Pearl Magala, a graduate of Springfield Technical Community College, went on to attend Mount Holyoke College and earned her Ph.D. in chemistry at Johns Hopkins University. She now works as a research scientist at the University of Washington.
(SPRINGFIELD TECHNICAL COMMUNITY COLLEGE PHOTO)

EDUCATION

STCC launched scientist on her journey to Ph.D.

Continued studies at Mount Holyoke, Johns Hopkins

Born and raised in Uganda, Pearl Magala has literally traveled thousands of miles to obtain a top-notch education and pursue her dreams.

"I left Uganda for better opportunities in the United States," she says. "I think the higher education system in the U.S. is the best in the world."

Today, the 31-year-old holds a Ph.D. in chemistry from Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore and works in a research laboratory at the University of Washington in Seattle. She earned her undergraduate degree from Mount Holyoke College.

But her quest to obtain the best possible education began at Springfield Technical Community College. She enrolled in the engineering and science transfer program at STCC in 2003, the year she emigrated from Kampala, Uganda, to live with her father in East Windsor, Connecticut.

"There are so many advantages when you choose STCC," Magala says. "It saves a lot of money going to community college. And you're enrolled in basic classes. You're learning the same exact thing, whether you're taking the classes at a community college or at a four-year school."

"A lecture hall with 200 students is incredibly overwhelming. At STCC, I wasn't in a class with more than 20 people."

PEARL MAGALA

Magala cites what she calls the most major benefit to her community college education: intimacy. The classes generally are smaller than ones found in big universities, and the professors make themselves accessible, she adds.

"A lecture hall with 200 students is incredibly overwhelming," she said. "At STCC, I wasn't in a class with more than 20 people. I took a lot of engineering and science transfer classes where there were usually 10 people."

Magala was enrolled in premed, which is part of the engineering and science transfer

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program. Her classes weren't all science and mathematics. She studied English composition, introduction to sociology and psychology, all subjects that four-year colleges and universities generally require, before focusing on organic chemistry and other pre-med courses.

She earned her associate degree in 2005 and transferred to Mount Holyoke, where she received her bachelor's degree in chemistry in 2007. After taking two years off from academics, she decided to seek her doctorate in chemistry.

"I initially wanted to study medicine, but med school is so expensive," Magala said. "I always loved chemistry, starting in high school in Uganda. It's what I studied as an undergrad at Mount Holyoke College, so I applied to chemistry Ph.D. programs."

She was accepted into prestigious Johns Hopkins, and, two weeks after earning her doctorate in 2017, she moved to Washington state to start her new postdoctoral position at the University of Washington.

Working as a research scientist, she studies how bacteria affect human cells. The specific bacteria she examines are the type that cause urinary tract infections, and her research could result in a better way of treating people.

"Antibiotics are not as effective as they used to be, because there's growing resistance against them," she says. "We're looking for alternative treatments."

Magala works in Rachel Klevit's laboratory at the University of Washington. Klevit holds the Edmond H. Fischer-Washington Research Foundation Endowed Chair in Biochemistry.

"Throughout the years, several members of my research team here at University of Washington got their start at a community college and have since gone on to achieve their Ph.D. and become researchers," Klevit says. "Pearl Magala is the latest in this terrific group of individuals. As part of an interdisciplinary team of researchers, (she) is the lead scientist in the structural biochemistry arm of an exciting new project. Her previous training, which started at community college, has equipped her well for this highly technological research."

Asked what her dream job would be, Magala says without hesitation, "I want to be a research scientist. I am a research scientist, but eventually I want to have my own lab and run my own projects."