

SIUE URCA Program Recognizes Outstanding Faculty Mentors, 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 fall 2021 Vaughn Vandegrift URCA Research Mentor of the Semester Award was presented to Barbara McCracken, PhD, assistant professor at the SIU School of Dental Medicine. The URCA Creative Activities Mentor of the Semester Award was presented

to Johanna Schmitz, PhD, professor of theater history and dramatic literature in the College of Arts and Sciences. Award winners were nominated by URCA students.

“All URCA 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 extremely dedicated to helping students achieve specific learning outcomes. To be recognized within this fantastic pool as an award winner is incredibly noteworthy.”

URCA Assistant Elizabeth Schroader wrote in support of Schmitz, describing her dedication and commitment as “exceptional” and noting her relentless effort at seeing students succeed. “Professor Schmitz has been a true mentor. With her vast experience, she has helped broaden my horizon beyond the academic sphere. She inspires my confidence and ability to give my best all the time,” Schroader shared.

A group of URCA students wrote in support of McCracken, describing her as a great source of motivation. They praised her unflinching support for students beyond the classroom.

“Dr. McCracken's research allowed us to interact with our patient volunteers like professionals who greet the patients and guide them through the study's goal,” the nomination letter read.

“She has motivated me to keep pushing forward and find new ways of studying by providing research opportunities that are outside of her aerosol study, allowing me to help dental students and create new connections,” shared URCA Assistant Ethan Monroe.

Fellow URCA Assistant Darlene Sandoval expressed her admiration of McCracken's team spirit. “I have never appreciated how profound being part of a team has been until working with Dr. McCracken,” she contributed.

The Research Assistant of the Semester Award was presented to Lydia Fulton, of Staunton, a senior in the Department of History. Glen Carbon native Elizabeth Schroader, studying in the Department of English, was presented the Creative Activities Assistant of the Semester Award.

Fulton has been working with Kathleen Vongsathorn, PhD, for more than three years on transcription and analysis of interviews centering around traditional childbirth in Uganda, and women's access to and engagement with hospital facilities. Vongsathorn

described Fulton as an intellectual with insightful takes on a topic she has been researching for more than 10 years.

Fulton has assisted in her research, “not for a stipend or for credit, but out of a desire to understand where and how people seek healing, and the ways in which social, political, economic, and medical factors influence access to healthcare.” Vongsathorn also wrote that Fulton is “diligent, insightful, curious, and always seeking to learn more.”

Schmitz nominated Schroader for the creative activities accolade. Noting her work on a post-discovery archive, Schmitz described Schroader as someone who derives pleasure in solving complicated issues and enjoys working around the challenges presented by financial collection.

“What a joy to have her on the project,” Schmitz wrote. “She is thorough, accurate, and knows how to tell a story with existing material and augmented metadata. She is ready to learn, receptive to collaboration, and willing to take the lead if she sees a way clear.”

For more information on SIUE’s URCA program, visit siue.edu/urca.

[Southern Illinois University Edwardsville](https://siue.edu) 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.