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Alumni Update: Molly Laughlin Honored by Council of Accountability Court Judges

November 29, 2017



University Honors Program alumna Molly Laughlin received the prestigious Tommy Day Wilcox Leadership Award at this autumn's Accountability Courts Training Conference. Laughlin (political science '11, MPA '12) was honored for her work in an Adult Felony Drug Court in the Enotah Drug Court (south) that serves Lumpkin and White counties in north Georgia. This is quite an honor for Laughlin as it is the Council of Accountability Court Judges who recognized her for her hard work and dedication.

In her current position as the coordinator of Northeast Georgia Adult Felony Drug Courts, Laughlin manages the variety of steps that offenders must take as part of their sentencing, such as drug screening, attending Superior Court, home/job visits, attending twelve step meetings for addiction, and participating in substance abuse counseling.

"All of the moving parts that make up the programs for participants are managed by my case manager and me. We manage their cases for the twenty-four months they are in the program, refer them to other service providers, and are available on a daily basis to help them in any way we can. I am currently in

charge of scheduling the lives of sixty-eight people. I also have all fiduciary responsibility for the program, and I apply for grant funding, secure state certification, and draft/oversee all contract provision that the program uses," she said.

Laughlin insures that each participant gains the most out of the program. The length of the program allows for continued involvement so the participant can overcome the addiction rather than continue in the cyclical cycle of arrests.

Laughlin credits her experience in the Honors Program, both as a student and as a graduate assistant, with preparing her for the rigors of her work. The honors courses, the thesis, and the opportunities such as the program's study abroad trips to Egypt and to Albania, Kosovo, and Montenegro. "That opportunity with the Honors Program gave me the chance to experience a new culture in Albania, from the beautiful landscapes to the genuine people we met," she said.

Dr. Steven Engel, director of the Honors Program, remembers Molly as dedicated student and equally dedicated student worker. "Having had Molly in class and on our team at Eidson House, I am not at all surprised that she won this award. All of us in the program are delighted for her," he said.

Working for the Honors program gave her the necessary skills to use after her graduation. As a graduate student, Laughlin worked for the Honors Program, analyzing applications from new/current students, forming statistical data for the current Honors population and helping at Honors events. Laughlin attended two classes, studied for her comprehensive exam, and finished two self-directed readings with Criminal Justice and International Studies professors while working twenty hours a week at the Eidson House.

"Being a Graduate Assistant for the Honors Program, helped me to think critically about problems and respond, rather than react when barriers arose. You will also be faced with deadlines and have to conduct triage, so I learned to work on critical projects and manage my time before I garnered a position away from the University. I also learned how to manage my personal/academic life while working two jobs and still retaining my strong work ethic," Laughlin said.

While completing her graduate degree in public administration at Georgia Southern University, she participated in an internship associated with the DUI Court in Bulloch County. This internship was her first experience working in an accountability court.

"I like that this court exposed a good side to involvement with the Criminal Justice system. Most offenders who come through do not have a good experience and are offered no services that will benefit them in their everyday lives. And, even if they have access, it is only for the time that they are being supervised. For the offenders who will be arrested over and over because their underlying issue is substance dependence, I get to see the change in them and help them attain sober living," she said.

This experience allowed Laughlin to understand the necessity of continued treatment for offenders of substance abuse.

"I have a great amount of intrinsic motivation in this position; I get to see families reunited and people attain careers they may have never gotten if they were in active addiction. Most of all, I am exposed to former addicts being empowered to take control of their lives, take responsibility for their actions, and gain the self-confidence and pride. You honestly get the sense and see tangibly how you are helping people regain what they have lost or build something new, and that's what makes it worth coming to work," she said.

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Getting to the Square Root of the Problem in Mathematics Education

November 29, 2017



Approaches in mathematics education is often highly contested, and the question about the best way to teach math still persists. Bailey Kirk is trying to get at the root of this question in her honors thesis. Kirk (mathematics '18) recently attended the National Colligate Honors Conference (NCHC) in Atlanta, Georgia to present her research poster, "Mathematics Education through College Algebra and Calculus." The focus of her work examines where students struggle in college algebra and calculus.

