

TOP STORY

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Claflin STEM focus leads to opportunities in undergraduate research

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(From Left) Dr. Randall Harris and research interns Tyrek Commander, Jellisa Ewan and Tyrell Jamison.

Claflin University's strategic initiative related to experiential learning is taking hold as research scholars are making their mark at prestigious universities, renowned centers of science and technology, and major corporations throughout the United States and abroad.

Last summer, 59 students in Claflin's School of Natural Sciences and Mathematics conducted research ranging from plant genomics to advancing diversity in aging. The list included 23 students who participated in off-campus research programs and 36 students who received internships at Claflin. "These research internships provide students with practical, cutting-edge experiences that improve their critical thinking and presentation skills," said Dr. Randall Harris, associate professor of biology at Claflin. "The internships are invaluable to the students as they begin to develop their network within the profession."

"Serving as a research intern has broadened my perspective of career options in the science industry," said Jellisa Ewan, who participated in the Bridging the Gap Summer Research Program at the University of Southern California. Ewan is a senior bio-technology major from Jamaica. "I had prior research experiences at the Novartis Institute of Biomedical Sciences and at Claflin under Dr. Harris. These internships really opened my eyes to the diversity of job opportunities in science and research."

Harris said that many research internships also offer Graduate Record Examination (GRE) and MCAT (Medical College Admission Test) preparation, transferable course credit, physician shadowing and other opportunities to enhance their resumes. "We believe the combined exposure to the classroom, research, lectures and networking prepare our students for the rigorous and competitive admissions process at reputable graduate and professional schools," Harris said.

Tyrell Jamison, a senior biology major from North, S.C., was an intern at Michigan State in the Summer Research Opportunities Program. Jamison conducted research for MSU's Department of Microbiology and Molecular Genetics. "I want to attend graduate school and in the sciences, graduate programs are research based," said Jamison. "The internships make you more marketable to a prospective employer or graduate school. The more you know about your job, the more of an asset you are to an employer. The research programs and internships have prepared me for the workforce and graduate school."

In addition to the coveted internships at elite universities and renowned research centers and laboratories, Harris is quick to point out that students also participate in research conducted at Claflin. The University's world-class faculty has earned a growing reputation for performing innovative, results-driven research. Claflin interns are working with professors who are seeking new discoveries in areas that include cancer biology, autism, infectious diseases, public health and bio- technology.

"We are conducting research that resonates across numerous academic disciplines," Harris said. "What really is significant is that Claflin is a liberal arts university. However, the success of our students and faculty has raised our profile for research in higher education."

The accuracy of Harris' assessment is further revealed after looking back to last year when Dr. Ananda Mondal received the distinguished Early CAREER Development Award and \$550,000 from the National Science Foundation (NSF). Mondal, an assistant professor of mathematics and computer science, is conducting research on how proteins interact and bond to contribute to causing cancer. He became the second Claflin faculty member to win the award. Dr. Nick Panasik, associate professor of biology/chemistry, was the recipient in 2011.

"Perhaps the biggest advantage of participating in the internship program at Claflin was the familiarity with my professor and the campus," said Tyrek Commander, a senior biology major from Sumter, S.C., who investigated mathematic modeling for Claflin's RISE (Research Initiative for Scientific Enhancement) grant. "I did not have to worry about finding my way around in a new environment, which allowed me to focus entirely on my assignments."

The focal point of Commander's analysis was infectious diseases and its role in predicting, assessing, and controlling potential outbreaks.

Commander's internship was supported by the 1.3 million CU-RISE grant awarded to Dr. Gloria McCutcheon by the National Institutes of Health. McCutcheon is the interim chair and a professor in the biology department.

“The experience our students gain as research interns is invaluable for developing the insight and perspective they need to become visionary leaders in their chosen careers,” said Dr. Verlie Tisdale, dean of the School of Natural Sciences and Mathematics at Claflin. “As undergraduate researchers, these students have more interaction and hands-on instruction with their professors which enhances the learning environment.”