UC SANTA BARBARA

THE Current

June 7, 2017
Shelly Leachman

Distinction and Potential

Two graduating seniors and one faculty member have been recognized for their outstanding contributions to undergraduate research at UC Santa Barbara.

The Chancellor's Award for Excellence in Undergraduate Research for 2017 has been awarded to triple-major Amanda "Andy" Chen, who has earned bachelor of art degrees in medieval studies, classics and linguistics; and to Daniel Spokoyny, who has completed a bachelor of science degree in computing from the College of Creative Studies (CCS). Professor Stuart Feinstein, of the Department of Molecular, Cellular and Developmental Biology, has been recognized for his mentorship of undergraduates in the research laboratory.

Calling on her multidisciplinary education and her knowledge of numerous languages, Chen completed a senior honors thesis through the history department that examines the intersection of religious conceptions and military practice within the Byzantine Empire in the 9^{th} – 12^{th} centuries. Hilary Bernstein, the professor who taught the honors seminar, described Chen's paper as "original, deeply researched and surprisingly authoritative historical work."

Bernstein wrote of Chen's thesis, it "is not only a substantial piece of research and writing, but it is also entirely original in conceptualization and execution. In quality, it far surpasses what one would expect of an undergraduate and … can and should be published in a quality academic medieval studies journal."

Following graduation from UCSB, Chen will move on to a graduate program in history and political theory at Cambridge University, where she intends to pursue a Ph.D.

Starting out as a chemistry and biochemistry major at CCS, Spokoyny began working with UCSB faculty almost as soon as he arrived on campus, earning co-authorship on a published paper in his freshman year. His interests soon veered toward computing, especially machine learning, and he transitioned to major in computing.

Working with faculty in linguistics, Spokoyny produced two papers that were presented at international conferences and a third submitted to the journal Nature. His 2016 research project probing language acquisition in the context of mother-child interactions won first place in the humanities category of the UCSB Undergraduate Research Colloquium. He is a three-time recipient of the Technology Management Program's Young Innovator Scholarship and winner of an honorable mention in the 2016 New Venture Competition.

One of his faculty nominators, computer scientist William Wang, described him as "the best student that I have seen in the past 10 years, in terms of undergraduate research, and research potential." After leaving UCSB, Spokoyny will pursue graduate work at Carnegie Mellon University.

Professor Stuart Feinstein has received the Chancellor's Faculty Award for Excellence in Undergraduate Research Mentoring. First joining UCSB in 1986, and a full professor since 1996, he is a leading scholar in neurodevelopment and neurodegeneration, with his research funded by the National Institutes of Health, Cottage Hospital and private-sector support. His laboratory has elucidated mechanisms underlying the aggregation of a protein associated with Alzheimer's disease and clarifying the mechanistic basis for chemotherapy-induced peripheral neuropathy.

Through all of that, Feinstein also has established a career-long record of advising and mentoring undergraduate students in research, many of whom have gone on to top Ph.D. programs and into distinguished academic careers of their own. In supporting his mentor for the award, one former student — now a professor himself — wrote of Feinstein, "Stu trained me hands-on in the lab and transformed my life by the examples he set. He showed me how intellectually stimulating research can be."

About UC Santa Barbara

The University of California, Santa Barbara is a leading research institution that also provides a comprehensive liberal arts learning experience. Our academic community of faculty, students, and staff is characterized by a culture of interdisciplinary collaboration that is responsive to the needs of our multicultural and global society. All of this takes place within a living and learning environment like no other, as we draw inspiration from the beauty and resources of our extraordinary location at the edge of the Pacific Ocean.