Winter 2018

Discover, No. 14, Winter 2018

University of North Alabama Undergraduate Research

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Imagine, Investigate, Communicate

19 student/faculty research teams have been awarded grants this year from the Quality Enhancement Plan

Successful undergraduate research teams have a lot in common—they may be from a wide variety of disciplines, but they all have a curiosity that drives their research. We asked our researchers what they would advise fellow students who may be interested in getting involved.

“Go talk to your professors!” said Kristina McMahan, a senior majoring in psychology. “More often than not, they will add you onto an existing research team, or

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they will help you create your own research idea.” Dr. Larry Bates, professor of psychology, first sparked Kristina’s interest in research. “I was nervous to head my own research team, but after one conversation with him, I knew that I could do it, and I’m so thankful I did.”

Senior exercise science major Chandon Hines said that it is important to put yourself out there and just try something that really interests you, because you never know what it will lead to. “I truly believe that my involvement in the Human Performance Research Lab over these past few semesters helped solidify an award of an endowed scholarship to pay for my education this academic year.” She added that research is a great networking opportunity, and that participation has brought her closer to peers and faculty.

Undergraduate research can lead to . . .

“I’m currently applying to biomedical Ph.D. programs. I want to pursue a career researching biomedical diseases like diabetes.”
—Nicole Gallups

“I hope to become a Child Nutrition Program director for a school system.”
—Taylor Hjelms

“We hope to have jobs in this area teaching elementary education—we aspire to become wonderful teachers like many of our professors here at UNA.”
—Lindsey Carpenter and Katlyn Holden

“I am planning to attend a Ph.D. program for clinical psychology.”
—Kristina McMahan

“I would like to become a high school social studies teacher in an area in need of leadership.”
—Josh Marshall

“I am currently in the process of applying to graduate programs to obtain a master’s degree in Occupational Therapy. My plans are to complete that degree and go into the field working as an occupational therapist in a pediatric outpatient setting.”
—Chandon Hines

“My plan after graduation is to teach lower elementary.”
—Britney Jacks

“It is my dream to teach kindergarten! I am also hoping to start on my master’s very soon after I complete my bachelor’s degree.”
—Harper Canaday

“After graduation in May, I plan to move to Memphis, Tennessee, and pursue an elementary education position in a lower socioeconomic school. I also plan to obtain my master’s degree in early childhood education from UNA.”
—Olivia Privett

“We plan to attend Jacksonville State University for two semesters to acquire the accreditation to apply to dietetic internships, and eventually to become registered dietitians.”
—Bailey Plunkett and Ally Savery

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## 2017 QEP Undergraduate Research Grants Awarded to Student/Faculty Teams

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Mentor inspires students to dig into research

A great mentor can be an invaluable asset to a student’s research: just ask geography majors Jessica Coffey and Payton Gilchrist. Jessica and Payton have received an undergraduate research grant for their project “Defining the Subterranean Joint Patterns of North Alabama.” Dr. Greg Gaston, professor of geography is their mentor.

“My faculty advisor Dr. Gaston is not only the person who opened the door for my current research, which I am so passionate about, but also is the person who motivated me to pursue graduate school,” Jessica said. “He also encouraged me to present my research at multiple conferences which has given me confidence and many valuable academic connections.”

Fellow researcher Payton agreed. “Dr. Gaston has been my biggest mentor during my time of research. Dr. G, as many of us in the geography department call him, has a broad knowledge of not only physical geography but geology as well, which has helped me tremendously when I have questions related to the karst terrain that sinkholes form on.”

It was a field course that included a trip to the

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Bailey Plunket, a culinary, nutrition, and hospitality major, agreed. “Research helps build your résumé, and it provides you with experience in your field.”

Still not convinced, or just not sure what area is right for you? Biology senior Natalie Lindgren said, “My best advice is to be willing to try it out and try something new. It may be difficult to decide exactly what topic you want to study, but the best way to find your niche is to try things out. Even if you end up in research that you don’t love, you can learn from that experience and allow it to steer you into a career goal that you fits you best.”

Nicole Gallups, another biology major, had one more piece of advice. “It’s never too early to start! Don’t wait until the last minute.”
Pacific Northwest that may have been the spark behind their current research. Jessica said, “That trip instilled in me a love for geomorphology and I have been intrigued by the study ever since. The landforms which previously seemed interminably stagnant now became ever-changing puzzles.” The trip made Payton consider how geography and GIS could be used together—which led to her curiosity and eventually to questions about the sinkholes and joint patterns located in the Tuscumbia limestone formation (their research topic).

Both Jessica and Payton urge undergraduate students to get involved in research. Jessica said, “I highly recommend that undergrads get involved in research as early as possible. Not only has my research provided me with a thorough knowledge of the subject matter, but also it has helped me connect with employers, other academics and their projects, and even people who are just interested in what I can teach them. Independent studies enhance your résumés by showing you are driven and are passionate within your field of study.”

What if students don’t know what topic they want to research?

“The advice that was given to me by Dr. Lisa Keys-Mathews [professor of geography and director of the QEP] was ‘Find the thing you can’t stop thinking about,’” Jessica said. “This is exactly what I did and it proved to be the most fulfilling project I have ever completed. Even if you only have a fragment of an idea for a research topic, approach the faculty in your department and they can help you focus your passion into a successful research objective.”

Payton agreed. “Pursue whatever it is you are interested in until you think you have it all figured out. When you think you have it figured out look at the issue from a different angle; ask more questions; do more testing.”

Both Jessica and Payton plan to pursue their studies after graduation from the University. Jessica plans to attend graduate school in climatic geomorphology. Payton, who currently works for an engineering and GIS company, will enter the work force full time for a year or so, and then plans to further her education with a masters in an environmental or GIS field.

Collaborative education majors Dustin Phillips and Jacob Wallace are currently researching how social media affects students in the classroom. Their faculty mentors, Dr. Lorie Johnson and Dr. Linda Armstrong, have supported them in their research by providing guidance, encouragement, and feedback to enhance their studies. Phillips and Wallace say they have been overwhelmed with the support they have received in their research and it has been a great experience for them.