the tuberculosis field that had been debated for over a decade. He says, “it was one of [his] proudest moments.” After that experience, I’m sure he wanted to help others feel the same pride in their respective scientific work.

Although Dr. Conrad has only been at LFC for 5 years, he has become well-loved among the students. While documenting this story, I spoke with a handful of students from his classes and research lab. His students frequently express sincere gratitude for Dr. Conrad’s mentorship, patience, and support. One said, “Dr. Conrad is very passionate about his work and very patient with us. He knows we mess up, but instead of getting frustrated, he always has a smile and is more than willing to help us learn from our mistakes” – many would call him a master mentor. Many personal and professional experiences prepared Dr. Conrad to be a great faculty member here at LFC.

Dr. Conrad helped many of his students become successful and proficient scientists. In May 2023, Dr. Conrad, along with two of his research students, Ceylin Sahin and Laurel Robbins, had the opportunity to attend the national meeting of the American Society for Biochemistry and Molecular Biology (ASBMB). There, Ceylin and Laurel presented their research on the molecular mechanisms of mycobacterial pathogenesis using the *Mycobacterium marinum* – or zebrafish – organism model. They both had successful presentations and Laurel even went on to win first place in her poster category. Dr. Conrad loves mentoring and collaborating with his students.

From my own experiences with Dr. Conrad, I can see that he is very knowledgeable and admirable, but little did I know that he wasn’t always as proficient as he is now. In asking Dr. Conrad about his PhD experience at the University of Washington, he mentioned that before going to graduate school, he took a year to help young adults navigate and apply to colleges. In that year, he forgot many scientific concepts and struggled at the beginning of his graduate school career because of this. He said, “I had a very steep learning curve coming back... [graduate school was] a mixed bag because I learned so much scientific rigor [and] how to be productive in the lab.” His mentors helped him navigate the graduate school experience by teaching him how to conduct certain experiments, properly analyze data, and obtain legible and precise results. He also said, “I was lucky to find those people who were willing to support me... and took a lot of time and care to help me in a time where I was really struggling.” This goes to show that even when the situation is difficult, Dr. Conrad is a lifelong learner. Speaking with Dr. Conrad allowed me to see that he was a student, just like us at one point. If we also apply ourselves, persist, and find those who are willing to support us, there will come a time when

we will also be as successful and admirable as he is. Dr. Conrad learned so much from those graduate school experiences and continues to humbly learn today by proactively collaborating with colleagues and students.

This year, Dr. Conrad is co-teaching the Molecular Biology lecture section with Dr. Rebecca Delventhal – a stellar faculty member of the Biology department – and helping her become familiar with the course. Dr. Delventhal has expressed her appreciation for Dr. Conrad’s partnership and has nothing but great things to say about him. She believes that together, they have been able to develop a better academic experience than they could have done so alone. She said, “I bring a modern perspective as an outsider and he provides a more seasoned opinion about what works and what doesn’t work, so I think it’s the perfect balance.” Dr. Conrad believes that collaboration is vital in the scientific community if we are to achieve more holistic learning and productive solutions. In a field where people are naturally competitive and always trying to out-do their classmates and colleagues, he says, “I’m generally anti-competitive and more collaborative. I really believe science is about collaboration and building connections.” I have witnessed Dr. Conrad’s modesty in being willing to collaborate with other faculty to elevate the student’s learning; he is the perfect scientific partner.

Dr. Conrad is still anxious to continue growing at LFC and help others do the same throughout his career. He doesn’t think he’s perfect by any means, but that’s partially what makes him so great – he believes he still has so much room for growth. LFC and the BMB program are lucky to have him, and they will always be in great hands with him here. If you ever have time, stop by and say ‘hi’ to Dr. Conrad – he’ll always greet you with a smile and a fun ‘dad joke.’

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