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A Life Changer : University of Dayton, Ohio

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Tuesday June 6, 2023

A Life Changer

By Eric F. Spina

If I could bottle the spirit of the [Berry Summer Thesis Institute \(BSTI\)](#), I would in a heartbeat.

Instead, three young alumni and a current honors student brought the quintessence of the program to the spring meeting of the University's Board of Trustees, where they shared how their summer involvement as undergraduates changed their lives.

That's not an overstatement.

"The program led me to discover my passion for research, join a research lab at UD, win many awards, and enter into a top-five engineering Ph.D. program," said Joseph Beckett '22, a mechanical engineering graduate. "I was able to lead research and be a lead author as an

undergraduate — and not just wash glassware in a lab.”

Daniel Vencel '24, a health science major with a minor in finance, spent last summer comparing and contrasting two exercise protocols to determine which showed the better cardiovascular benefits for patients. He's already presented research at a professional poster session at the American Physiology Summit in California and gained experience working as a patient care technician at Miami Valley Hospital, where he volunteered in the surgery center. He knows he's bound for med school.

Michaela Miller '21, a music therapy graduate with a minor in Spanish, told trustees she researched ways music therapists can practice with a culture-centered emphasis and improve their cultural humility when working with Latinx young adults. With guitar in hand, she's now a full-time music therapist at Eskenazi Health, a large public hospital in Indianapolis that serves marginalized communities. She routinely uses what she learned in her research in her everyday life caring for patients.

Allison Herceg '23, who will begin a graduate program in social work at Case Western Reserve University this fall, said she gained confidence and improved her skills in performing research, writing, and presenting after working closely with faculty mentor and microbiologist Yvonne Sun on ways to make food safer.

For her part, Sun calls the BSTI students “the best intellectual companions I can even dream for. My students keep me going. They ask questions. They show up. They're like the partners you have alongside you on a very hard hike. Working with them brings me so much joy.”

Thanks to the generosity and forward-thinking vision of the Berry Family Foundation and the Berry family, a group of honors students each summer learn the joy of discovery in what is a high-impact, trial graduate school opportunity. Each receives a \$2,000 summer fellowship, \$1,500 research budget, campus housing — and the opportunity to co-author peer-reviewed research papers with their professors before they graduate. They also learn lessons in service to others as they volunteer at Mission of Mary Cooperative, a sustainable urban farm in Dayton's Twin Towers neighborhood.

Let's not forget one other important side benefit: the program helps students contribute to the dialogue between faith and reason.

“They call it research for a reason because you're always searching,” said Joseph Beckett, a Ph.D. pre-candidate in the mechanical engineering program at the University of Michigan with support from a prestigious National Defense Science and Engineering Graduate Fellowship.

“With research there's a sense of wonder and awe — the awe of creation. It's humbling. ... For those on the ground doing research, it can be a form of worship,” he told trustees.

While I can't bottle the humility, intellect, curiosity, poise, and confidence of the Berry Summer Thesis Institute fellows, I can describe it. It's the transformative power of a relationship-rich UD education at work — and fueled by the generosity of a caring Dayton family.