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Posner Funds Fuel Scholarly Goals

Photo Gallery



([/posner-gallery/index.html](http://posner-gallery/index.html))

Seventeen Weinberg students had anticipated spending the past summer—the one between their freshman and sophomore years—flipping burgers on a steamy grill, selling jeans at the Gap, or washing floors. Instead they found themselves living the life of scholars for eight weeks, free to explore a subject which intrigued them—the influence of a Spanish philosopher, the role of graffiti in public art, solutions to violence against Haitian women, and many others. Stipends from alumnus Brian Posner, whose generosity supports the entire program, liberated them from the need to earn a wage and gave them a chance to deepen their skills. Paired with a faculty mentor, they learned how to conduct research and how to shape a scholarly project from beginning to end. Some learned how to interview public officials; others, how to work with infants in a psychology lab and code their findings.

Zul Kapadia was one of these fortunate students. Instead of working in a Chinese restaurant as he had planned, he used his \$4,000 stipend to team with political scientist and college adviser Jaime Dominguez, to identify the range of resources for immigrant groups in Chicago. The work required Kapadia to interview executive directors of many not-for-profits.

"It was so weird at first," says Kapadia. "You've recently exited high school and you don't have much experience in a business or professional world. I didn't know in what sense I should be functioning." Before the first meeting with Lhakpa Tsering, head of the Vietnamese Association of Illinois, he found himself tongue-tied. Dominguez encouraged him: Just talk, go through the protocol, and we'll see what he says.

The life and work of Tsering so fascinated the student that he forgot his shyness. "This guy had an amazing story," says Kapadia. "He came to the United States as a refugee, graduated from Columbia University, worked at the United Nations, and returned to his native Tibet to help people there before starting the Vietnamese organization. Just listening to his story made it a lot easier to interact. You find out that people are just people."

Dominguez taught his student all he needed to know: where to find background articles, how to write an interview protocol, how to conduct an interview. He gave him his phone number the first day, even treated him to lunch in a tucked-away Latino diner. By summer's end, Kapadia was an accomplished interviewer in his own right. Together, the pair have completed 20 interviews, are compiling what they learned into a report, and have been awarded a Rockefeller grant to continue the project.

"I learned that I liked to talk to people; I like the interaction," says Kapadia. "I like public speaking." He also found that books and lectures are not the only valuable resources in learning about a subject: "It was academically life-changing for me to see that you can sit down with an expert and learn about an issue so in-depth in just a 30-minute conversation."

Transformations like this—and opportunities for students to envision themselves as scholars—are exactly what Brian Posner had in mind when he established the program. In mid-October, he came to campus from his New York home to hear the results of the students' summer efforts. They dressed up for the occasion, a dinner in the Big Ten room in Norris, and presented reports on their work process and product.

"The kids who presented tonight are real risk-takers," said Posner, after the event. "What they wound up doing was a leap for a lot of them."

Indeed, the students drawn into the program are those whose academic preparation or life circumstances presented them with more challenges than that of their classmates. Rafael Vizcaino grew up in Mexico and didn't speak much English when he came to this country four years ago. He worked very hard in high school, and received excellent grades, but says the reading part of his standardized college admissions test was below average. The Posner committee eagerly welcomed him into the group and the experience has allowed him to soar as a philosopher-in-training.

Having professional guidance from an expert in the field, Professor Mark Alznauer, was invaluable, says Vizcaino. "He gives me a different perspective on the life of a philosopher. I used to have a certain view of the path I have chosen for the rest of my life. Professor Alznauer says, 'That's not the way it really happens. You should really do this, take this class.' It's great to just trust someone who has so much experience and let him guide me."

One of the first notions Alznauer dispelled was that eight weeks was enough time for Vizcaino's very ambitious project: to critique the work of early 20th century Spanish philosopher Miguel de Unamuno.

"He said, 'People do this for a living and you have only finished your freshman year'." But his student was stubbornly persistent. After a month of intensive reading, he was burned out and bleary-eyed—and ready to listen to the expert.

Together, they picked a smaller project: to describe and critique what another Spanish philosopher, Maria Zambrano, had to say about Unamuno. Her book, originally written in the 1930s, was published just seven years ago, and only in Spanish. In a remarkable coincidence, Zambrano had written the book while in exile

in Morelia, Mexico—the very town where Vizcaino grew up.

"We decided to develop her work and offer it to the English-speaking philosophical circles," says Vizcaino. He examined her writing closely, turned it inside out, and offered Alznauer a systematic description of it. In doing so, the student was expanding the mentor's knowledge as well: Alznauer does not speak Spanish, which is, of course, Vizcaino's native tongue.

Vizcaino says the Posner program has opened many doors for him—engaging in research so early in his college career means that he can apply for a fellowship after sophomore year. And now he knows just what he wants to do in life.