"During the 2014-2015 and 2015-2016 school year, Georgia Southern University and its faculty conducted assessments in College Algebra and a study on prerequisite skills in Calculus classes," Kirk said. "The results show the number of students that answered the problems correctly or incorrectly in different classes. My research focuses on taking this data and further analyzing it to try to discover where students struggle the most in College Algebra and the prerequisite skills required for Calculus and whether there are any common trends."

Kirk's research calculates statistical results and ranks the problems based on the percentages of questions answered correctly while mapping the skills needed to the Common Core State Standards for Mathematics (CCSSM). The data are then analyzed to see if there are common trends in the type of class – fully online compared to traditional classroom – and when the concepts were taught and then reinforced in K-12 grades.

"After we figure out which concepts in College Algebra and which prerequisite skills required for Calculus students often have difficulty with and why, we will work on teaching suggestions to help improve the teaching and learning of these concepts and skills," Kirk said.

Her experience at NCHC was in some ways very similar to the Honors Research Symposium held annually at Georgia Southern University. Kirk has presented at the program's symposium every year of her academic career thus far. "I have presented my Honors Thesis as well as other research from my FYE class at the symposium. I think those previous experiences really helped me prepare for the NCHC," she said.

During her presentation she had many viewers who were intrigued by her ideas and research. However, most of them wanted to know how she will implement her findings. Kirk is currently creating lesson plans that are adjusted to where the students are struggling the most.

"One of my favorite people that came to talk to me was a professor. He said that my poster showed him that student really do learn from what he teaches and that he forgets sometimes," she said.

During Kirk's undergraduate career, she pushed herself to do more than what was expected of her. Last year, Kirk also presented research from her experience volunteering in Costa Rica on the Honors Alternative Break Trip. She is currently a peer leader for the third year in a row for the Honors Section of FYE that she took her freshman year of college. This is her third year as a Community Leader on campus. Kirk does not limit herself. Instead, she desires to gain every experience. Kirk wants for other students to not be afraid to pursue opportunities, such as NCHC.

"Do it! There are always excuses to not go on conferences, but the sooner you do it the more you can go on and the less scary it is. My freshman year was when I went on my first conference and we went to Richmond, Virginia. Since then I have presented eight different times now and attended conferences that range from math focused to culture. No matter the conference there is always something you can learn from and find interesting," Kirk said.

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Honors Program at the Georgia Undergraduate Research Conference

November 29, 2017

The University Honors Program saw 11 of its students participate in the annual Georgia Undergraduate Research Conference (GURC) this past November. This conference is open to any undergraduate student from any discipline, and the students from Georgia Southern presented research from across the disciplines, including special education, kinesiology and chemistry.

Megan Fromme's (special education '18) professor Dr. Kymberly Harris pushed the students in her Classroom Management course to submit the proposals they created for a class assignment. At the conference, Fromme had two presentations, the one for the class, which she presented in the poster session, and one based on her thesis research, which she presented on panel.

Fromme's research, "Special Education Teachers' Response to Consistent Changes in Curriculum Standards," analyses how the constant change of standards such as Common Core and Georgia Standards of Excellence are specifically affecting special education teachers.

"I am going to interview ten special education teachers in the Bulloch County area that have taught Georgia Performance Standards and Georgia Standards of Excellence," she said. She hopes her research will provide valuable information that teachers can implement in their lesson plans, teaching, and preparing specific activities.

While attending the conference, Fromme was able to form connections with other students from other universities in Georgia. The ability to work with other undergraduate researchers provides students with new insight and perspectives on their personal research. "This conference helped me break down exactly what I want to do with my research once it is completed as well as ways to improve my work thus far," she said.

