

SIUE URCA Program Celebrates Excellent Faculty Mentors and Students

by Megan Weiser
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EDWARDSVILLE - Southern Illinois University Edwardsville's unique Undergraduate Research and Creative Activities (URCA) program is celebrating the extraordinary work of faculty mentors and students through four awards.

The URCA program encourages, supports and enables students to participate in research and creative activities at the undergraduate level. URCA Associates work one-on-one with faculty mentors to lead their own research projects or creative activities. URCA Assistants work on faculty-led scholarly activities to gain a hands-on introductory experience.

The Spring 2019 Vaughn Vandegrift URCA Research Mentor of the Semester has been presented to the School of Education, Health and Human Behavior's James Panico, PhD, associate professor of speech language pathology and audiology, and Sarah Conoyer, PhD, assistant professor in the Department of Psychology.

“All of our approximately 90 URCA Assistant faculty mentors are dedicated to helping their students achieve specific learning outcomes through their work together,” said Laura Pawlow, PhD, URCA coordinator and professor in the Department of Psychology. “Drs. Panico and Conoyer are exceptional mentors who are making a positive difference in students’ academic journey through research experiences. To be recognized within this fantastic pool as an award winner is incredibly noteworthy.”

According to student mentor Alyssa Groene, Panico shows incredible passion for his work and is a strong motivator driving her to continuously achieve.

“Watching him interact with others and talk about our project during the national convention that I had the opportunity to attend with him, showed me how passionate someone can be about their job,” said Groene. “It made me realize that I chose the right profession.”

“Each time I work with him, I learn more about the field of speech language pathology,” she added. “The field is so vast and variable that it is impossible to capture every aspect in class alone. I can’t imagine going through my program without having this incredible URCA experience and the opportunity to work with Dr. Panico.”

Conoyer’s nominator, Nicole Ties, praised her ability to prepare students for their next steps in the real world through mentorship, research opportunities and teamwork experiences.

“Dr. Conoyer is granting students an incredible opportunity to take part in new research in the field of psychology,” Ties said. “She takes the time to help her lab students with resumes, personal statements, interview skills, making us extremely prepared for our future. She creates relationships with her students that show she cares about us and wants us to succeed.”

URCA students Jenna Heng, of Overland Park, Kan., and Tyler Cronister, of Springfield, were also recognized for their exceptional work in the program. Heng earned the Creative Activities Assistant of the Semester Award. Cronister received the Research Assistant of the Semester Award.

“Jenna has taken to our work with enthusiasm and great attention to detail, and is both analytical and creative in her approach,” said faculty nominator Johanna Schmitz, PhD, professor of theater history in the College of Arts and Sciences, who referred to Heng as unflappable and indefatigable.

“She has been as insightful as she is generous to bring our new researcher up to speed on our newly established protocols and standards,” Schmitz added.

Faculty nominator John Matta, assistant professor of computer science in the School of Engineering, lauded Cronister for his leadership and persistence. When Matta's original project took a surprising turn, Cronister never hesitated to investigate and reimagine the project's possibilities.

"Tyler took it upon himself to develop a plan to rewrite an original thesis program from scratch," Matta explained. "He has demonstrated great software engineering ability, as well as project management skills. I am incredibly impressed with Tyler's technical knowledge, persistence, good attitude and leadership skills. He has been an exemplary URCA Assistant."

For more information about SIUE's URCA program, visit siue.edu/urca.

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 13,000.

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Photo: (L-R) SIUE URCA faculty awardees Dr. James Panico and Dr. Sarah Conoyer, and SIUE URCA Assistant award winners Jenna Heng and Tyler Cronister.