EMPOWERED TO WRITE THEIR STORY

Everybody has a story. The who they are, what they’re all about and where they’re going. Programs like LSAMP give some UNI students the chance to write a really great story about their life, and here’s how.

The Louis Stokes Alliances for Minority Participation (LSAMP) Program is a national program aimed at increasing the quality and quantity of students who successfully complete undergraduate degrees in STEM programs. Beyond undergraduate work, the LSAMP program aims to increase the number of students interested in programs of graduate study with a long-term goal of earning their doctorate in STEM fields; specifically those from populations underrepresented in STEM fields. In order to achieve their goals, grants are given to qualifying institutions of higher education to financially support students who qualify for the LSAMP program, which is how UNI was able to get involved with the program and support students like Brittnie Dotson, a senior majoring in Biology.

“I chose to join LSAMP because it was one of the few organizations that actually supported minorities in STEM fields and helped with professional development for careers in STEM fields,” stated Dotson. “LSAMP has also provided funding for me to do cell biology research at UNI.” This research was a part of a study being conducted by Dr. Kavita Dhanwada, the Associate Provost for Academic Affairs and Dean of the Graduate College, during Dotson’s junior year at UNI.

“Our research was about how the breakdown components (metabolites) of Atrazine, a commonly used weed killer, would affect human liver cells,” described Dotson. “The metabolites of Atrazine are important because these are contaminants that are being found in high concentrations in our water systems, and we wanted to know if they behaved like Atrazine, which causes health defects. Also, there’s not a lot of information about these metabolites.” In addition to this research, Dotson has been afforded the opportunity to conduct research with the NASA BETA project under Dr. Alexa Sedlacek, Dr. Joshua Sebree and Dr. Xinhua Shen, alongside fellow LSAMP participants Jose Lopez and Steven Gomez.

Lopez, a junior majoring in biology, is doing research with the NASA BETA project as well as conducting research on botanical biology with Dr. Julie Kang. With Dr. Kang, Lopez is looking to understand the evolution and homology of leaf shape and vein patterns using a variety of plant species to investigate this correlation. His research opportunities are setting him a part as he begins preparing for graduate school and then medical school.

“I would love to get a PhD after I graduate,” stated Lopez. “I want to become a doctor someday.”

Unlike Dotson and Lopez, Gomez, a junior majoring in Biology, did not choose to attend UNI based on the opportunities LSAMP provided to him; he didn’t even know about it until the end of his first year here but the program has expanded what he has accomplished at UNI.

“My campus visit is what sold me on UNI,” explained Gomez. “I am from Texas so if I wouldn’t have visited UNI as a high school student, I would not have even looked at UNI as a place to go to school. It was upon arriving to campus for my first semester that
I found out about LSAMP from Nick Sullivan in the Student Support Services office. Because of my interactions with him, I got connected with LSAMP and joined the program my sophomore year. Being a part of LSAMP took him to a leadership conference his sophomore year. At the conference, students were presenting their undergraduate research posters on the research they had conducted.

“The conference helped me better my leadership skills and provided me with a lot of networking opportunities that have helped me with my academic success and professional development,” said Gomez. “I want to become a physician’s assistant someday and LSAMP has been helping me prepare for graduate school.”

Without programs like LSAMP, students like Dotson, Lopez and Gomez may not have had the opportunities they have been afforded through the program. From leadership conferences and professional development to connections with faculty, staff and future employers, LSAMP is helping students write their story here at UNI!

In the state of Iowa, 15 higher education institutions receive funding through LSAMP to provide support for underrepresented students in STEM related majors.