Summer Scholars Research Program

The East Carolina University School of Dental Medicine offers incoming students a unique opportunity to perform research under the direction of faculty through the Summer Scholars Research Program. The Summer Scholars Research Program provides dental students with the knowledge and background to address research questions, design and implement a study to answer those questions, analyze and interpret the data meaningfully, and effectively present the results to fellow faculty and peers. Incoming freshman Caitlin Mehaffey, Precious Boston, and Omar Glover were chosen to take part in this year’s Summer Scholars Research Program.

Mehaffey, along with her mentor Dr. McCarlie is conducting a project entitled “Oral Health and Orthodontics Literacy Correlated with Oral Health and Orthodontic Status in Eastern North Carolina” with grant funding from the American Association of Orthodontists Foundation. Mehaffey stated that, “the summer research scholars program is a good opportunity to jump into the world of dentistry and I think research is very important to help practices run as efficiently as they can so that more patients are able to be seen and better care is able to be given.”

Mehaffey will be starting her first year in the dental program at the end of this summer and, “fell in love with ECU’s hands on approach in the commitment to public health and their drive to bettering the communities of Eastern North Carolina.” Mehaffey stated, “I’ve learned a lot, one of the cool opportunities that we have is that we get to see the background. ECU’s research department is very encouraging and these are all skills I can carry with me into future research projects.”

Precious Boston sees her experience in the summer research program as, “an opportunity to interact with faculty and fellow student researchers, I feel coming to ECU’s dental program was a good choice.” Boston enjoys, “working and collaborating with other student researchers and being able to compare ideas, that is a major benefit of our dental research department.” Boston added, “the focus of our research is to help the community, great attention is really given to that.”

Boston and her mentor Dr. Mejia are examining “Barriers to oral health care and impact of unmet dental treatment needs in young children” with support from the Engagement and Outreach Scholars Academy (EOSA). Using focus groups, surveys, and examinations, information will be gathered to figure out where the difficulties in accessing dental care are. Boston stated that, “If you can figure out what the barriers are to them getting dental care access, then you can figure out ways to better treat and target them.”
Omar Glover is expanding his undergraduate research experience into research in the dental program. Glover stated that, “being in research has solidified my want to be here, being a student and a researcher is very important. You want to not only contribute to the clinical aspect but also to the dental field as a whole.”

Glover with mentor’s Drs. Anderson and Gordon are determining the protein levels present in the saliva to find a correlation between inflammation and the condition of the mouth and body of the patient. Glover stated, “by creating a more convenient way to evaluate the oral damage, it has the potential to really change how we are able to deliver care to patients.”

Mehaffey, Boston, and Glover recently presented at the Summer Biomedical Research Program at the Health Sciences Career presentation. They addressed fellow East Carolina University students on the importance and community impact of the ECU School of Dental Medicine, as well as the research opportunities that are available.

First year dental students Luke Current and Jessica Shamberger got their start in dental research through the ECU Summer Scholars Research program. Now with the knowledge and background that the program provided, they have gone on to conduct research studies with their mentors as well as present their research findings at national conferences.

Through his research experiences Luke Current has gained interest in pediatric dentistry; “being a part of a research study that is centered around pediatric dentistry is an opportunity that I am very grateful for, it is a big part of what I gravitated towards in experiences and career wise.” Current, along with his mentors Drs. Cotterill and May is researching “how we can better improve child health through the links between the child’s mother while she’s pregnant and any association in the child’s oral health.”

Current enjoyed being able to talk about the future implications of his research with pediatric dentistry, “that’s the great thing about research is that everyone can take pride in it but the most important is that whether the research can be applicable to clinical practice and everyday use.” Some of the future applications Current hopes to achieve are improving the overall health of the child as well as he overall health of the mother. Current adds, “investigating these relationships is an important adventure with the end game being the improvement of overall health of the child and mother.

Fellow first year student Jessica Shamberger expressed how studying a topic that was important to her before entering dental school has paved the way for her research now. Shamberger and her mentors Drs. Gordon and Mejia are examining experience with dental emergency department visits. Shamberger stated, “there are a lot of misconceptions about oral health and where to properly seek treatment, so I think our research will allow people to see the importance of going to an oral health professional instead of an emergency department.”
Shamberger believes that one day they can eliminate the improper use of emergency department visits for oral health care so that patients are able to receive the proper care required. Shamberger is excited to continue her research beyond her time here at ECU’s SoDM, “I think that research is the foundation of dentistry and a lot of health science fields. If people don’t continue, we can’t really advance the field of dentistry.” Shamberger added, “I didn’t realize how much behind the scenes work goes into research and to come in at the beginning of a study you learn that there is a lot more work that goes into it behind the scenes.”

Current had the opportunity to be the first ECU SoDM student to present at the American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry conference (AADA) this past May and will be attending the Colgate Dental Student’s Conference on Research and the Hinman Student Research Symposium in October. Shamberger presented at the National Oral Health Conference (NOHC) in April, also being the first student from ECU to do so. Both Current and Shamberger expressed their enjoyment at being able to present and converse with people from across the country and various disciplines. Current stated, "to meet with people who are so passionate about research and learn what is happening throughout the different dental schools across the country and then bring that knowledge back to ECU is amazing." Current added, “there are certainly lots of ideas I will share with my mentors that could possibly help to involve my project.” Shamberger added that, “you have all these people with the same ideas and same problems, why are they not fixed yet. It is going to take a team effort to change things. I believe they can and will be changed.”

Current and Shamberger credit their opportunity in the Summer Research Scholar Program, Current described the time as, “an incredible experience which allowed me to be able to continue to learn in the study of dental research and meet a lot of people and be a part of the research community here. “

For more information on getting involved with research at the East Carolina University School of Dental Medicine please contact the Office of Research at dentalresearch@ecu.edu