

Kara Snyder

Hello and welcome to The PodCAST, a podcast produced by the College of Applied Science and Technology at Illinois State University. I'm your host, Kara Snyder, and I serve as the Assistant Dean of Marketing, Communications, and Constituent Relations for the college. Each episode, we're sitting down with an alum of the college, and today we have a chance to talk to Dr. Jenny Ting. Jenny is a Health Sciences alum and currently serves as the William Rankeenan Professor of Genetics, Microbiology, and Immunology Director, Center for Translational Immunology, Leinberger Comprehensive Cancer Center at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Welcome, and thank you for being here.

Jenny Ting

Thank you so much, Kara. It's great to be there virtually and to say hi to all the Redbirds.

Kara Snyder

Well, this is going to be fun. Let's start at the beginning. Why did you choose ISU?

Jenny Ting

I chose it because my brother was a student here and he told me about the amazing time he has. He was still a student at the time at ISU. And he also told me about a scholarship opportunity for international students, which was really rare. I applied and was able to get it. So it was really a blessing that I was able to attend ISU at that point. So it was an easy choice, actually.

Kara Snyder

And I know that once you got here, you majored in medical technology, which is now known as medical laboratory science. That's typically one of our found majors for students. So I'm curious, how did you find that major that ended up being the right fit for you?

Jenny Ting

Yeah, so when I picked my major, my major was actually biology, which I loved. To be honest, I had some of the best teachers in biology and chemistry and genetics. I still remember some of those lectures. They really triggered an interest in me about the medical field, but I knew I couldn't go into medical school because I cannot stand people with blood on them. So that kind of excluded any chance of thinking about the medical school route. And then I discovered there's the medical technology field and I really was intrigued by it. So I majored in that and I was very happy especially with the kind of things that we did in the laboratory like testing specimen at that point, we actually had real laboratory classes and doing all of that I really enjoyed it. And then I went for an internship in Chicago for my last year and again I enjoyed that one year as an intern. There's of course tribulations as well but overall I really enjoyed the field.

Kara Snyder

So tell me about that laboratory time, that internship time prior to graduation, how did that hands-on experience play into your next step?

Jenny Ting

Yeah, so that was very important because I'm actually at that point not that good in the laboratory. I was pretty good with classes. So classes were fairly straightforward for me. But when I went into MedTech, we had to do lots of laboratory science and then the one year of course as an intern, that's all you did. I really appreciated the kind of work we did and the basic science behind it, which got me really interested in microbiology and immunology because I learned firsthand how to identify microbes and bacteria infections in the laboratory. It was like a puzzle and I was really intrigued by it. We did blood typing in the lab, so that was really intriguing and trying to understand the basis of why blood groups are different. I learned about immunology and those were my favorite two classes when I was an intern. So that really got me into the field. I was pretty torn between going to genetics or microbiology immunology. So it's kind of interesting right now, I'm a professor in all three. I think that's because originally that's where my interest lies.

Kara Snyder

Isn't that funny how those things come full circle for us, right? You have this little spark of interest and then later that plays out in your career and that's really fun to see.

Jenny Ting

Yes, it is. There's kind of an interesting story behind all this though. So when I was looking for a major, back then, at least I didn't spend a lot of time thinking about my major. And my parents, they had eight kids by the time I came along, I was number eight. We had six living at the time. They were just like exhausted. So my dad asked me, what would you like to major in? And I said, I really love the literature classes I took and I actually submitted a couple of short stories and got some awards. And he said, what else are you interested in? And I said, I really like this biology class, which is absolutely true. We had an amazing teacher who was very strict in high school. And my dad said, what about you just try biology? And that's how I got into it. But when I was at ISU, I almost majored, I had a minor in literature because I took a lot of literature classes. And I took a lot of biology classes. And to be honest, the things I did for the literature classes, to this day, I still find really useful because I write a ton of grants. And grants essentially is to tell a story, but a story that's very technical. So I think both of those helped me in terms of learning how to conduct science and also how to write a story.

