

DEVELOPING A LOVE FOR THE SEARCH

Undergraduate research opportunities help OU students thrive and discover their futures from year one.

B Y T A M I A L T H O F F

ON A QUIET FRIDAY AFTERNOON, the basement of Dale Hall is almost empty, except for a small group of undergraduate students gathered in a corner classroom. They chat about upcoming weekend plans before taking turns practicing their poster presentations, which highlight research they've conducted on various mental health-related topics.

Instructor Charlie Rioux, who specializes in developmental and quantitative psychology, listens intently and offers suggestions to help the students improve their presentations. The atmosphere is one of collaboration and mutual support, as the students give feedback to each other.

The students work in the PEANUTs Lab (Laboratory for Prevention/Epidemiology + Analytic Novelty, Uptake & Translation), where they have a unique opportunity to gain research experience as early as their first year of college.

They are among the more than 500 OU students involved in undergraduate research, an effort supported by the university's Lead On Strategic Plan.

Rioux, an assistant professor in the OU Department of Psychology, has been running the PEANUTs Lab since 2022. About 20 students are currently participating in the lab, where they do everything from vetting potential research participants to data analysis and conducting surveys.



ERIKAH BROWN



OU senior Amanda Nsubuga researches novel bacteria isolates through OU's UReCA program.

“I FEEL SUPER LUCKY TO BE A PART OF THIS LAB. IT’S SETTING ME UP FOR MY FUTURE AND BEING ABLE TO CONDUCT MY OWN RESEARCH. CHARLIE IS SUCH A STELLAR MENTOR.”



PAIGE OWENS

Mentorship by faculty like OU Assistant Professor of Psychology Charlie Rioux helps undergraduate researchers produce vital science and reach their personal goals.

She says while some of the daily work may be mundane, the opportunity to research mental health draws students into the lab—and the chance to be involved in every aspect of the study process keeps them engaged.

Rioux’s students are currently participating in an “Experiences of Pregnancy” study, researching how environmental factors can affect the mental health of pregnant individuals and the outcome of their pregnancies. They also research topics like environmental sensitivity in adulthood and how multiple adverse childhood experiences, or ACEs, affect development.

“Students want to be involved because they are energized by the work and have an opportunity to improve mental health,” Rioux says. “A lot of students have been really excited about participating in the pregnancy study because it has practical applications.”

Emily Flesher, an OU junior public health and art therapy major from Rogers, Ark., joined the lab her freshman year. Although the former preschool teacher has always had an interest in developmental psychology, she never considered herself a researcher or expected that the lab would alter the course of her future.

“I came to OU as an art major—something totally unrelated and not at all connected to research,” she says. “When

I came across the opportunity to work in Charlie’s lab, I really wanted to join.”

Flesher now plans to go into the medical field, where she hopes to continue her research while serving marginalized communities and children. “I’ve been so grateful for the experience, and it’s dictated that I really want to research maternal health, perinatal health and pediatric health, which is something I’m very passionate about,” she says. “I love research because of its connection to storytelling. I enjoy knowledge translations and being able to tell people about my research, letting them know what we’re doing, what’s out there and how we’re trying to help people.

“I feel super lucky to be a part of this lab. It’s setting me up for my future and being able to conduct my own research. Charlie is such a stellar mentor.”

OU senior Zoe Childers-Rockey, a Galveston, Texas, native majoring in psychology and sociology/criminology, says experience in the lab has helped her obtain the necessary skills and knowledge required for graduate school admission. She, like Flesher, has also developed a passion for research.

“I’m in the lab to gain experience for what I want to do in the future, which is research or developing programs for kids in the criminal justice system,”



Emily Flesher, left, and Zoe Childers-Rockey in the PEANUTs lab, where they research pregnancy and mental health.

PAIGE OWENS

Childers-Rockey says. “Before, I didn’t really know what I wanted to do. Learning more about developmental psychology and its impact on the human brain and our personalities has inspired me to continue my education.”

While undergraduate research is not unique on college campuses, OU is unique in its approach, says Miloš Savić, director of the Office of Undergraduate Research and Creative Activity (URCA). It was established in 2022 at the request of OU’s Office of the Senior Vice President and Provost to place greater emphasis on undergraduate research. URCA serves as a one-stop shop for students who are interested in research opportunities and creative activities of all kinds.

The office’s primary focus is the URCA Summer Fellowship, which is granted to 50 undergraduate students every summer and provides a \$5,000 stipend allowing them to concentrate on their research without financial distractions. Savić also oversees the First Gen URCA program, which offers a \$1,000 stipend to undergraduate students who don’t have prior research experience.

Each fall, students come together for the URCA Showcase, a three-hour conference where they present their research. In addition, URCA helps students find a variety of undergraduate research opportuni-

ties offered across OU’s Norman campus.

Savić says undergraduate research opportunities have far-reaching benefits. Students have landed jobs, presented their work at international conferences and published their research in journals because of their OU experiences. One of the biggest rewards, however, is when students realize their potential.

“The effects are immense because of the empowerment, self-efficacy and confidence they build,” he says. “Undergrad research is the biggest win, because not only does it help students, but mentors also gain an incredible amount of benefit. Undergradates can shift a mentor’s entire research agenda. Ultimately, we all win because more research equals better solutions.”

Savić says applications for research programs have increased each year. As word spreads, he expects those numbers to continue to go up.

“These students come up with some of the most beautiful ideas—ideas I would never have thought of. If we foster a person, let them play, let them have opportunities to thrive, we don’t know how incredible their accomplishments can be,” he says. “My goal is to have one out of every four students at OU doing some kind of undergraduate research because of how empowering it is.”

Amanda Nsubuga agrees. The microbiology senior from Kampala, Uganda, conducts research on novel bacterial isolates. “The URCA experience has shown me how proactive and adaptable I can be, especially when I encounter obstacles in my research,” she says. “It has required a lot of troubleshooting and innovative thinking.”

As a mentor, Rioux’s objective is to enhance students’ research skills while helping them grow. She says although the broader outcome may be improving public mental health, her goal is to support students and enable them to achieve their individual goals.

“If they want to get into grad school, we’ll get them the experience they need. If they want to work in industry, policy or clinical settings, we’ll get them where they need to be to do that,” she says. “Research outcomes have an impact, but the lab experience has just as much of an impact.”

“These students are amazing,” she adds. “They are eager to learn, build new skills and contribute to science. Through their involvement, we have an even bigger impact on our own research. Students can make huge contributions if we involve them.”

Tami Althoff is content lead for OU Education Services.