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'Researcher speed dating' at Tufts helps lab scientists, doctors, academics forge partnerships

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By Matt Rocheleau, Town Correspondent

Long-lasting, fruitful and fulfilling relationships can be tough to come by, especially between doctors, academics and lab scientists. But the Tufts Clinical and Translational Science Institute is trying to promote more interaction between those groups by playing the role of matchmaker through “researcher speed dating” events.

On Thursday afternoon inside a conference room on Tufts medical school campus in Boston, about two dozen people – a mix of doctors, lab scientists, professors and other researchers – mixed and mingled.

They're not looking for a boyfriend or girlfriend. Instead, they are searching for their “scientific soul mate,” or a research partner.

Some of the researchers stood beside posters that described who they were, listed project ideas and outlined what type of collaborator they're looking for. The other researchers toured the room scouting out potential partners.

The scene did not exactly resemble what you might expect to see at a speed-dating event. A couple of people wore white medical lab coats. Some participants brought laptops and notebooks. Phone numbers were exchanged, but primarily on formal business cards. There seemed to be little to no flirting.

Discussions were not limited to one-on-one talks and there was no time limit on conversations.

“If we get a good match and they really start to hit it off, we don't want to break them apart,” explained Amy West, a Tufts spokeswoman.

“We organized this event to foster collaborations that can help speed up the process of taking something from an idea for research to a pill or a medicine or something that can improve public health,” she added.

While some “speed daters” interacted only briefly, several pairs and groups seemed to click.

Ivette Emery traveled all the way from her job as a translational research scientist at Maine Medical Center in a quest to forge new relationships.

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She met a match in Graham B. Jones, professor and chair of the chemistry and chemical biology department at Northeastern.

Emery and Jones work at different levels of a four-stage scale used to describe the differing phases of research. Shortly after Jones gave a presentation, she sat down at a table with him and they spent several minutes talking to each other about how their work could benefit from some collaboration.

“Face-to-face communication, you can never underestimate the value of that,” said Emery.

The most beneficial collaborations, said Jones, bring together “people who see the limitations of current medical practice and people who are aware of the limitations of what it takes to get research into practice.”

“Basic researchers need to design their projects with the end result in mind,” he added. “And, you need the end users to be involved in the basic research.”

In recent years, Tufts and research institutions across the country have formed Facebook-like online portals that researchers can search to find out what other researchers are working and then contact one another.

Tufts web-based portal, [Profiles](#), launched in February and officials hope it will encourage partnerships that can help improve ongoing projects or may even lead to new research and discoveries that might not have happened otherwise.

But, such collaborations have not been common, nor have they been regularly promoted, until recent years.

“Researchers used to work in silos,” said Randi Triant, executive director of Tufts CTSI. “The lab researchers never talked to the people in clinical trials and the people in clinical trials never talked to doctors and practitioners.

There is often hesitancy among doctors and academics to work together, Jones said.

“Meeting people in a different field and having them be interested in the same question can be really challenging,” said Laura Gee, an assistant professor in economics at Tufts, who was able to find some interest at Thursday’s event for her project idea – studying the economics of doctor referrals.

Some fear that getting involved with people who work in other phases of research will distract them from their busy schedules and the work they are already doing, which is often funded by project specific grants that can be coupled with certain deadlines, requirements and goals.

“Scientists are focused and that’s what makes them good scientists,” said Karen Freund, associate director of Tufts CTSI. “But sometimes that means we don’t always connect the dots.”

There are other barriers, too, including location. Researchers said something as seemingly small as having labs or offices on different floors and thwart potential partnerships.

“It’s great having these big academic health centers in Boston, but sometimes they are so big that two people can be working on really similar research that is relevant to each other, but they never know each other exists,” she said.

However, the keys to finding a good research partner are much like what matters when searching for a significant other. Researchers said it often comes down to who you can stand and who you can trust.

“You’re looking to build a relationship,” said Jones. “Sometimes personalities do not

match up.”

“If you’re working on a project with someone that is going to involve a two-year relationship, you start to ask yourself, ‘can I put up with this or that,’” added Emery.

Matt Rocheleau can be reached at mjrochele@gmail.com. Looking for more coverage of area colleges and universities? Go to our [Your Campus pages](#).

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