Kara Snyder

I love that. I love when people have stories like that when they have these seemingly disparate interests that really end up feeding off of each other and helping each other. And you found a way to marry both of those in your current career. And I think that's really cool.

Jenny Ting

Thank you. Yeah, it's like, to this day, I still love, you know, I still like writing and I get excited about it. People will think you're crazy for writing, to write about your scientific proposals. And I think that's where it came from.

Kara Snyder

What do you miss the most about that time, about your time on campus?

Jenny Ting

was just like the pure energy one has and pretty uncynical, right? Very, maybe naive view of the world. And of course, we didn't have, at least I didn't have a lot of access to a lot of opinions. So I had this a little bit of naive and the world is wonderful and people are great kind of attitude. I still have a little bit of that, I hope, but I think ISU is a place where I just thought people were really nice. And that was my first introduction, you know, to college, to people in the U.S. actually. I just had a really wonderful time. People were friendly. I don't remember if I told you about this separately, but there was a group, a little town that was close to ISU. And during the Christmas time, they would invite the international students who didn't have a place to go for Christmas or New Year's, for example, and had invited us over there. And I did this at least for two years, and it was just the best holidays I've had. And locally, we had host families who hosted us. And I still remember mine, Mr. and Mrs. Fish, and if you're out there listening, please contact me. They had me over for Easter, for all sorts of holidays, just to make sure that we didn't feel isolated. And the teachers I had were pretty amazing. I remember my genetic professor, Dr. Brockman, who really triggered this interest in me of genetics. I thought it was just the most intriguing topic to learn about. I had many other teachers as well who were just there to teach, which is, you know, we can't say that about everybody these days.

Kara Snyder

I like hearing about your experience because I think you did such a great job of creating community with different sets of people. It sounds like you had your international student community, you had your host family, you had your academic community. And I think that's what we want for all of our students at ISU, to really find those places that help campus feel like home. And you did an outstanding job of that.

Jenny Ting

Oh, thank you. I found like a church group as well and a Chinese Bible study group. So all those people that helped me along in so many different groups. When I was just, you know, when I came to ISU, I wasn't even 18, I was 17. And to have all those people help me, of course my brother and his wife were just tremendous help, helping me adjust to a new country and college life.

Jenny Ting

But my years in ISU was just, to this day, I still think extremely fondly of it.

Kara Snyder

So once your time at ISU wrapped up, what was next? Did you have an initial job search? Did you go straight to grad school? What did that look like for you?

Jenny Ting

Yes, I thought it was really interesting. You asked me about my entry-level job, and I was going to tell you my entry-level job was as a fountain girl and also just a bus girl at the ISU cafeteria way back, it was called a cage. So that was my interest.

Kara Snyder

I love that.

Jenny Ting

Then I became a cashier. I rose through the rank and became a cashier. Then I found a job as a science tutor. And I did all this at the same time, I think. I'm pretty sure. And so that was my entry job, which taught me the lesson of how hard one works in many jobs. But after my medical technology training, I really wanted to go to grad school to learn more. So I applied for a number of grad schools, and one of them was a genetics program, and the other one was a microbiology immunology program. But the micro immunology program was in Chicago, and all my friends were there because I did my internship in Chicago. So I just wanted to stay and that was with Northwestern. So I got my PhD there. To be honest with you, thinking back, I wasn't one of these kids who knew exactly what I wanted to do. So this is good for those who are not so sure yet, but I just knew that I probably needed an advanced degree if I wanted to work in microbiology immunology, whether I was going to work in a hospital as a clinical lab director or if I wanted to do other things in industry. At that point, I was thinking mostly about industry and there weren't that many jobs back then. I thought either way an advanced degree will help. And it was actually a big struggle in grad school. So in kind of the opposite of my undergrad, my grad school was a time of like a lot of struggle to like feel like I was doing a good job and it was really tough.

Kara Snyder

How did you overcome that? You know, if undergrad felt successful for you, what was that like for you then when you hit that roadblock in your PhD program?

