



Illinois Wesleyan University Magazine

Volume 23
Issue 2 *Summer 2014*

Article 2

2014

Prime-Time Research

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Recommended Citation

Hill, Kim (2014) "Prime-Time Research," *Illinois Wesleyan University Magazine*: Vol. 23: Iss. 2, Article 2.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/iwumag/vol23/iss2/2>

This is a PDF version of an article that originally appeared in the printed *Illinois Wesleyan University Magazine*, a quarterly periodical published by Illinois Wesleyan University. For more information, please contact iwumag@iwu.edu.

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Passion and pressure

For 25 years, IWU's John Wesley Powell Student Research Conference has served as an academic rite of passage, condensing hundreds of hours of scholarly and creative exploration into one climactic moment.

Stories by KIM HILL



Student investigations are often inspired by a faculty member's expertise, such as Professor R. Given Harper's decades-long interest in avian ecology and wildlife toxicology. In 1988, Heidi Richardson '99 presented her study of low-level pesticide contamination in songbirds breeding in North America.

It began in 1990 as a way for students to prepare for the demands of graduate school.

Along the way, what was known as the Illinois Wesleyan Student Research Conference has become a highlight of the University's academic experience. Held each spring, the conference provides students, from first-years to seniors, with a public forum to present their research, either in poster sessions or 15-minute oral presentations.

This April, the John Wesley Powell (JWP) Student Research Conference celebrated its 25th year of student-faculty collaborations, creative endeavors and exploration of new ideas and methodologies across a range of disciplines. Guests included several returning alumni who shared their memories about the presentations and poster sessions they gave as students.

For those, the real benefits of the experience are sometimes better recognized in hindsight.

As a senior, Jordan Ault '04 wasn't sure it would really be worth the effort to prepare and rehearse for his 15-minute oral presentation on the topic "The Effect of an Illinois Wesleyan University Education on Political Ideology During Students' Time at IWU."

"It's the last fleeting moments of being a college student, and I remember wondering if all this work was going to pay off," recalls Ault, who was advised by Political Science Professor Tari Renner.

Looking back, Ault sees the value in learning how to take a large amount of information, condense it to the most pertinent points and quickly make a persuasive argument.

"It's very hard to learn that skill in the classroom, and almost everyone needs it, whether you're making a pitch to a potential client, trying to win over an audience or even asking for a raise," says Ault, who is now a mass tort and product liability attorney in St. Louis. "The research conference was a great opportunity to jump in the deep end and make that kind of presentation."

Ault was one of several alumni who returned to campus to celebrate the 25th anniversary of the research conference and to assess its impact on their own educational and professional development.

To take the time needed to develop a project of the JWP magnitude, it's critical to pick a topic for which you have a passion. That's the lesson educator Tyler Ferber '08 learned in his last year at IWU, and one he continually shares with his students today.

As a chemistry major preparing for a career as a teacher, Ferber's project involved surveying the student teachers in his cohort regarding their successes and challenges. "It was a topic I was excited to explore," Ferber recalls.



Kathleen Johnson '12 and Nick Timme '08 learn about research done by Nicholas Lazzara '16.

"The day of the presentation I was nervous, but I was also very passionate about my project and I was excited to share what I'd learned." Encouraged and guided by his advisor Leah Nillas, associate professor of educational studies, Ferber later published his research in *National Teacher Education Journal*.

The lesson to follow one's passion influenced Ferber's career choices. He enjoyed his first few years teaching high school chemistry, but found his true calling in advocating for his students. After earning a master's degree, Ferber is now a middle-school counselor in Danville, Ill. "I tell my kids if you have passion for something, your

motivation will follow," he says. "You won't consider it to be 'work.' It was the same with my project for John Wesley Powell."

Presenting his research in physics was a foreshadow of his future for philosophy and physics double major Nick Timme '08, but it wasn't his first experience presenting research. As a junior, Timme had presented his philosophy work at undergraduate conferences across the country. His senior-year experience at JWP was his first time presenting physics research, and it was daunting, he says, to think of who might be in the audience.

"I remember President Wilson came to my presentation, which was on effects of vibration dampers on tennis rackets," Timme recalls. "He seemed to enjoy it, but I remember being nervous the president was there."

Advised by Visiting Assistant Professor of Physics Andrew Morrison, Timme published his work in *Journal of the Acoustical Society of America*. He's now a Ph.D. student in biophysics at Indiana University and has published several articles, but his first experience remains significant.

"It was the first time I had to hone a presentation to 20 minutes in length for a general audience," he says. "Getting the pitch right to make it accessible for people was a formative experience."

Teddy Petrova '10 missed John Wesley Powell her senior year due to a conflict. That same weekend, she was presenting her thesis "How European is the European Central Bank's Monetary Policy?" at a regional business conference. She was an experienced presenter, however, thanks to her junior-year JWP experience.

"It's amazing we were doing this kind of research at the undergraduate level," says Petrova, who was advised by Associate Professor of Business Administration Elisabeta Pana and Associate Professor of Economics Robert Leekley. Now a portfolio manager for Great Lakes Advisors in Chicago, Petrova notes that "a lot of institutions don't give you this type of research experience until graduate school. So it's a great opportunity for anyone — those going into academia or those going into an analytical field."

Kathleen Johnson '12 used her research skills to her advantage while looking for teaching positions. "Education has become such a data-driven field that our experience collecting data and then analyzing it really gave my peers and me a distinct advantage when we were competing for jobs," says Johnson, who teaches high school Spanish. "We could go into interviews and explain what research we'd already conducted and show how the data drove our instruction."

For her project, "Implementing a Participation Policy in a Foreign Language Classroom," Johnson and classmate Christopher Hammer '12 analyzed students learning a second language and whether those students benefit from formal grades for class participation. Assistant Professor of Educational Studies Jeanne Koehler served as their advisor.

"I continually analyze and think critically about my educational practices and think about what I could do to improve it," Johnson explains. "Obtaining my data for John Wesley Powell forced me to ask my students their opinions about what I was doing. Overall, I think that process started me on the path to being a better professional."

To visit the John Wesley Powell Student Research Conference website, [click here.](#)