Kali Todd (kinesiology '19) presented her thesis research, "The Effect of Perceived Level of Social Support on the Fear of Falling among the Elderly." Her research focuses on the belief that societal support and falling are correlated. Todd examines whether increased support decreases the fear of falling with the elderly.

"If results confirm this hypothesis, medical professionals will understand the importance of social support and use it in the treatment of this debilitating fear," she said.

GURC was Todd's first experience with presenting her research in a professional setting. "At first, I was very nervous and was not sure if I was capable of thoroughly explaining my research. However, it got easier as the questions continued," she said.

Sarah Hethcox (chemistry '19) presented the beginning stages of her honors thesis. "Apoptosis, Cancer, and Caspases: Is Calcium the Link?" In her work, she analyzes how the failed occurrence of apoptosis, which is the controlled death of cells within an organism, may provide answers to treat certain diseases such as cancer.

"Ultimately, my project will focus on the effect of metal ions on the structure and function of certain proteins called caspases which play a significant role in apoptosis or regulated cell death. In short, a better understanding of why apoptosis sometimes fails to occur. This pattern may help the development for a treatment for certain diseases. For example, when a person has cancer, the cells become resistant to natural apoptosis signals," Hethcox said.

Hethcox created a poster detailing her ideas and outline for her Honors thesis. She is beginning to research with her mentor and used this conference as a chance to gain experience in both the research process and the presentation.

"Organizing a poster on the research I will be conducting gave me a deeper understanding of my topic. I practiced presenting my work to friends and family to insure that I could thoroughly defend my research," Hethcox said.

Other Honors students who participated at GURC include Isabella Axelsson (exercise science '17), Austin Eubanks (exercise science '19), Andrea Holloway (exercise science '19), Morgan Laballe (physics '19), Lauren Love (chemistry '19), David Moore (electrical engineering '18), Thomas Mulkey (physics '19) and Wesley O'Quinn (electrical engineering '19).



Sarah Hethcox (left) and Kali Todd (right)

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Honors Research in Political Science & International Studies

November 29, 2017

Four students, whose research focuses on political science, international studies, human rights and community values, presented their thesis work at the International Studies Association South Region annual conference in Orlando, Florida and at the Georgia Political Science Association annual conference in Savannah, Georgia. Ashley Archer (political science '18), Bernadette O'Donnell (international studies and Spanish '18), Elizabeth Stovall (political science '18) and Emily Elizabeth Shannon (political science, psychology and Spanish '18) each explored the link between politics and human rights, the effects of globalization through the lens of indigenous tribes and terrorism and student involvement in college towns.

Archer's thesis, "Does Difference Make a Difference? Exploring the Relationship Between Gender, Political Ideology, and Human Rights," examines the correlation between political identity of female executives and their work for better human rights. Archer discovered that women that identified with far left politics were more likely to support projects and laws for increasing human rights.

"My thesis looks at female chief executives and their human rights practices domestically. My research is different from existing literature, however, because I study these female leaders in conjunction with their political ideologies. I seek to understand if female chief executives navigate the political double bind that they face differently depending on their ideology. Furthermore, I want to know how this navigation affects their domestic human rights practices," she said.



Archer addressed the importance of her mentor, Dr. Courtney Burns, in the early stages of development, during the editing process and throughout instilling confidence in her research. "Dr. Burns has been such a great resource to have on my team in this entire process. Since I began my work on my thesis, she has helped me develop my ideas, interests and passions into a project that I am proud to work on. At the conference, she never stopped providing me encouragement, until the moments before my presentation. I look up to her more than she will ever know," Archer said.

O'Donnel's research titled "Indigenous Tribes in the Brazilian Amazon: Finding a Balance between Sustainability and Economic Development" focuses the dwindling number of indigenous tribes while trying to find a solution for both indigenous peoples and the encroaching modern world to coexist.