Jenny Ting

Even as a postdoc, there were times as a postdoc where I felt very good with a wonderful mentor and then at other times felt not so good. There are two wonderful mentors actually, Jeff Frallinger and Leslie Weiner. very successful in science. It's like lots of factors can combine to make you feel not as good. It could be your project, could just be your luck. And I wasn't feeling super great about my achievement, but one of my mentors actually kept on encouraging me and felt that I could make it and say things like, you're one of the smartest trainees I've ever had, which really just changed my view of myself. So I think as a mentor, I may not say that enough to my trainees, but a lot of times I'll tell them, you know, what I'm trying to do is to make sure your career is enhanced so they would know that I'm on the same team as they are, as opposed to opposing team. So I think that's pretty important when your mentor tells you, you know, I'm on your team, I just really want you to succeed. That's really important. So a long story is there were people along the way who helped. But also I think my family, my parents, my grandma, who lived with us for all my life, until she

passed, they instilled in me a sense of, you just keep on going, and you don't listen to what other people are saying about you. And I don't know how they instilled that, but to this day, I still feel that way. If somebody says you can't do that, I'm like, okay, great, that's your opinion, but I'm gonna try. So I think both people who pull you up when you're at a moment of just like really low and also your inner self, that's much of that is given by people along the way. And for me, I also have faith. So that's pretty important to me. So all those combined, I think, make you pull yourself up when times are really bad. And your loved ones, right? siblings, friends, like I already mentioned, mentors, and even people who are not your mentors but who are in the position to pull you up. All those people can help. That's a great perspective.

Kara Snyder

And I love the concept, too, of not being afraid to ask for help because so often, especially when we're at those turning points in our lives, we get into the mindset of we want to do everything ourselves. And so to be able to rely on others for some of that emotional support, I think is so important. So that's very valuable advice. Thank you for that.

Jenny Ting

Oh, thanks.

Kara Snyder

So, tell us, you are in the doctoral program and now, today, I'm talking to you and you're at University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. What happened in between?

Jenny Ting

So, after my PhD, and to be honest, during my graduate school, there were several professors who were very helpful. I think they saw that I was struggling. Research is very different. were very helpful. I think they saw that I was struggling. Research is very different. I'd never done research Jenny Ting

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before my graduate school, and they gave me encouraging words as well. So just to put that out. But then I went for my postdoc, and back then you had to do postdoctoral training. So I did one that I mentioned that was really helpful, then I did a second one. Then the person who was my mentor, Jeff, for my first postdoc actually told me about a job at that time. He moved to UNC, told me about a job at UNC. I came to interview, I didn't think I was good enough. And that's again a common trait of young people nowadays

Jenny Ting

that people don't think they're good enough. And I think I see that pretty prevalent among young women. So I just want to give a word of encouragement. Many times women don't apply for things because they'll say, I don't think I'm good enough, but just apply. So I applied for the job. I practiced my interview. I practiced my talk. So many times I think I could point to a blackboard and tell you where my slides, where the word in any slide will fall.

Jenny Ting

And then the next day I got the job. They call me the next day and say, we offer you the job. And I was like in disbelief. But then I came to UNC and I really like it and have just stayed here for all my career.

Kara Snyder

I love that you dove into the gender specifics of that because I think the data on that is astounding that women don't apply for jobs unless they are 100% qualified and men will submit their application if they can do 60 to 70 percent of what's required of them. So I really appreciate your perspective on that and along those lines, I would love to ask you if you have learned other valuable lessons being a woman in what I imagine is typically a male-dominated field.

