



Summer 7-29-2014

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Recommended Citation

Hill, Kim, "Stauch '15 Studies Dogs' Reactions to Human Motives" (2014). *News and Events*. 2420.

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Stauch '15 Studies Dogs' Reactions to Human Motives

July 29, 2014

BLOOMINGTON, Ill.— Illinois Wesleyan University student Kiri Stauch '15 (Elgin, Ill.) offers a treat to Wendell, a 10-year-old basset hound. But before Wendell can bite into his snack, Stauch “accidentally” drops the treat. Wendell barks his encouragement while Stauch appears to search the floor for the kibble.

The drop is no accident, however, and Stauch knows exactly where the treat is. She’s investigating what domestic dogs understand about human intentions as an **Eckley Summer Scholar and Artist**. Established by President Emeritus Robert S. Eckley, his wife Nell and the Eckley Family Foundation shortly before he passed away in 2012, the Eckley program is in its third year.



Kiri Stauch '15 conducts a test trial with Wendell's help.

Guided by Assistant Professor of **Psychology** Ellen Furlong, Stauch is conducting six test trials in which she is either unable or unwilling to give a dog a treat. During the trials, Stauch sits inside a dog playpen. In several scenarios in which the researcher is either “unwilling” or “unable” to provide the treat, Stauch records the dog’s reaction — whether the dog stays near the researcher, wanders off, barks or exhibits some other response. Stauch’s project replicates a project with chimpanzees that provided evidence that sensitivity to human intentions may be a phenomenon across species.

“We predict that dogs will spend significantly more time near the researcher when she is unable to give the treat compared to when she is unwilling to give the dog a treat,” said Stauch, an **anthropology** and psychology double major. If these predictions hold true, it suggests dogs have an understanding of human intentions. One explanation for dogs’ social savvy, the domestication hypothesis, holds that domestic dogs are able to read human communicative clues as a result of domestication rather than resulting from exposure to humans or from an inheritance from wolves.

While dog owners may claim to know exactly what their beloved canine companions understand, Furlong said researchers still have much to discover through scientific inquiry about dogs’ understanding of human social cues.

The Eckley Summer Scholars and Artists Endowment program allows students to engage in original research on campus over the summer under the direction of faculty mentors. Stauch said the Eckley program allows her the opportunity to engage in the depth of research she would not have time for during the academic year. She plans to apply to graduate school in preparation for a career as an academic.

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