

SIUE's URCA Program Honors Faculty Mentors and Student Researchers

by Megan Wieser

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EDWARDSVILLE – Southern Illinois University Edwardsville's Undergraduate Research and Creative Activities (URCA) program encourages, supports and enables undergraduate students of all disciplines to participate in research and creative activities under faculty mentorship. Each semester, the URCA program recognizes outstanding faculty mentors and student researchers through four awards.

The fall 2020 Vaughn Vandegrift URCA Research Mentor of the Semester Award was presented to Myron Jones, PhD, associate professor in the College of Arts and Sciences' (CAS) Department of Chemistry. Kristin Best-Kinscherff, assistant professor and head of dance in the Department of Theater and Dance, was presented with the URCA Creative Activities Mentor of the Semester Award.

"I am honored to receive this award," said Jones. "The URCA program is fantastic. I participated in a similar program when I was an undergraduate at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga. I remember truly appreciating the ability to interact with my professors outside of the classroom, and I am thankful for the career and academic

mentoring they offered. I care about my students at SIUE and hope I can support them in a similar way.”

Student nominator Jochabay McGeeBey wrote in appreciation of Jones’ mentorship, noting the professor’s caring and encouraging nature while they attended an academic conference together.

“Dr. Jones has exemplified what a mentor truly is: an understanding, caring and encouraging person who influences their mentees to be the same,” wrote McGeeBey. “Dr. Jones, along with Dr. (Michael) Hankins, are the only Black professors in the Department of Chemistry. I am grateful that they are here, because they encourage me, as well as the other few Black chemistry majors, that we can be successful in a field that is predominantly white. I am truly grateful and appreciative of all Dr. Jones has taught me.”

URCA student Jamie Grawitch nominated Best-Kinscherff for safely bringing live theater back to the SIUE community after a nine-month hiatus as a result of COVID-19. In October, the Department of Theater and Dance presented Garden Flow, an outdoor, promenade-style dance performance created and directed by Best-Kinscherff.

“Professor Best-Kinscherff deserves to be recognized for her outstanding work on this semester’s show,” wrote Grawitch. “This show was an outlet for many artists in the SIUE dance community. With Garden Flow, we were able to welcome small audiences to view live theater again. It allowed both artists and audiences a sense of relief, if only for an hour.”

“It is an honor to receive this award,” said Best-Kinscherff. “This year has certainly been difficult for the arts. I am extremely grateful for the URCA program, which supported my endeavor to reimagine creative work in my field. Jamie Grawitch was an outstanding assistant on the Garden Flow performance, and the project would not have been possible without her.”

URCA students Blessing Udoh, of Ota, Ogun State in Nigeria, and Kenzie Holzinger, of Highland, were also recognized for their exceptional work this semester. Udoh, a junior biology major, earned the Research Assistant of the Semester Award. Holzinger, a sophomore majoring in art and design, received the Creative Activities Assistant of the Semester Award.

Faculty mentor Brittany Peterson, PhD, assistant professor in the Department of Biological Sciences, describes Udoh as a model student researcher. Throughout her time at SIUE, Udoh has participated in many research projects and patiently assisted fellow lab mates.

“As a third-year student researcher, Blessing is a pillar in my lab,” Peterson said. “Blessing has become such a staple source of knowledge that she frequently trains her lab mates in the techniques she has mastered, including seniors and graduate students. There’s never a technique she can’t master, a detail she overlooks or a challenge she’s not up for. I’m grateful to URCA for the opportunity to recruit someone so motivated and brilliant to my lab.”

In summer 2020, Udoh was accepted to the competitive American Physician Scientist Virtual Summer Research Program, where she worked on a proposal to treat Fanconi anemia in utero using hematopoietic stem and progenitor cells. Currently, she is applying for summer research internships to gain experience and positioning for medical school.

Holzinger continuously demonstrates her capacity for self-learning and problem-solving. Faculty mentor Brigham Dimick, chair and professor in the Department of Art and Design, praised Holzinger’s unwavering dedication to the visual arts.

Holzinger first entered the Department as a visiting student from Thomas Edison University in New Jersey. Impressed by her talent, Dimick recruited her to apply for a bachelor’s at SIUE. Now, Holzinger works as Dimick’s assistant, helping bring complex ideas to life through drawing and painting.

“Kenzie has been an invaluable assistant for me, working directly on my paintings and drawings, and doing so with an impressive skill set and work ethic,” said Dimick. “Because Kenzie is able to analyze the gaps between my complex goals and her understanding, she demonstrates the capacity to frame the perfect question and apply my responses into practice with efficiency and clarity. I couldn’t ask for a better assistant.”

For more information on 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.