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Acing It

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Acing It : University of Dayton, Ohio

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By Eric F. Spina

Listening to chemical engineering major Josh Romo talk about his efforts to create a renewable energy-powered refrigeration technology for use in developing countries, I flashed back to my own days in college and early in graduate school.

Was I that poised? That self-assured? That aware that engineering could be used to change lives?

When graphic design major Annie Brinkman described her work to develop a visual identity system to create a sense of place for an economically challenged neighborhood, I admired her critical analysis skills and empathy for others. And I'm still thinking about English major Rose Dyar's thoughtful reflections on what would lead a mother to document her son's health issues on social media as she was slowly poisoning him.

I recently spent a fascinating afternoon at the Honors Student Symposium, where time flew too fast as I ran from room to room in Kennedy Union, immersed in a wide range of undergraduate student research — from the toxicity of nanoparticles on lung tissue to the reasons why some people in poverty can't get out.

I observed intellectually curious students guided by supportive faculty mentors. Clearly invested in and proud of their students, they challenged them on their findings, probing for greater understanding. Other faculty and staff from across the University showed up to observe student work, encourage and support these young researchers, and engage deeply. Many students, not just those in the Honors Program, stopped by to quietly support their friends through their presence and genuine interest.

For the most part, the research presentations I observed were equivalent to the work of second-year graduate students. The students' literature reviews reflected an understanding of the nature of their research problems and how their own work fits into the broader work in the field. Under the guidance of faculty, they ably used highly sophisticated instruments and measurement techniques. And the theoretical and scholarly work that I observed showed tremendous depth and strong critical analysis skills.

I found the poise of the students and their presentation skills to be remarkable. When I think about my own graduate presentations and those of a generation of young graduate students with whom I have interacted, these undergraduate students were more composed, better prepared, and much more able to deliver a talk that reflected very well on their research.

I applaud Honors Program Director John McCombe, Associate Director Nancy Martorano Miller, and all the honors thesis mentors who helped students every step along the way. What an outsized impact you've had on these students' academic journey.

This experience truly says something about a University of Dayton education. All students who work hard will gain knowledge and wisdom. But our students also possess intangible qualities that will set them apart in the workplace and in graduate school. They show the confidence and interpersonal skills that allow them to stand before a room full of people, deliver a professional presentation with poise, and respond to pointed questions and comments. Not an easy thing to do!

For some young researchers, this can be challenging — but not so at UD.

They aced it.