Jenny Ting

Yeah, you know, I have to say there are a few lessons I've learned. One is there's lots of good men out there who actually lift people up. So many of the people along the way who suggested me for whether it's positions, recognition, are male. So that's the first step. The second step is women, we help each other but there are ones who don't. And you really as a role model, I feel pretty strongly that when I feel like there's a woman in the position of feeling like, I'm not good enough, you know, I shouldn't do this, or when given a situation that's not the best, they just take it. You know, the more senior people who have more experience should say something,

Jenny Ting

or should offer to help, or it's not, if people reach out to you, you should offer to help. So I do feel pretty strongly that I can't remember what the context or women should really help each other, right? So not to be political. I think the context was women who don't help women should go to a place that, you know, I don't want to mention at this point. They should go to a very bad place, but not all women feel that way. So those are two things I learned about. And the third is you as a senior person now, I do spot not just women, but men who actually don't ask for themselves. They're usually people who are very service-oriented.

Jenny Ting

They just like try to do the best for service and sometimes you have to tell them, no, this great what you're doing, but do watch for yourself, do advocate for yourself. And there's a balance, right? You help others, but you also try to help yourself.

Kara Snyder

Great advice. Great advice. Well, Jenny, I have to say you have one of the most impressive titles that I have ever seen. Can you tell us, how would you describe your job to someone outside of the industry? Because we have students listening that might have other majors or be from across campus or maybe an alum is listening that's from another field.

Jenny Ting

What does a day in the life look like for you? So my life is always very crazy. I'm always multitasking. So I direct a lab and that's my predominant responsibility in research. And so we have about 17 people in total. Some are graduate students trying to do research so they can get their PhD and some are postdocs who are trying to use this opportunity to jump to their next level, their first independent position. So they could become a faculty somewhere or they can get an industry job or they can go into the government position or they can go into scientific related positions such as policy for example or in scientific writing, etc. So this is where they launched their career is through their postdocs and sometimes we do a fantastic job of launching people and sometimes not as much, right? So it is a struggle and I try to be the best mentor you can be. The most rewarding is when you see somebody who struggle and then at the end of their training period became confident, do beautiful science, really became very critical but good people in terms of scientific achievement. And then they launched themselves into these great positions that they're now mentoring other people or in their industry making great discoveries or in some government agency that they're making critical decisions. So those are all really rewarding. So I do a lot of mentoring, I go to the lab, ask people what they're doing. We have lots of people who come and ask for whether it's advice or collaborations but we also review other people's grants so we help the government, review grants for them or review groups and how their research is done. I also serve on nonprofit organizations to help them review their programs. And a large part of my life is spent on trying to get money to fund my research, so lots of grant writing and bringing people into the grant writing process or, you know, forming collaborations. So, yeah, a lot of it is spent within UNC, keeping the lab going, trying to get money for the lab, advising other faculty who are more junior or even maybe somebody just asked for your advice. Also people ask questions, you know, can we collaborate on this? Can you review my project? Can you do this? And also on the broader scale, we participate in a lot of faculty recruitments, faculty interviews. We have a lot of committees on campus, some I serve on. For example, promoting the goals of the School of Medicine, what are our primary goals? So you can serve on those committees which are really critical. And then serving on national committees, again, what are the directions and how do you push through good science? And even internationally, so at every level. And your day is just spent doing all sorts of things, you know, many different things. And then think about science, right? What are the projects in the lab? How can we advance them? Having meetings with people in the lab, having lab meetings and so forth.

Kara Snyder

And I know I've heard you talk about mentoring quite a bit. How would you describe your leadership style?

Jenny Ting

I think my style has maybe changed through the years. I sometimes think I'm in the face of a grandma face, you know. So I'm probably much more relaxed nowadays than I was as a young faculty. I don't think I was, I hope I wasn't like the pushy tiger mom type. A lot of times

it takes a lot of kind of understanding, and when you're younger, you don't quite have that understanding. So I give you an example. I always try to emulate mentors who are good, trying to think about the future of your trainees and hoping that they can launch. My role, I always felt like, is between them, when they first came, and the time they're leaving, should be a really productive time that they can go on to a real career. And by that I mean independent position, whatever it may be, in all sorts of organizations. But I think throughout the process I always realized that I'm supposed to be a facilitator to help people, but in the early years you're also trying to help your own career. So you try to push as hard as you can. And so in the early years, you try to get as much done as possible. I hope I was always kind at least to everybody and trying to let them know that what I do is for their own good. But when I mature more, I had a really very deep feeling, which is as a mentor, you're supposed to facilitate people's dream. Everybody comes to your lab and they have some kind of dream. You know, they wanna be a faculty, a professor one day, they wanna work in a big pharma one day,

