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Junior Biochemistry Major Sees Research Presented at World Vaccine Congress in Beijing

WASHINGTON, PA (April xx, 2010) – In less than a year, Washington & Jefferson College junior Taylor Eddens has gone from the classroom, to a laboratory at the Philadelphia College of Osteopathic Medicine, to the World Vaccine Congress in Beijing, China, where research he co-authored was presented on an international stage to the world’s leading scientists in vaccine development.

The biochemistry major spent last summer as an intern in the laboratory of Kerin Fresa-Dillon, Ph.D., a 1979 W&J graduate, where he played an integral role in research designed to test the effectiveness of a vaccine against the extra-respiratory spread of a bacteria that is a major cause of pneumonia in humans. Eddens traveled to Beijing in late March as Fresa-Dillon presented their research at the conference attended by more than 800 scientists representing more than 25 countries.

In a little more than a year, the only undergraduate student whose research was presented at the Beijing conference will be preparing to graduate from W&J. He will intern with Fresa-Dillon again this summer, continuing the same research, and has no doubt W&J has prepared him well for his life after college.

“[I] always had my mind set on being an M.D.,” Eddens said. “Now, I am thinking about pursuing a dual M.D./Ph.D. program. I have spoken with scientists who have both degrees and it seems to me they have the best of both worlds. I can practice medicine and be qualified to teach at any given time as well.”

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Eddens said he applied for the internship with Fresa-Dillon last summer without any real knowledge or experience in direct research. Fresa-Dillon offered him the opportunity in her lab and he applied for funding from W&J’s Howard Hughes Medical Institute grant. His proposal was accepted.

When Fresa-Dillon’s proposal to present the research at the World Vaccine Congress was accepted, Eddens asked if he could attend. Additional funding from the administration and the HHMI grant made his trip possible.

Eddens is grateful for the opportunity.

“Through my research internship and lab projects in various courses at W&J, I have learned how to conduct a scientific experiment, collect data, and draw conclusions. My internship gave me the opportunity to see the step-after research,” Eddens said. “As for the World Vaccine Congress, one of the biggest aspects of science is communicating with peers in your field. Seeing research with my name on it presented to an enormous audience is such a humbling experience.”

He credits W&J President Tori Haring-Smith, Ph.D.; Alice Lee, Ph.D., professor of biology and chair of the department; Candy DeBerry, Ph.D., associate professor of biology; and James Sloat, Ph.D., associate dean for assessment and new initiatives.

He left for Beijing on March 22 and returned home March 31.

“Attending the conference was fantastic, perhaps a little overwhelming to be in a foreign country,” Eddens said. “I cannot thank our administration enough for providing me with this opportunity. When I told people how I paid for the trip, so many said, ‘my institution would have never done anything like that.’”

DeBerry said very few undergraduate students anywhere have the opportunity to carry out a real, in-depth research project outside the classroom like Eddens has. Regardless of the institution, undergraduate research is not usually done in that type of environment, she said.

W&J focuses on what it does well, and that is teaching, DeBerry said, and with continued support from a dedicated faculty and administration, available funding, and alumni, like Fresa-
Dillon, who are willing to give back to their alma mater by opening up their labs and sometimes their homes for promising students, real-time opportunities in research labs around the world will continue to be available to W&J students.

“I do not know of any institution whose administration does as much on a per capita basis for its students to provide an opportunity like this for Taylor,” DeBerry said. “W&J really puts an emphasis on getting our students into the research labs and offering our students a top science education.”

When you have a dedicated faculty, administration, alumni, and available funding for these types of opportunities, “that’s when magic happens,” DeBerry said.

Eddens toured Beijing and Xi’an while at the conference, giving him the additional opportunity to discuss research with the scientists at the conference. He visited the Great Wall, the Forbidden City, Tiananmen Square, and the Terra Cotta Warriors Museum.

“As an incoming student, I never dreamed I would have the chance to travel halfway around the world,” he said. “What a way to expand my liberal arts education.”

About Washington & Jefferson College

Washington & Jefferson College, located in Washington, Pa., is a national liberal arts college founded in 1781. Committed to providing each of its students with the highest-quality undergraduate education available, W&J offers a traditional liberal arts curriculum emphasizing interdisciplinary study and independent student work.

For more information about W&J, visit www.washjeff.edu, or call 888-W-AND-JAY.

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