

Psychology Undergrads Present at Research on Capitol Hill Event

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President Elizabeth Cantwell, Associate Dean of Research for CEHS Shawn Whiteman, and Psychology undergrads Kiernan Callister, Hayden Dries, and Tori Dehlin at Research on Capitol Hill event.

Undergraduate students from Utah State University (USU) and the University of Utah visited the Utah State Capitol on January 18 to present their research projects to legislators during the 2024 Legislative Session. A limited number of students were selected to participate from each university. Among these students were three Psychology undergrads from the Emma Eccles Jones College of Education and Human Services (CEHS)—Kiernan Callister, Hayden Dries, and Tori Dehlin—who were given the opportunity by the USU Office of Research.

In the months leading up to the event, the student researchers worked on their projects in a laboratory setting with faculty members serving as their mentors. “The research presented by the CEHS undergraduate students was inspiring. Their work advances understanding on critical issues facing society, including substance use and perceptions of sexual assault survivors,” says Shawn Whiteman, associate dean of research in the Emma Eccles Jones College of Education and Human Services. “I am eager to learn where their interests will lead them next, as participation in research is linked to future educational and workforce development skills such as analytic thinking, problem solving, collaboration, and teamwork.”

Undergrad research student Kiernan Callister worked with Psychology professor Amy Odum on vape consumption

in rats to understand human vaping behaviors. Rats have a shared neurobiology with humans and can therefore be used to examine a phenomenon that is difficult to experimentally study in humans. The goal of the research is to bring awareness to young adults of the many harmful effects of vaping on the brain, which can result in permanent change.



Psychology undergrad Kiernan Callister presents research on Capitol Hill.

“A highlight for me in being involved in research as an undergrad was presenting on Capitol Hill. It was a great opportunity to speak about the research that I have a passion for,” says Callister. “Through this project and my involvement in the lab, I was able to jump into my secondary project, which is my first publication that was submitted this past December.”

Odum oversees the lab and works with both undergraduate and graduate students helping them learn how to quantify their research. “Kiernan is training my beginning graduate students in my lab on technical procedures,” explains Odum. “She is a driving force in our laboratory success and momentum and has been integral in conducting externally funded grant research as well as submitting other grants.”

Senior Hayden Dries was hesitant about his future in research when he approached Psychology professor Greg Madden to be a part of his lab study group. “The main topic of my research study is to find out how to reduce impulsive behavior,” explains Dries. “When the behavior is left untreated, it can lead to substance abuse, binge eating, gambling, and other maladaptive behaviors.”

Dries studied female rats to observe the differences between female and male impulsivity traits. (Male impulsivity traits have been previously studied.) He split the rats into two groups for 120 days of observation, monitoring delayed and immediate responses when given rewards of varying types of food items.

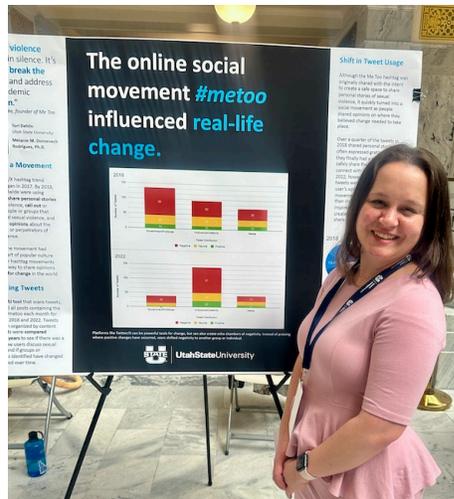


CEHS undergrad Hayden Dries explains his research on impulsivity behaviors.

"Hayden has put in countless hours acquiring research skills and exploring ways of reducing the impulsivity that leads to substance-use disorders," says Madden, who served as Dries' faculty mentor. "He was excited about the opportunity to share his findings on Capitol Hill."

The findings concluded that rats who went through a delayed response training prefer the delayed reward, whereas the group of rats being studied for immediate responses chose the immediate but smaller and less-significant reward. "This process helped me to decide which direction I am interested in for my future, whether it's an academic or more clinical setting," notes Dries. "Working in research and seeing how the results correlate with the topic is interesting, especially before going to grad school."

Tori Dehlin, also a senior in Psychology, chose to study the effects of the #metoo social media movement created to provide survivors of sexual abuse and sexual violence an online space to share their experiences. Dehlin studied tweets on the Twitter/X platform. "The #metoo movement originally started as a way to create a community to help survivors of sexual abuse or sexual harassment realize they are not alone," explains Dehlin. "It was presented as a space for survivors to share about their experiences with a community of people who have similar experiences to heal and grow together."



Senior in psychology undergrad Tori Dehlin shares research on the #metoo movement on social media.

When the movement began in 2018, many survivors shared experiences through #metoo. However, by 2022, most of the people who shared were voicing negative opinions rather than providing a safe space for those who needed it. Dehlin's study concluded that most tweets were negative instead of being a therapeutic outlet for healing; the opinions created an echo chamber of negative thoughts.

Overall, Dehlin says that it was a great opportunity to connect with legislators. "I felt seen by those elected officials who are making laws that impact me. They showed a genuine interest in my research. As a college student, sometimes I feel small, and having the legislators treat me as an equal was very empowering to me."

Psychology faculty mentor and professor Melanie Domenech Rodriquez commented on Tori's work. "While preparing for Tori's presentation on Capitol Hill, she had a breakthrough in how to present her work. She moved from having an interesting poster to having a draft of a publishable paper. When scholars present their work to others in thoughtful ways, they make valuable connections. I'm grateful this experience exists for Tori to grow beyond the classroom and toward her greater professional goals."

To learn how undergraduate students can become involved with research through the Research on Capitol Hill event, visit the [Office of Research](#) website.