

FHSU professor and student join forces for epilepsy research

Across the Fort Hays State University campus, you will find many examples of what are called high-impact educational practices. They are important, because these teaching and learning practices have proven effective for college students with varied backgrounds and learning styles. They exist at FHSU because our faculty are energized by working with and mentoring our students. I truly value this emphasis and the examples I see on a daily basis of how our faculty invest in our students.

From first-year seminars, to our living and learning communities, to our undergraduate research opportunities, our faculty step forward and go deeper in driving student success. Each of these programs are based on personal relationships between students and faculty. They are squarely focused on helping students become successful – and this is important – in ways that truly matter to the student. Our faculty mentor and fuel the dreams of our students, and that makes the FHSU student experience the best investment in one's future.

Here's just one example. It is the story of Dr. Whitney Whitaker, assistant professor of psychology, and student Skyler Krull, a senior psychology major from Durango, Colo. Skyler and Dr. Whitaker met when Skyler's academic advisor, Dr. Trey Hill, learned of Skyler's interest in areas that aligned with Dr. Whitaker's research. So, Dr. Hill encouraged Skyler to email Dr. Whitaker. Skyler followed through.

After working together on a research poster for our annual Scholarly and Creative Activities Day in the spring of 2019, Skyler approached Dr. Whitaker with an idea. He wanted to come up with a way to try to help people who suffer from drug-resistant epilepsy. This population finds very limited – if any – relief from their seizures through the use of medications.

"I sent Dr. Whitaker an ambitious research proposal, and to my surprise she began to help me realize my vision of conducting a telehealth study to measure the effect ashtanga yoga has on people with epilepsy," Skyler shared. "This is an incredibly involved study, and the fact that she trusted me to conduct a study like this demonstrates her selfless character and altruistic desire to support my growth as a researcher."

Skyler said that being able to work on this project "surpassed my wildest dreams."

"Dr. Whitaker has involved me in every aspect of the research process. She helped me with things like: study design; procuring approximately \$7,000 in funding; the IRB application; editing my work and providing feedback; and putting in many hours to assist with recruitment for this project," he said. "There are countless other ways Dr. Whitaker has helped make my research idea a reality; however, I simply do not have space to mention them all here. What I can tell you is that Dr. Whitaker cares about making our study the best it can be while supporting my personal growth."

With Skyler's idea crystalized, he and Dr. Whitaker worked together to develop the study. They are currently testing the effectiveness of a behavioral intervention at reducing seizure frequency and improving the quality of life for people who suffer from drug-resistant epilepsy.

As a side note, our students who have an interest in research have opportunity to work alongside faculty from their very first semester – and it is incredible what they are learning and accomplishing. At many universities, such research opportunities are reserved for upper-class students and often only for graduate students.

Skyler and Dr. Whitaker are collecting physiological data through the use of sensors that they send out to participants in the mail. According to Dr. Whitaker, they “have had a very neat opportunity to meet participants from all over the country who are completing the study, and have been fortunate enough to collaborate with some incredible people through epilepsy organizations and hospitals in various states.”

The fact that they are working together in such important and meaningful work is impressive. But one thing that might surprise you is that Skyler and Dr. Whitaker have never met in person. Skyler is an online student living in Colorado. They've been collaborating and working together through Zoom.

Dr. Whitaker describes Skyler as a remarkable student and an incredible person. I love her description of him because it captures the respect and admiration that our faculty, like Dr. Whitaker, have for the students with whom they work.

“She makes me feel like her equal,” Skyler said of Dr. Whitaker. “She is always compassionate, considerate and humble. She has given me so much and only expects my best effort in return.”

Skyler will apply for graduate programs to start next fall after he earns his bachelor's degree from FHSU. Dr. Whitaker says, “It's been a pleasure to collaborate with Skyler and to work on a project that's really meaningful to him and to so many others.”

This story is only one of a gazillion examples of how our faculty invest in our students. I am confident Skyler will go on to graduate school and make a positive impact on our world. I am grateful and honored that while Skyler leaves to change our world, Dr. Whitaker will remain and invest in the hopes and dreams of many more current and future Tigers who will follow.

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