"This summer helped solidify my ideas perfectly," he says. "When I came to Northwestern I didn't know what I wanted to do. As soon as this opportunity came up, I enjoyed it and just said, 'This is it.' Now my plan is set in stone."

Kira Hooks knew she loved art in its many forms—some unconventional—when she came to Northwestern. So she jumped at the chance to explore the larger questions that graffiti art poses: What is graffiti and how is it related to hip hop in American culture? What is the difference between graffiti and street art, graffiti and vandalism? Who has the right to self-expression in public spaces?

Hooks says she found the perfect mentor in Christine Bell, the Weinberg College adviser and lecturer in art history, who is an expert in public art.

"We were both learning at the same time," says Hooks. "I was exposing Professor Bell to the new wave of graffiti artists and she was helping me with the history and structure of public art. We've looked at people who've done commissioned pieces of work and what they've had to go through because their work was public. We've looked at site specificity and how that plays a role. We've looked at what we expect of our art."

The exploration has whetted Hooks' appetite to pursue a major in art history. Her close relationship with a mentor such as Bell means that she will have the benefit of informed advice as she seeks further opportunities, such as an undergraduate research grant and study abroad.

"This program helped me realize, through studying a concentrated form of art, that I could work in this field and really like it," says Hooks. She plans a career in art, perhaps representing artists and developing international exhibitions for museums.

Posner Director Jaime Dominguez can personally relate to value of the program. Growing up in Los Angeles, he says academic enrichment programs starting in high school gave him the desire, the tools, and the confidence to pursue a PhD in political science and a career in college teaching.

"For me, these programs provided an infrastructure to stay focused and to push me to succeed. As an undergraduate, I initially had no idea what a research proposal was. Eventually, I was able to write a 60-page senior thesis," Dominguez says.

The Posner program, he says, demonstrates Northwestern's ongoing commitment to provide tailored opportunities to students depending on their interests, their backgrounds, and the kinds of academic preparation they received before arriving at the University.

Dominguez hopes that in their junior and senior years at least some of the students tackle larger independent research projects, now that they know the ropes. But even for those who don't, he says that being a Posner fellow has huge rewards, like better writing skills, which last a lifetime. And that trumps flipping burgers any day.

After delivering presentations in October about their summer research, each of the Posner fellows thanked Brian Posner and all who had made this remarkable opportunity possible. One student said the program had changed her view of the world; two others have stepped into paid internships, working in the lab of their summer mentors on frontline scientific studies.

The Posner program began six years ago with seed money from the Davee Foundation. Julia Stern, an English professor committed to helping underrepresented students get strong preparation for graduate studies, helped bring the College and the Foundation together on this project, through her father, Charles A. Stern, class of 1952.

The students now meet for lunch every other week to report on their projects. They've become a community, interested in each other's work, asking questions, being supportive. "Research can be a lonely endeavor," says Jaime Dominguez. "When students see their peers performing optimally and moving in the right direction, it motivates them."

Mary Finn, associate dean for undergraduate academic affairs, who has shepherded the program from the outset, says, "Having a relationship with a professor is an absolutely crucial part of the program. Anybody who starts doing scholarship realizes that projects can be endless, and a faculty member can help create boundaries. It makes an enormous difference to connect with a faculty member as early as freshman or sophomore year; otherwise some students may never get into the research pipeline."

Posner's generosity to Northwestern includes serving on both the University's Board of Trustees and the College's Board of Visitors. He was a history major for whom mentors like historian Henry Binford opened up new worlds. He went into asset management after graduation in 1983. Now based in Greenwich, Connecticut, he is president of Point Rider Group, which provides consulting for private equity firms.

"I feel that what I am and what I've been able to do is because of this place," he says. "I came here with blinders on intellectually. I wasn't a thinker. Here I was surrounded by students and professors who always challenged me."

He hopes that the Posner fellows will both hone skills early in their college years, and begin to get a sense of where their passions lie.

"When I first started coming back to campus," said Posner, "I was struck by the intellectual energy here. I wanted to give back in a way that acknowledged how powerful that is. I am the guy who is always telling students to try this, try that. It's okay to be a history major. Follow your passion. Take a shot."

Behind these transformative student programs stand a host of alumni and friends of the College whose generosity makes them possible. In addition to the Posner program, in each of the last two years, the College has been able to award more than \$200,000 in grants for research, giving solid foundation to scholarly aspirations. If you would like to contribute to undergraduate research opportunities at the Weinberg College of Arts and Sciences, please contact Stephanie Banta, Director of Development, at 847-491-4585 or s-banta@northwestern.edu.

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- Address
- **Judd A. and Marjorie Weinberg College of Arts and Sciences**
- 1918 Sheridan Road
- Evanston, IL 60208