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## The Joy of Undergraduate Discovery

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# The Joy of Undergraduate Discovery

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Thursday July 28, 2022

By Eric F. Spina

Tierra Freeman popped one of her presentation slides up on the screen in Sears Recital Hall as 10 honors students in the Berry Summer Thesis Institute gathered on stage for a group photo before lunch.

As I glanced up, the question jumped out, “What is a role model?”

That’s an easy one.

Everyone in that room qualified — from the selfless faculty mentors who guided these high-achieving students in scholarly research, to the Honors Program staff who organized a high-impact summer, to the students themselves, who displayed intellect, curiosity, and confidence as they presented their projects in front of their peers.

Every summer, I’m amazed by the poise and passion of the Berry Summer Thesis Institute students, who complete a fascinating array of research projects over 12 weeks. All rising juniors, they each receive a \$2,000 summer fellowship, \$1,500 research budget, and

campus housing, thanks to the generosity of the Berry Family Foundation and the Berry Family.

But they receive much more than that. This “trial graduate school opportunity” is a life-changing experience. I fully anticipate many of them will co-author peer-reviewed research papers with their professors before they graduate. Others will form lifelong friendships with the future musicians, biologists, philosophers, lawyers, and historians who all are part of this year’s cohort.

They’re also learning lessons in serving others. Outside the seminars, laboratories and library, they’re volunteering at Mission of Mary Cooperative, a sustainable urban farm in Dayton’s Twin Towers neighborhood, where they’re weeding, watering, and cultivating vegetables and supporting local residents who benefit from the farm.

Mostly, though, they’re cultivating lives of discovery and creativity.

Lizzy Herr and Jeanne Sering both worked with Professor Yvonne Sun, a microbiologist, on ways to make food safer. Their research, taken from different angles, is aimed at protecting people from the harmful pathogen in listeria that cause severe illnesses and death, particularly in pregnant women and those who are immunocompromised.

“The research has changed my relationship with food. I’m much more aware (of the need to protect the public),” Jeanne observed.

As one by one the students rose to present their findings, I was impressed by the diversity and breadth of their projects, which ranged from Jaylee Sowders’ analysis of the use of music therapy to treat adolescents with attachment challenges to Caitlin Spicer’s interpretation of divine grace in the lives of the characters in Evelyn Waugh’s *Brideshead Revisted*, both the novel and the film adaptation. Phillip Cicero presented a fascinating study of the rhetoric of disgraced Evangelical pastor Mark Driscoll, while Jules Carr-Chellman took us through an examination of the uncanny and the sublime in a short story by H.P. Lovecraft, a writer of weird, science, fantasy, and horror fiction. And I learned a lot about how three-spined stickleback fish can avoid predators after Claire VanMeter shared the results of her experiment.

In rounding out the presentations, Daniel Vencel compared the less-popular kettlebell workout to a rowing ergometer machine for strength and cardiovascular health, while Jacob Biesecker-Mast made us think deeply about the expression and meaning of music.

Some of the best faculty-mentored undergraduate research on campus can be found at the Berry Summer Thesis Institute, where the joy of discovery thrives and one can see the future. It is very bright!

