

SIUE's URCA Program Honors Exceptional Faculty Mentors and Student Researchers

by Megan Wieser
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EDWARDSVILLE – Each semester, Southern Illinois University Edwardsville's Undergraduate Research and Creative Activities (URCA) program recognizes outstanding faculty mentors and student researchers through four awards.

The URCA program encourages, supports and enables undergraduate students of all disciplines to participate in research and creative activities under faculty mentorship. These experiences allow undergraduate students opportunities to engage in scholarship, interact with faculty, and fully connect in the educational process of discovering and creating.

The spring 2021 Vaughn Vandegrift URCA Research Mentor of the Semester Award was presented to both Carlee Hawkins, PhD, assistant professor in the School of Education, Health and Human Behavior's Department of Psychology, and Brittany

Peterson, PhD, assistant professor in the College of Arts and Sciences' (CAS) Department of Biological Sciences. Award winners were nominated by URCA students.

“All URCA assistant faculty mentors have to ‘try out’ each semester, and it is not uncommon to receive over 120 faculty applications for approximately 90 funded positions,” said Laura Pawlow, PhD, URCA coordinator and professor in the Department of Psychology. “Whittling it down to the best 90 applicants is extremely tough. Those who make it are excellent mentors who are very dedicated to helping their students achieve specific learning outcomes through their work together. To be recognized within this fantastic pool as an award winner is incredibly noteworthy.”

A group of URCA students wrote in support for Hawkins, describing her as a passionate, understanding mentor who sets her students up for success.

“While entering an unfamiliar learning environment during a pandemic, Dr. Carlee Hawkins has pushed through to show her passion for education as an extraordinary professor and mentor,” wrote the students. “Dr. Hawkins has shown compassion and understanding for her students and research assistants by creating a comfortable environment in which her students can learn, while not feeling overwhelmed.”

URCA student Kaitlin Goodbrake described Peterson as a reliable advocate for student researchers in her nomination letter.

“Dr. Peterson believed in my capabilities in the lab once I proved to her that I could handle the project she had in mind for me, and I have not been disappointed with my time in her research space,” wrote Goodbrake. “I’m always excited to work in her lab, wondering what new objectives will be directed to me, as well as what data I will be able to collect for my project in the coming weeks. Dr. Peterson is the reason why her lab is one of the busiest with URCA and graduate projects.”

Research Assistant of the Semester Awards were presented to URCA students Lauren Ferris, of Danville, a senior studying psychology, and Vu Dinh, of Bien Hoa City, Vietnam, a senior engineering major.

Ferris has developed a project that investigates students’ perceptions of feeling known by their instructors in online courses and how these perceptions could impact students’ self-handicapping. Faculty mentor Maurina Aranda, PhD, assistant professor in the Department of Biological Sciences, wrote in favor of Ferris, praising her positive attitude and strong work ethic throughout the project.

“As instructors move to change their pedagogy to teach in online environments and develop compassion for our students who are facing uncertainty during this pandemic,

Lauren's project will provide insight to understanding the impact of our teaching," wrote Aranda. "Outside of developing a project that could inform teaching and policies at SIUE, Lauren is one of the hardest working undergraduate researchers in my lab. She is motivated and has one of the most impressive self-starter attitudes I've seen in a senior biology student."

Dinh was nominated by Jon Klingensmith, PhD, assistant professor in the School of Engineering's Department of Electrical and Computer Engineering, after assisting him in building a prototype platform for algorithm development and demonstration.

"Typically, students need quite a bit of guidance before they are productive in contributing to actual feature development," wrote Klingensmith. "However, Vu developed several new features right away and has subsequently become the main developer of our software tool, Package for Adipose Tissue Segmentation (PATs). He's already doing work on par with my graduate students, and based on his unparalleled success this semester, I enthusiastically nominate Vu as an outstanding URCA 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.