LEARNING THE REWARDS OF RESEARCH

The Dean's Leadership Scholar program engages students in research at Iowa State from day one – with outcomes that last a lifetime.

Photo: Erich Ernst

Delving into research
Kristen Alverson works with Professor Stephen Dinsmore to understand the nesting habits of burrowing owls.
LIKE MANY IOWA STATE UNIVERSITY students, Kristen Alverson is employed on campus. But rather than the typical work-study job, she’s researching the endangered burrowing owl and preparing a paper for publication.

The Cottage Grove, Minn., sophomore is working with Stephen Dinsmore, an associate professor in the department of natural resource ecology and management, as a College of Agriculture and Life Sciences Dean’s Leadership Scholar. The scholarship, established in 2010 by Dana (67) and Martha Robes, allows nonresident undergraduate students to engage in research in areas related to their majors during their first two years at Iowa State.

The scholarship provides funds specifically for recipients’ employment at least 10 hours a week by the college’s faculty. “The award is designed to connect students with people in their department who can help them be successful,” said Andy Zehr, the college’s director of marketing and recruiting.

Alverson has embraced that goal through her study of burrowing owls, Dinsmore says. “She really wanted, in the spirit of the scholarship, to have a broad set of experiences at Iowa State that would build her career as a scientist.”

Understanding how burrowing owls establish habitat has greater implications for their conservation and management. According to Alverson’s analysis, size is the main factor influencing which abandoned prairie dog colonies Montana burrowing owls choose to occupy.

“The whole research process of analyzing data then writing the paper has been really interesting to me,” Alverson said. She appreciates the fact that she has been able to conduct this research in her first few years at Iowa State.

That’s the real benefit, Dinsmore says.

Scholarship recipients get “dialed into research and science very early on during their time at Iowa State, providing them the opportunity to build these skills throughout their career.”

The Dean’s Leadership Scholarship helps set Iowa State apart when recruiting sought-after, high-achieving students from outside Iowa, Zehr says. “More than offering a scholarship, we’re offering students an experience. I think that’s pretty compelling,” he said. The award’s two-year term also helps retain these top students. “This scholarship is valuable not only from a reward standpoint, but also for the role it plays in the personal and professional development of these students.”

That’s been true for recipient Josh Sonnabend, a junior from Vernon Center, Minn. He entered Iowa State as an undeclared agriculture major, but chose agricultural business after working with Chad Hart, an associate professor of economics and ISU Extension grain markets specialist. Under Hart’s guidance, Sonnabend spent two years studying switchgrass and corn stover use for ethanol, and the effect of expiring Conservation Reserve Program acres on corn production.

His research experience, Sonnabend says, was a big factor in earning him a summer 2013 internship at a commodities brokerage.

“It takes that one professor willing to give you a challenge,” he said. “It helped me get where I am.”

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