

Psychology Program Positions Students to Achieve Ph.D.



With jobs in psychology usually necessitating a graduate and even doctoral degree, it is ideal that students interested in a career in psychology seek out undergraduate programs that put them on the right pathway to obtaining these advanced studies.

Mercy's psychology program positions students on just that pathway. It steers them toward faculty support, mentorship and research programs that give them a competitive advantage when applying for master's or Ph.D. programs, ultimately helping them realize their dreams of working in psychology.

When Associate Professor and Director of Mercy's Master's in Psychology Program Rebecca Trenez, Ph.D., came to Mercy in the fall of 2011 one of her primary goals was to develop research opportunities for students to boost their chances of acceptance into Ph.D. programs and foster their development of practical skills. "The experience of research sets students' applications apart when they apply for limited spots in Ph.D. programs, which are often selected from a pool of highly competitive applicants. Students can be chosen for an interview for a

Ph.D. program because the research they conducted as an undergraduate and/or graduate student in is line with the research of faculty at their prospective school," Trenez explained.

"I had countless opportunities to participate in higher level research with the opportunity and preparation to publish research."

- Dimitra Tzanis '19, M.S. '20

Trenz has made significant strides in achieving her goal by developing studies with the idea of incorporating students into the research process from design to presentation of findings and encouraging others to do the same. "Involving students in the high-impact practice of research engagement is an important part of what I do as a faculty member at Mercy. The work I do with students on research projects informs my approach as an instructor in the classroom. It's a win-win scenario for

both faculty and students," she said.

She has worked on three research projects with students in her psychology lab and directed research courses, which are titled: "College Women at Risk: Alcohol Use Severity and HIV Risk Behavior;" "Expressive Writing Intervention for Alcohol Use and HIV Risk Behavior;" and, "A Narrative Analysis of Negative Alcohol-Related Events Written by Female College Students."

Opportunities for students to engage in research also stem from Mercy's Course-based Undergraduate Research Experience (CURE) program and the Ronald E. McNair Scholars Program (McNair Scholars Program), among others. The CURE program allows students to conduct authentic research as part of their coursework under the guidance of a faculty mentor. The McNair Scholars Program, funded by the U.S. Department of Education, provides first-generation, low-income students and those who are from groups underrepresented in graduate education, enriching research and mentorship experiences that prepare eligible students for doctoral study.

Associate Professor Kimberly Rapoza, Ph.D., director of Mercy's McNair Scholars Program, describes the benefits of these research opportunities: "Some Mercy students don't always have the time to take

away from work or family, so making research accessible by incorporating projects into their coursework enables them to partake in a rewarding academic and professional development experience. For students who may not have been able to participate in research in the past, CURE and the McNair Scholars Program makes the process more convenient, so they reap the benefits of learning how to critically analyze data, be more questioning, and think about the scientific process and where you can put trust in things.”

Terrence Calistro '16, M.S. '18, Mercy adjunct professor and tutor, doctoral student of educational psychology at CUNY Graduate Center, and former student of both Trenz and Rapoza, is a prime example of an undergraduate psychology major who successfully navigated a pathway to a Ph.D. with the support of faculty and Mercy's robust academic programs. His journey involved graduating from Mercy's undergraduate and graduate psychology programs, being accepted into the McNair Scholars Program, conducting independent

“Being exposed to so many different research projects and professors was extremely helpful, because I got hands-on experience in different research methods.”

- Katharina Loeffler '19, M.S. '20, M.B.A. '22

study, writing a master's thesis and being offered two doctoral program offers.

“I originally chose to study psychology because I wanted to understand people better – I didn't know why, I just knew I wanted to understand,” Calistro recalled. His curiosity led him to become a lab assistant for Trenz during his junior year. “I asked questions – probably too many – all the time.” In the environment of a psychology

research lab, a light bulb went off for Calistro. “The first time I did research I realized, ‘Oh, that's how I can answer these questions.’”

Calistro also learned the practical application of psychology as a participant in the McNair Scholars Program: “The McNair Scholars Program put me on the map with Ph.D. applications. I was trained how to develop a research project and implement that project within a year. The program built me as a student researcher.”

Now, Calistro wears many hats as an adjunct professor at the MercyManhattan Campus and online, doctoral student, freelance data analyst and tutor. He uses the skills – professional, interpersonal and practical – he learned from Trenz and Rapoza to inform his teaching practices, whom he credits with his success. “I aim to follow Dr. Trenz's step-by-step structure. Dr. Rapoza taught me how to be myself and more relaxed in the classroom setting. I try to project my personality into teaching.” He is also grateful to them both for helping him address any challenges having to do with graduate school.

Students in Dr. Trenz's psychology research lab (l to r) Melissa Augustin '15, Kelley Boyce '16, MS '19, Claudia Santoya '15, MS '19, Terrence Calistro '16, MS '18, Natalia Plawiak '18, Jenna Markakis '16