"The isolated indigenous tribes in the Brazilian Amazon are declining in population due to many factors like tropical resource extraction. For instance, the problem my research is attempting to solve is that the same resource extraction which threatens isolated indigenous tribes, also benefits Brazil's economic development significantly. I would like to find a way to balance both sustainability of Amazonian indigenous tribes and economic development. My research design consists of surveying a panel of experts on the best way that Brazil can sustain its indigenous tribes in the Amazon, in order to find a consensus," she said.

During the writing and editing process, O'Donnel's Thesis developed with excellent direction and mentorship from Dr. Mathew Flynn. "Dr. Flynn helped me sharpen my research topic and finalize my research design. He provided me with sources, such as books and journals, to use in my literature review," she said.

At the conference, O'Donnel presented with a panel of doctoral students who also study indigenous sustainability. She was the only undergraduate student presenting research in this field. "The ability to have feedback from professors who specialize in this subject and to converse and compare doctoral dissertations was invaluable. I will definitely improve the content of my thesis," she said.

Stovall's research "Recruitment of American Citizens to International Extremist Religious Groups Via Social Media" analyzes the evolution of terrorism because of advancements in technology, specifically the rise of social media. Platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram are creating an online environment with susceptible members being influenced by endless amounts of information.

"The study of terrorism has rapidly changed over the past ten to fifteen years. Technological advances and a change in the objectives of extremist terrorist groups have made this field more difficult to study. This research focuses on how technological advances, particularly social media, such as Facebook and Twitter, have made a direct impact on the recruitment processes of extremist terrorist groups such as ISIS on western audiences, particularly on American citizens," she said. "This research shows the impact of social media on recruitment done by extremist groups. It shifts the narrative of the recruitment of Middle Eastern citizens to the less accepted idea of 'home-grown' terrorism and recruitment of American citizens within their own homes."

After three semesters of constant work and dedication, this conference allowed Stovall to gain feedback from fellow scholars in the field of terrorism. "I had a lot of people come up to me and tell me how interested they were in my research. People gave me their business cards, and told me to email them if I ever needed any help. It really made me feel good that people were so interested in what I was doing and were recognizing all of the hard work that I have done over the past year," she said.

Her experience of completing the Honors Thesis has provided her with skills that she can use in later endeavors. "Writing my Honors Thesis is a very long process that requires a lot of time, patience, and editing. I think that having to go through this process really prepared me for my future in law school," Stovall said.

Her experience of completing the Honors Thesis has provided her with skills that she can use in later endeavors. "Writing my Honors Thesis is a very long process that requires a lot of time, patience and editing. Dr. Srobana Bhattacharya played a huge role in my entire thesis process. I would not have known where to begin without her. Overall, I think that having to go through this process really prepared me for my future in law school," Stovall said.

Shannon's thesis, "How Does Student Participation Create Change in University Towns" analyzes the effects of student involvement in a growing community. She specifically examines students' political and economic values.



"Being an active political citizen not only impacts these individuals' personalities or marketability for plans after their undergraduate degrees, but it also has an effect on the groups and communities that the students get involved in. It is clear to see that cities and towns are influenced and changed by the presence of universities and university students. The important question is how student political and economic involvement affect local communities and government decisions in university towns? If we can figure out how active citizenship and student involvement affects local communities and what types of involvement help to create change, then we can figure out how to change our communities and eventually the world," she said.

The Honors Thesis provides freedom for students to research topics outside the classroom. Shannon used this opportunity to research a subject that she finds interesting, because she is extremely involved with the Statesboro community.

Her research mentor, Dr. Robert Pirro, helped Shannon focus her argument, gain resources and improve her writing. "Without Dr. Pirro's guidance, I would have been lost on how to conduct my research and with putting my plans into writing. He gave me ideas, feedback and advice on my thesis," she said.

The International Studies Association South Region conference and the Georgia Political Science Association conference provided these students with the chance to present their research as well as meet and talk to professionals in their specific fields. "The aspect about the conferences that I enjoyed the most was conversing with other scholars in my field and with the people whose works I have read and studied in my classes here at Georgia Southern University," Archer said.

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