

Psychology Students Make the Most Of In-Person Lab Experience

by Megan Wieser

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EDWARDSVILLE – After spending more than a year completing coursework mostly online or through a hybrid format due to the COVID-19 pandemic, it's not lost on five undergraduate psychology students at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville how

fortunate they have been to meet in person this semester. The team of research assistants is engaging in applied learning with the support of Jason Finley, PhD, assistant professor of psychology.

“It has been so wonderful for us to work together in person in the lab,” Finley said. “Lab meetings are the crucible of scientific research, where new ideas are born from sprawling intellectual conversations and hands-on exploration of both prior literature and new data.”

Seniors Alyssa Cerna, Claire Ellis, Alexandra Hardy, Sarah McCoy, and Patricia Roberts have been working with Finley this semester on a variety of research topics from memory to cultural bias.

One project, The Forgetting Curve, is a collaboration with California-based artist Deborah Aschheim, who conducted research on her own memory over the course of 10 years. Ellis and Hardy are continuing Finley’s previous work on this project by coding Aschheim’s qualitative data to create quantitative data that will allow them to perform statistical analyses and identify patterns in her memory.

“We are looking at what is remembered, but what we want to find when looking through all of the data is what is misremembered and if there is a relationship between those errors in her memory,” said Ellis.

In the Photo Importance study, Roberts and Finley asked study participants to select only one year of their life in which they would choose to keep photos. The pandemic has impacted the results of this study in an unexpected way.

“There have been a few participants who have mentioned choosing a specific year because it was before the pandemic,” explained Roberts. “While the results are currently unclear, this could have an interesting and unexpected impact.”

McCoy had the opportunity to work with Finley on a project from beginning to end this semester. The Cultural Bias in Security Questions project sought to identify whether or not security questions asked by online identity verification systems are biased toward white, heterosexual individuals with heteronormative lives.

“This research experience has been one of the most enriching experiences of my academic career,” said McCoy. “I have been involved in a research project from start to finish, which has given me an authentic, behind-the-scenes look into how real psychological research is conducted (sometimes through trials and tribulations). Dr. Finley has instilled in me a strong curiosity and passion for learning about the human mind.”

Finley and his research assistants have not taken for granted the time they are able to spend around the lab table this semester talking through their research projects.

“We are blessed to be able to meet in person in our lab,” said Hardy. “We have had so many great conversations about our projects that might have been more difficult to have on Zoom.”

While Finley and his students are fully vaccinated and comfortable attending meetings in the psychology lab, much of their research is still conducted without in-person contact. This challenge makes their lab discussions even more important as they work through different ways of collecting data.

“Joining the research lab this semester has provided me with a lot of insight on what the research experience is all about. It's difficult and time-consuming, yet super rewarding,” said Cerna. “As much of a pain as the pandemic has been, it's at least made us come up with more creative ways to carry out our research. Of course, in-person research is always great, but now we can make use of our resources, like technology, to create great studies that yield promising results.”

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