

SIUE URCA program recognizes outstanding faculty mentors and students

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EDWARDSVILLE - Southern Illinois University Edwardsville's distinctive Undergraduate Research and Creative Activities (URCA) program has recognized excellent mentorship and student work with the presentation of four awards.

The spring 2017 Vaughn Vandegrift URCA Research Mentor of the Semester Award has been presented to faculty mentors Jianwei Huang, PhD, PE, and Kevin Tucker, PhD.

Huang is an assistant professor in the School of Engineering's Department of Civil Engineering. Tucker is an assistant professor in the College of Arts and Sciences' Department of Chemistry.

"All URCA assistant faculty mentors have to "try out" each semester, and it is not uncommon to receive well over 100 faculty applications for 80 funded positions," said Laura Pawlow, PhD, URCA coordinator and professor in the Department of Psychology. "Drs. Tucker and Huang are excellent mentors, who are dedicated to helping their students achieve specific learning outcomes through their work together. To be recognized within the program's fantastic pool of mentors is incredibly noteworthy."

The award recipients were nominated by their students, who wrote recommendation letters, which Pawlow describes as "truly inspiring."

"When Dr. Huang accepted me as his URCA student for the Fall 2016 semester, I was nervous and excited at the same time," senior engineering student Riley Hoffman wrote. "Since we started this journey last semester, I have gained so many life lessons for my professional career. He is the best professor and mentor I have had the pleasure of meeting here."

"I am honored to be recognized and happy to know that my students enjoyed the journey of conducting their research, and found it useful for their professional development," Huang said. "SIUE's URCA program provides a platform for students to connect what they have learned in the classroom with cutting-edge research and real-world applications, which deepen their understanding of the subjects and enhance their critical thinking and problem solving skills. I am proud to work with my URCA students, who are enthusiastic about learning new things and passionate about their area of study."

Tucker stressed the investment URCA students have in their research. Together, he says, they take pride in the work they produce and excel at the opportunity to present their inquiry-based, hands-on projects at academic conferences.

"Our research group is diverse with students from each grade level and is nicely divided between those studying biology and those studying chemistry," wrote senior Paisley Harper on behalf of Dr. Tucker's large research group comprising seven URCA students. "We appreciate that he has pushed us to be invested and dedicated to our projects, and has given us agency over what we do in the lab. Dr. Tucker's unfailing faith and confidence in us as researchers has allowed us to flourish academically."

"I am proud to serve as a mentor to my students, because together we form a successful team," Tucker added. "I observe daily that these students care deeply about the work

they are doing. It is easy to mentor students whose desire to work toward successful outcomes is so strong. I am proud to be a mentor in a program that enables me to instill qualities in my students that are difficult to produce in the classroom – independence, true collaboration and self-confidence – all qualities that I have seen develop exceptionally in my students.”

Research Assistant of the Semester Awards were presented to Edwardsville’s Addison Elliott, a senior in the Department of Electrical and Computer Engineering, and Belleville native Angela Little, a junior in the Department of Historical Studies.

Elliott’s mentor, Jon Klingensmith, PhD, assistant professor of electrical and computer engineering, praised his “tenacity and work ethic.”

“The project we are working on together is a validation of a segmentation algorithm that identifies epicardial adipose tissue in magnetic resonance images,” Klingensmith said, noting the project requires custom software. “Addison’s job was to build our software package to be used for manual tracing. Addison independently found a cross-platform library to build the graphical user interface, the open-source library to display images and completed a working version of the software in a matter of weeks, far surpassing my expectations.”

Little was nominated by her URCA mentor Jeffrey Manual, PhD, associate professor of historical studies. Manuel emphasized Little’s significant contributions to *Madison Historical: The Online Encyclopedia and Digital Archive for Madison County, Ill.*

“Angela is the only undergraduate member of our research team—the other researchers are faculty, a former chancellor and graduate students—yet she has stood out for her dogged research, excellent writing abilities and understanding of extremely complex historical events,” Manuel said. “Angela illustrates what is best about SIUE’s non-traditional students: a fusion of life experience and an eager desire to make the most out of her education.”

The URCA Program presented student recipients with a certificate and a \$100 award.

[The Undergraduate Research and Creative Activities \(URCA\) Program](#) at SIUE encourages, supports and enables students to participate in research and creative activities at the undergraduate level. An undergraduate research or creative activity experience enhances the quality of the baccalaureate experience by giving students opportunities to engage in scholarship, interact with faculty and connect more fully in the educational process of discovering and creating. The URCA Program recognizes that student talents can be uncovered in ways that do not appear through the usual format of classroom instruction and testing. In cooperation with the academic departments at

SIUE, the URCA Program recruits eligible students as URCA Associates and URCA Assistants.

[Southern Illinois University Edwardsville](#) provides students with a high quality, affordable education that prepares them for successful careers and lives of purpose to shape a changing world. Built on the foundation of a broad-based liberal education, and enhanced by hands-on research and real-world experiences, the academic preparation SIUE students receive equips them to thrive in the global marketplace and make our communities better places to live. Situated on 2,660 acres of beautiful woodland atop the bluffs overlooking the natural beauty of the Mississippi River's rich bottomland and only a short drive from downtown St. Louis, the SIUE campus is home to a diverse student body of more than 14,000.