

Communication and Competition: Undergraduates Apply Research Knowledge at Annual REU Poster Contest

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Directors of DREAM (EEC 0353922 and 0649033): Dr. Surya Kalidindi and Dr. Antonios Zavaliangos

Directors of Engineering Cities (EEC 0552792): Dr. Joseph Wartman and Dr. Patricia Gallagher

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DREAM Fellow Lauren Jackson, Drexel's 2006 REU Poster Contest Winner, explaining her award-winning poster at Drexel's first annual REU poster contest, entitled "Sliding Wear of Thermally Sprayed Nylon-11 Reinforced With Nano-Sized Silica"

Prior to coming to the NSF-sponsored Research Experience for Undergraduates (REU) Site: DREAM at Drexel University, 2006 DREAM Fellow Lauren Jackson had never presented a research poster, let alone been a lead author on a paper. "The DREAM program was my first in-depth research experience and provided me my first opportunity to participate in a poster presentation," says Lauren.

Undergraduate students from all over the country come to one of Drexel University's three NSF-sponsored REU sites, typically without much in the way of research experience. In addition to their inexperience in lab research, many REU Fellows have never had the opportunity to present their research to a wider audience. Drexel's REU sites give students a foundation in all aspects of research, the culmination of the experience being the annual REU poster contest.

As host to three distinct REU programs, DREAM: Drexel Research Experience in Advanced Materials, Engineering Cities, and SENSORS: From Design to Implementation, Drexel creates a unique venue for inter-program interaction. In 2006, the first year for Engineering Cities and SENSORS and the third year for DREAM, a poster contest among all three programs brought undergraduate researchers together to learn about each others' research areas and to showcase their presentation skills to the larger Drexel community

As the overall winner of the contest, Lauren, mentored by Dr. Richard Knight, Dr. Richard Cairncross, and Ph.D. student Milan Ivosevic, came away with more than just a gift certificate. "Making a poster pushed me to view my project from different angles and to consider how to best convey my work to people with varying scientific backgrounds," Lauren says of her experience. "Like writing a research paper, generating a poster was a learning process during which I gained a greater appreciation for the project and scientific research as a whole. The presentation session was challenging, but rewarding. I got tough questions from other researchers, especially those from civil and environmental engineering. Their questions gave insight and possible directions for further research which I had not considered."

This summer, with the help of her experience in DREAM and a recommendation letter from her DREAM mentor, Lauren secured an internship at Oak Ridge National Laboratory at the Center for Nanophase Material Science in a neutron scattering and diffraction lab. "I am truly grateful for my time at Drexel which made me even more excited to be in materials science and opened many doors."