

Leadership Spotlight: Dr. Michael Gustafson, Ph.D.

Dr. Michael Gustafson, Ph.D.
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1. How long have you been an ISCT member?

I have been a member since 2012.

2. What is your educational history?

I earned my Ph.D. in Biomedical Sciences—Biochemistry/Molecular Biology at the Mayo Clinic Graduate School of Biomedical Sciences in the lab of Ed Leof, Ph.D., and completed my post-doctoral fellowship at the Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center in the area of cancer signaling/cell cycles in Dr. Bruce Clurman's laboratory.

3. What was your first job in cell & gene therapy?

In 2006, I joined the Mayo Clinic Human Cellular Therapy Laboratory (now the Immune, Progenitor, and Cell Therapeutics Lab) as a development technologist under the leadership of Drs. Dennis Gasteau and Allan Dietz.

4. Are there any career transitions that were challenging and/or exciting for you looking back?

Challenging, absolutely. I made the difficult decision to transition from my post-doctoral fellowship to the development technologist position in the more clinical Cell Therapy Lab. As a Ph.D., there are expectations that you move on to your own independent research lab, and so I had to come to terms with my own perceived "failures" for not staying on that path. However, I was able to learn cell manufacturing, quality, regulatory, and other aspects of cell therapy. The time I spent in the IMPACT lab really prepared me well for my current position leading the Cell Therapy Lab at the Mayo Clinic Arizona campus.

5. What would you say have been your favorite projects to work on?

I really enjoy working in the lab. The hands-on manufacturing that I was doing for our patients enrolled in clinical trials was very rewarding for me personally. Essentially, I was making their drug—I mean, how cool is that? I also am passionate about understanding our cell therapy drug

products and how the patient's immune system influences the response to the cell therapy. We are currently expanding our methodologies to address these aspects of cell therapy. Finally, I am not in the lab as much as I was before, but I do really enjoy teaching and mentoring our great team and passing along my experience to those now currently working in the lab.

6. What are your thoughts on formal versus informal education in the cell & gene therapy field?

I never really had a formal education in cell & gene therapy other than attending meetings, workshops, and seminars. Most of what I have learned has come through on-the-job training. So, for me, experience has been the best teacher. That being said, I think there should be more opportunities for students in graduate and/or medical school to add quality and regulatory training to their education. There is certainly a need in the field for people trained in cell and gene therapy.

7. Any advice you would give to an early stage professional now?

Never give up an opportunity to network or connect with someone. I know this can be hard to do, and I struggle with it too. But I have found expanding my network to be very helpful, whether it be connecting with someone with similar interests, potentially a new mentor, or a new job. These efforts do pay off. For those who are passionate about cell and gene therapy, the field is growing exponentially. This is a great time for you..... so get involved!

8. How have you been involved in ISCT over the years?

Aside from attending and presenting poster abstracts at the annual and regional meetings, I have been involved with the Immuno and Gene Therapy Committee since 2019. I have really enjoyed serving on this committee and interacting with the other members as we advocate and strategize how to move the field forward. I also had the opportunity to chair a plenary session at this year's virtual Annual Meeting.

9. What would you say are the benefits you have seen from ISCT membership?

Where do I start? There are many benefits of ISCT membership. I would suggest that networking and opportunities to serve on committees to advance ISCT related issues are the most significant benefits. I have learned quite a lot from colleagues outside of my institution on how they approach things from their different perspectives. I also have taken advantage of the excellent webinars that the ISCT provides as additional training material for me and our staff. Overall, I am very happy with my involvement in ISCT.