Jenny Ting

they wanna direct a clinical lab one day, they all have their dreams. And your goal is to have them be as productive as possible so that they can achieve that dream. And so you try to do everything you can for them to achieve that dream. What I was not very good at in the beginning was probably making people realize that you know some of the things I do is really to push them to be a better scientist. So I'm usually I would say relatively critical this type of work we do. It has to be a really good science, you know. And sometimes I would make people repeat experiments and so forth. But I don't think I ever told them, you know, we want to publish really good things. Nowadays, I do tell people, you know, I think you should do this because this is really good for your career, to put it into context, right, that people appreciate it a little more. So I think in the early days, I tried to be the best mentor I could be at those stages, but now I my opinion is much better formed and My goal is much more would benefit the mentees Even though I did always have those concepts in the beginning, but now I can do it more because I'm more established

Kara Snyder

It only makes sense that your leadership evolves as your career evolves So it's nice that you can self-reflect and see that evolution in yourself. Well, Jenny, we are going to finish with a speed round just to get to know you a little bit more. So go with your first instinct on these questions. Are you a morning person or a night owl?

Jenny Ting

Both, which is horrible.

Kara Snyder

I hope you sleep at some point.

Jenny Ting

Yes, I do, but not as much as I should.

Kara Snyder
Coffee or tea, and how do you take it?

Jenny Ting
Absolutely tea with nothing.

Kara Snyder
Where did you go on your last vacation?

Jenny Ting
Oh, actually for Christmas and New Year I was in Seattle visiting my two daughters and my two little grandkids. So it was wonderful.

Kara Snyder
Oh how fun.

Jenny Ting
Yeah.

Kara Snyder
What are you currently reading or listening to? Anything we should add to our list?

Jenny Ting
Yeah, I've been on and off reading this book and I really need to just like finish it. And it's a book about Warren Buffett, which is a snowball. And it's a really thick book. So I've been trying to get through the book and it's really intriguing in terms of how the autobiography of this, you know, well-known person who's super wealthy but also a philanthropist and never seemed to have forgotten his roots.

Kara Snyder
That sounds like a great recommendation. Thank you for sharing. And I ask everyone that comes on the podcast, Avanti's gondola or Pub 2 cheese balls?

Jenny Ting
Yeah, I like them both. It's a hard choice. Hmm. Yeah. Can I just say both?

Kara Snyder
That's fair. That is fair. Last question for you. If you could give one piece of advice to a college student, what would you say?

Jenny Ting
I would say there's so much negativity right now. Try to stay positive and try when people tell you negative things, try not to listen to them. You know, when they say negative things

about you, see if there's any value in it. If there's, in your honest moment, if you see a value, then maybe take some. But in many cases, I've seen people that I know, when they're going through asking for advice from an advisor sometimes, the advisor would say, oh, I don't think you should do this. Implication is, I don't think you're good enough to do that. Well, you know, I tend not to listen to that myself that much. So that's my one advice. And when you were asking about mentorship, I do want to add one thing is you have to appreciate that as a professor in the types of work that I do, whatever I do is really the accomplishment of all the people who've been through my lab. So it's a collective accomplishment. It's not my accomplishment.

Kara Snyder

So I just want to clarify that. Yeah, we can do more things together than we can do individually, so that's a great reminder. Well, thank you again for being here. That was Dr. Jenny Ting, William Rann Keenan Professor of Genetics, Microbiology and Immunology, Director Microbiology and Immunology, Director Center for Translational Immunology, Leinberger Comprehensive Cancer Center at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Join us next time on the PodCAST for more stories from our cast alumni.