Richard Smith III, a graduating mechanical engineering major, grew up with an appreciation for competition. His father encouraged him to participate in sports throughout his childhood and that continued into his high school career. As he considered where he would spend his college years, he entertained numerous athletic scholarship offers until multiple shortcomings in his senior year led to most of the offers being retracted. Still hoping to find a team environment, he chose to attend Georgia Southern University.

“I was looking for opportunities to be a part of something greater than myself like I had been growing up,” Smith said. “I found the Georgia Southern men’s lacrosse team (club) and I have played lacrosse every year I’ve been at Georgia Southern. I feel fulfilled by being a part of a system where the success of the whole is far more important compared to the individual. I met lifelong friends playing lacrosse and had some of my favorite moments of my college experience.”

After a year in college, Smith found another team to join outside of sports that bred a similar environment of competition and teamwork.

“I discovered the Fundamental Combustion Laboratory in the Allen E. Paulson College of Engineering and Computing,” Smith said. “I had never worked on an engineering team at the time and the lead of a project took me under his wing. The experience of working on that project propelled me into research, which has become my passion.”

Smith anticipated studying engineering while he was in college, but diverged from his family’s expectations when he decided to study mechanical engineering rather than following in his father’s civil engineering footsteps. It was this shift that introduced him to Valentin Soloiu,
Ph.D., professor of engineering, director of the Automotive and Aerospace Combustion Laboratories and Allen E. Paulson distinguished chair.

“I found a professor that had the same relentless style,” Smith said. “He takes young students with a fuzzy understanding of the career ahead of them and turns them into great thinkers, scientists and engineers. Dr. Soloiu encouraged all the values my parents instilled into me as a child and he cultivated an environment of competition that bred innovation.”

Smith worked his way up to lead undergraduate researcher in the lab under the supervision of Soloiu. This fall, he was selected by the Council on Undergraduate Research to present his research on climate change mitigation technologies at the Research Experiences for Undergraduates Symposium in Washington, D.C., an annual event that provides undergraduate students with the opportunity to present their research in a National Science Foundation-funded discipline on a national stage.

“My research used synthetic fuel produced through the Fischer-Tropsch process that during combustion can reduce emissions and noise,” Smith said. “I worked on this project with a great team and, though it was difficult, it has been rewarding. I enjoy looking at all of its applications for sustaining and protecting the environment while making aerospace travel more efficient.”

Smith graduated in the Fall 2021 Commencement ceremonies with a bachelor’s in mechanical engineering and is ready to transform his community by continuing his climate change mitigation research while working toward a graduate degree at Georgia Southern. Though numerous coaches, instructors and family members impacted Smith’s growth, he credits his father with many of the lessons that have brought him to this milestone.

“He constantly has a great attitude about any situation and works more than anyone else I have ever met,” Smith said. “He has taught me every sport he knows and he has been a fantastic father to me. No matter the situation he always attacks the solution with a positive mindset, something I strive to do through my own personal trials.”

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