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A Successful Simian Summer

David Glenn and Stuart Thomas

Students of Dr. Higley share their research experience during an internship through the Oregon Health and Sciences University at the National Primate Research Center.

I was taking my first neuroscience class, Neuro 205. One day our professor put up a flyer for a non-human primate behavior class that would be taught in the winter. I do not remember the exact words but it was about monkeys. He mentioned that the professor teaching it was Dr. Dee Higley, an experienced researcher who studied monkeys on an island back east. He would be coming to BYU soon to give a lecture about his research at the annual Rocky Mountain neuroscience conference. My interest was piqued so I went to the conference to listen to Dr. Higley's lecture.

Afterwards there was a dinner reception where I had the chance to meet and talk at length with Dr. Higley for the first time. I mentioned that I would like to enroll in his class the following semester and he assured me that I could. The next semester I signed up for the Primate Behavior course and spent three hours each Friday afternoon learning about a wide variety of monkey species and their intriguing behavior quirks. Dr. Higley told our class about an internship he was putting together in Oregon for that summer. Unfortunately, I could not go that summer but I made sure to jump on it the following summer. In the meantime, Dr. Higley became a full-time professor at BYU and I took another class from him. During the school year I had the chance to get some initial research experience by working with a large monkey data set that Dr. Higley had collected while he was in Washington, working with the NIH. This data set had hundreds of monkeys in

it, with their behavior and neurobiology from over 20 years of research. I decided to use the data to test whether there were genes that lead monkeys to abuse alcohol. I learned a lot about monkey behavior and alcoholism analyzing that data set. Under Dr. Higley's supervision I was able to put together a poster and submit it to the Mary Lou Fulton Spring Research Conference, where I won one of the awards.

With these experiences under my belt, I applied for the summer internship and was excited when Dr. Higley accepted me and six other students as interns to study monkeys at a primate center located in Oregon. When June first arrived, we piled in a BYU van with Dr. Higley and the other interns to travel to Beaverton, OR where the monkeys were located. BYU provided us with a place to live and our food. It was our job to learn as much about monkeys as possible. Our internship was with Oregon Health and Sciences University working with Drs. Dee Higley and Judy Cameron until the end of August. The monkey facility in Oregon is one of eight National Primate Research Centers. There they have about 6000 monkeys, mostly rhesus monkeys (the white rat of the monkey world). Dr. Cameron had several research projects going that involved working with the monkeys kept in large outdoor one acre corrals. Twice a year, these monkeys are caught so the veterinary staff can perform medical exams, ensuring the monkeys are healthy and to treat them if needed. While the veterinarians are waiting for the lab reports, Dr. Cameron uses these monkeys in various research projects investigating alcoholism, anxiety, and weight control. During the first weeks we learned about how to do the testing and how to work with monkeys. Then we became full-time research assistants. The project I was assigned to in-

involved measuring growth hormone in the infant monkeys following a medication that is administered while they are anesthetized. Specifically, I was in charge of preparing the infants each day to get their blood samples taken. This was about a 2-3 hour process measuring four anesthetized infants at a time. We usually had about 2-3 days to get samples from 20-30 monkeys so we would have to get started early in the morning and work hard and fast in order to get everything done. Over the course of the summer I got very comfortable handling the monkeys, giving their sedation shots, and even taking the blood samples. There were many other minor jobs we had to do over the summer such as paperwork, labeling things, and cleaning the equipment. One of the things I learned about being an intern is that you get to do a little bit of everything. Some things are interesting and challenging, while others are less stimulating. The days are long, but rewarding. As an intern I worked with used to say, "This is awesome. Where else can you get paid to work with monkeys!"

Other interns measured behavior in monkeys of various ages by using standardized tests of anxiety. Some of the other interns looked at levels of anxiety in a new room where there were interesting toys or new foods, while others measured anxiety when a human was standing close by. Another team of interns looked at levels of intoxication in monkeys that each had identical amounts of alcohol. The monkeys were quite different in how much they looked intoxicated, even though they all received the same amount of alcohol. Overall it was a very good experience for me. I had the chance to see how research is done first hand and I was able to work side-by-side with and get well acquainted with both Dr. Cameron and Dr. Higley.

Spending my summer as an intern at OHSU was one of the most valuable experiences I have had as a college student. The research experience was great and will help me in my academic career. Spending time away from BYU and away from home was also a good learning experience. I was able to make some great friends over the summer and have a lot of fun in a new place. I would recommend to any student that they look for internship opportunities in their field and go after them. The experiences you have and things that you learn far out weigh the sacrifice of time and money that it often requires.



Male using a "threat face"



Infant being held

*Photographs courtesy of Dr. Dee Higley