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Fast Life History Strategy & Academic Achievement- Reflective Essay

I would like to start out this reflective essay with a quick narrative to demonstrate what the completion of this project meant to me. While I disseminated this project in various ways, such as presenting at my old high school and displaying a poster at the Health Professions Fair here at the University of Cincinnati, the way I shared my project that stuck with me the most was through the RECON Research, Education and Creative Opportunities Network) Mentorship Program. The RECON Mentorship Program is run though the URSC Office (The Office of Undergraduate Research, Scholarly Endeavors and Creative Practice) at the University of Cincinnati, of which I am now the Assistant Program Coordinator—I loved the RECON experience so much that I now have a job running the program! The RECON program was started to help get undergraduate students into research, and basically what it does is pair students that are inexperienced with the research process with other undergraduates who are research “veterans,” if you will.

I was one of the first mentors inducted into the program, and when I was paired with my first student I was nervous and excited at the same time. For our first meeting I met her at Starbucks where we drank some coffee, ate some muffins and scones, and basically just chatted about her Curriculum Vita (CV) as well as what she wanted to get out of the program. Basically, her CV was virtually nonexistent as she only had a resume, and she had no idea what she wanted to do in terms of research and post-graduate study. This student was studying Psychology and Substance Abuse Counseling at the university, which is exactly what I am doing, so this made it easier for us to spark conversation and talk about what kind of research she wanted to do.

I helped her edit her CV, and for out next meeting, in the same Starbucks at the exact same table, I talked to her about my own research experiences. She seemed very interested in this project, Fast Life History Strategy and Academic Achievement, because it was directly related to her passion for substance abuse counseling and working with children in particular. I ended up finding a volunteer experience for her during out next meeting, and we parted ways. Eventually, I got an email from her thanking me and letting me know that this very project inspired her to pursue a further degree in the field of substance abuse counseling. Out of everything I gained from my project, this was the most memorable and rewarding. I could not believe that this one project that I shared with her impacted her choices that much, and going into a graduate studies program could really change her life. I was thrilled about hearing from her, and her communication and follow- up with me made this project that much more fulfilling.

While the excitement gained from helping another person fulfill their goals and follow their dreams is invaluable, that is not the only thing I gained from this project. For this project, I helped investigate whether lack of success in school causes decreased investment in education and risky behavior such as substance abuse, or vice versa—whether lack of success reflects a fast life history strategy, which is characterized by impulsivity and risk-taking. Ultimately, it was found that both factors influence each other in different ways, and there is not one concrete pattern. This experience connects to my goals because not only do I hope to run my own lab someday, but also what I learned about delinquency helped draw me into the field of criminal justice. The issue of substance abuse is a multi-faceted global issue, and through this project I learned that addiction does not discriminate. Although there are multiple perspectives on incarceration and substances, I strongly hold true that we should focus more on rehabilitation as opposed to filling out prisons, which is a key belief that I took away from this project and it has fueled the fire for my future career goals, which focus on rehabilitating offenders.

In terms of the learning outcomes, I worked on framing and developing a research question regarding education and substance use—I investigated data and research in order to determine whether truancy influences substance use, whether drugs cause an decrease in education investment, or whether drugs and academic achievement have a more dynamic relationship. In order to investigate these issues on a deeper level, I looked into previous research and studies, which allowed me to possess a well-developed awareness of literature regarding investment in education as it is related to risky behaviors such as drug use. I used theories, such as Life History Theory (LHT) and other theories of evolutionary psychology (EP), presented in previous research to build a foundation for my knowledge. Through extensively examining previous research on the topics at hand, such as analyzing longitudinal data on GPA, I was able to ask the question of how fast life history strategy relates to truancy and other delinquent behaviors such as substance abuse. Ultimately, we found that substance abuse can influence truancy, but truancy influences substance abuse as well—basically, there is a dynamic relationship involved that includes a variety of confounding factors, so a direct relationship cannot be determined.

As a result of this, I moved on to the second learning outcome I identified in my proposal, or the ability to think beyond the just completed research and articulate how my world view has been impacted by the experience. Because substance abuse is a variable that affects all cultures, all age groups, and all demographics throughout the world, this research taught me something that can help students throughout the entire world who are struggling with substance abuse and truancy. This project taught me that we can work on prevention programs for young students in order to attempt to halt the delinquent behavior before it even happens. Outside of that, for students who are already involved in deviant behaviors as a result of fast life history strategy, we can develop education programs for them as well as help get them involved in extra curricular activities after school so that they can stay off the streets and clean off of drugs.

Not only was I able to think beyond the completed research, but I also learned a lot about the research process in terms of publishing. After I completed the research, I worked on a letter of intent for a grant in the Institute of Education Sciences—we chose this publisher because by reaching out to professionals in education sciences, we will be able to develop programs for delinquent students or students at risk for delinquent behavior. After completing several drafts of the letter of intent and sending it in, we worked on a proposal and are currently waiting on a response—this part of the research project has shown me how grueling and slow and yet how exhilarating the research and publishing process can be. It is a hard line of work to get into, but from this project I realized I enjoyed it so much regardless that I still want to get into research professionally after I graduate.

The main academic theory that this entire project was based off of was Life History Theory (LHT) within the field of Evolutionary Psychology (EP). This involves the notion that delinquency, greater mating effort, substance use, and truancy all coordinate because they reflect fast life history strategy. Fast life history strategy (LHS) entails being adapted to reproducing more with less parental investment in order to pass on as much of one’s genetic makeup as possible, given harsh and unpredictable environments. This suggests an alternative to the idea that academic failure drives de-investment in education and increased investment in risky and antisocial behaviors. In other words, individuals may be biologically prepared to invest in mating effort and risky behaviors at the expense of education. Through this project we found that both causal pathways, such as low GPA leading to fast LHS and fast LHS leading to low GPA are both important and are dynamic in nature. These findings taught me that because the relationship is not always predictable between GPA and LHS, counselors need to focus on individualized treatment within the realm of substance abuse counseling in order to assess each person for their particular situation. This is especially imperative when dealing with young students, because the sooner preventative measures are implemented, the better.

As I explained above, I disseminated my work in several ways. While the most notable and life-changing was my work as a RECON mentor, I also was able to share my work at the Health Professions fair here at the University of Cincinnati through a poster, as well as demonstrate the research process to a group of high school students at the Seven Hills Upper School, my old high school. This gave me the opportunity to share with different types of audiences, which included college students interested in research, college students who had no idea what kind of research they were interested in, and high school students that had never even heard of research. This allowed me to share my work using different mediums and answering a large variety of questions for these different groups. My audiences learned about the research process as well as my specific project, which I think helped several people get inspired to join research labs at UC. Not only that, but sharing my research with others truly re-affirmed that I love talking about the work I do and that this is the field I want to go into after I graduate.