Research Opportunities for Students | CPD

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04/10/2013

Curtis Steinfeldt works in the CPD biomed research lab. Research. It’s the cornerstone of institutions of higher learning like Utah State University, as well as a core function at the Center for Persons with Disabilities. It’s being celebrated for the ninth year in a row during Research Week, April 8-12. Research at the CPD isn’t only being conducted by faculty, professional researchers and graduate students—important research is being done by undergraduates as well. Students in the Interdisciplinary Disability Awareness and Service Learning (IDASL) class at the CPD, which is open to upper level undergraduate and graduate students in any major, conducted two Participatory Action Research (PAR) projects this year. Both groups will present their posters on Thursday, April 11 from 9 a.m. to 2 p.m. in the International Lounge at Taggart Student Center. In the first, Casey Maher, Natisha Miles, Stephanie Mulford, Parveen Parasar and Laura Opperman conducted a study to determine the level of awareness about the CPD in Cache Valley residents. They developed a survey that was distributed to a small number of people at four different sites, and found awareness of the CPD was highest among those who knew someone who worked, volunteered or received services there. The second study, by Clay Shumway, Cameron Cressall, Heidi Quimby, Alex Garnica and Ester Walker, examined service learning opportunities at USU, and specifically at the CPD, and identified common areas of success that can be implemented university-wide. “We would like to see service learning to be better integrated into every student’s educational experience,” the group wrote in its abstract. “Our research shows that if the correct principles are applied, this will have an enormous effect for good on both the students and the community at large.” Undergraduate research at the CPD is not limited to classes such as IDASL, however. There are also opportunities in the Biomedical division’s research lab, where Dr. Anthony Torres and his staff conduct cutting-edge research into autism spectrum disorder, ADHD and other neurological puzzles. By genotyping the DNA extracted from thousands of blood samples, Torres and his staff has found significant evidence linking autism to the immune system. Torres currently has five undergraduate researchers working in the lab. “They are excellent students,” he said. “They do important work. They have projects that have to get done. We put a lot of responsibility on them. This is not what they’d do in class, they’re doing real research.”

Curtis Steinfeldt, a senior biology major from Spanish Fork, Utah, said working at the research lab has been an important stepping stone on his professional path. “It’s the perfect transition between book science and hands-on science,” he said. “It’s really helped me to learn how to learn.” Steinfeldt, who graduates from USU in May, has a job lined up at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, Md., where he will work for a year before applying to medical school. “This experience has been better than anything else to prepare me for working at Johns Hopkins,” he said. “It’s the best thing that’s happened to me at college.”

Elizabeth Robertson, a junior biological engineering major from Bluffdale, Utah, agreed. “It’s a wonderful experience to get hands-on, and put what you learn to use,” she said. “It’s a completely different aspect of learning. I definitely think it’s a part of the educational experience students should get involved with.”

Kelsen Kitchen is a junior from Hoytsville, Utah, who is majoring in professional and technical writing. She works on writing grants for the biomed lab. “I feel like I’m learning a lot,” she said. “My major is not in a scientific field, but I will be working with subject matter experts in my career. It’s a good experience for me, I’m learning the terminology and how the field works. It definitely sets apart your college experience.”