

1-1-2008

FORT offers students in-depth clinical, research experience

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Recommended Citation

Jordan, Cary (2008) "FORT offers students in-depth clinical, research experience," *Furman Magazine*: Vol. 50 : Iss. 4 , Article 39.
Available at: <https://scholarexchange.furman.edu/furman-magazine/vol50/iss4/39>

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FORT students gather with surgeon Steven Trocha. From left: Brian Greenwell of Clemson University, Jodi Schneidewind '09, Kaylee Nuckolls '08, Paige Zdybel '08, Amanda Byrd '08, Trocha, Sarah Asman '08, Brent Schoen '08, Simon Lehtinen '08. Photo by Jeremy Fleming.

FORT offers students in-depth clinical, research experience

Surgical oncologist Steven D. Trocha steps into an operating room at Greenville Memorial Hospital, preparing to perform a mastectomy on a patient with breast cancer. There to observe are three students.

While Trocha works, he peppers the students with questions and grills them on the intricacies of the procedure. And he shows them what an effective and efficient operating room is all about.

This situation is hardly unusual for a teaching hospital. What is unusual, however, is who has scrubbed in to observe Trocha's work.

One is a medical student. Another is a surgical resident.

The third is Furman student Sarah Asman '08.

"Never in a million years did I expect an opportunity like this as an undergrad, even at Furman," Asman says. "This is the real deal."

Asman, a biology major, was one of 10 undergraduates who were part of the 2007 Furman Oncology Research Team (FORT), a summer internship program that offered students the chance to conduct cancer research and gain the kind of practical know-how that could set them apart in the eyes of medical schools and graduate programs.

"This isn't just another shadowing program where you come in for a few hours and maybe get to see surgery from a distance," Asman says. "You're expected to be there at 7 a.m. You're expected to be prepared. You have to know how to interact with physicians and anticipate their next question before they even ask it. You have to prove yourself in surgery when the surgeon

asks you a question that the observing medical student might not even know."

In recent years medical schools have begun placing a premium on applicants who have clinical experience in a hospital setting. Such experiences, however, are typically abbreviated and limited in focus, says Trocha, who adds, "What students don't get exposed to are all the things that lead up to an operation."

After meeting with Furman students and biology professor Christine Schammel, Furman's health professions research director and FORT program architect, Trocha says they determined that "it would be a lot more fulfilling for the students to do the research, to observe operations up close, to understand how to diagnose, manage and treat a particular cancer, and to complete a research project that might then be published.

"It shows a far different level of involvement — and, in my opinion, a far greater understanding of what medicine is today."

For their research, the students were divided into two-person teams and assigned a project. They analyzed data on hundreds of cancer patients, studying the surgical procedures, non-surgical alternatives and prognostic factors that affected treatment options. They learned about the intricacies of clinical research and created new sets of data that could enhance ongoing research efforts. They scrubbed in for surgeries. And they observed the lifestyle of medical residents — and the rigors of preparing for a career in medicine.

"It was amazing how quickly they assimilated the information from the medical textbooks, journal articles and other areas," says Schammel.

To date, the FORT students have submitted four research abstracts for consideration at national and international meetings. So far, one (on melanoma, by Amanda Byrd '08) has been accepted for a meeting in Sydney, Australia, which Byrd will attend.

Thanks to the high-quality work of the students, Schammel has heard from other doctors who want to institute similar programs with undergraduates. "So the students aren't the only ones getting value out of this," says Schammel. "You have really busy clinicians who need to publish — who have a lot of research to do — and this is a great collaborative effort that assists them in this endeavor."

As for the students, they recognize they've been given an opportunity that is rarely available at the undergraduate level. Fifteen more have signed up for the program this summer.

"We've gotten it all through this experience," says Kaylee Nuckolls '08. "We've learned how to extract and find data, incorporate it, run bio-statistics and write a medical article, and we've observed what it's truly like to be a surgeon."

— CARY JORDAN

Adapted from an article in Engage Furman (Volume 3, No. 3), a publication of the Furman Admissions Office.