The way to P.J. Utz’ heart — and into his lab — isn’t through holding a pipette correctly or scoring straight A’s. Sure, Utz, director of a high school internship in Stanford’s clinical immunology center, is proud of his interns’ strong science backgrounds and high GPAs. But for Utz, it’s not all about grades and test scores.

“We select students with a real love for science — students who have aspirations of careers in biology or medicine, he explains. “We want people who, 10 to 20 years from now, will be sitting in my chair,” says Utz, MD, an assistant professor of medicine.

These future professors and immunologists are part of a program created by Garry Fathman, MD, professor of medicine and director of the Center for Clinical Immunology at Stanford. The program, now in its third year, was designed to expose science-minded high schoolers from the Bay Area to the world of medical research and to encourage the young students to pursue careers in clinical immunology.

Utz himself attended a similar program at Roswell Park Memorial Institute in Buffalo, N.Y., as a college student — and he credits the program with helping to shape his career. “I wouldn’t be here if it weren’t for this program,” he says, adding proudly that several former interns have decided to go into medical science because of the Stanford internship experience.

During the eight-week program, which Utz says is one of few high school programs in the country, the 25 interns work alongside graduate students or postdocs in clinical immunology labs. Interns receive stipends of $1,500 for doing research in such areas as transplantation and multiple sclerosis; some work with DNA and protein microarrays. “The interns are doing the kinds of things that are on the front page of the Wall Street Journal,” Utz notes.

The depth of the interns’ involvement in the lab is what impressed one former intern. “The interns are truly involved in the process — they’re not just washing plates,” says Faraaz Chekeni, a University of California-Berkeley junior. Chekeni enjoyed his 2000 internship so much that he is working in Utz’ lab as a paid researcher for a second straight summer.

Chekeni says he would recommend the program to his friends, and Utz reports that the program’s popularity is growing, both among applicants and faculty. Several faculty members have expressed interest in establishing intern programs beyond the clinical immunology center and, if that happens, Utz is happy to help out — but only in an advisory capacity. His group of interns keeps him busy enough, and “I could never give up this program,” he says.