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AuBuchon '16 Researches Impulse Control in Dogs

Aug. 6, 2015

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. – Steph AuBuchon '16 (Glen Ellyn, Ill.) knows all too well the consequences when people make judgments based on a lack of knowledge.

In second grade the **psychology** major learned she was dyslexic. Her elementary years were spent working with reading specialists and meeting with school psychologists. She's grateful, she said, for the professionals who sought to understand her learning disability in order to help her succeed.

AuBuchon sees some parallels between those experiences and her work researching self-control in dogs as an **Eckley Scholar**. Established by President Emeritus and Mrs. Robert S. Eckley before President Eckley passed away, the program's fellowships are awarded to meritorious students to remain on campus over the summer under the supervision of a faculty mentor.

AuBuchon was already an experienced student member of Assistant Professor of Psychology Ellen Furlong's **Dog Cognition Lab**, one of fewer than a dozen such labs in the United States. AuBuchon's Eckley study ultimately seeks to discover if tests can be developed to determine if dogs have self-control. Using an apparatus Furlong's students built, AuBuchon tests whether a dog will wait a few seconds for a more desirable piece of jerky or if the dog immediately gobbles a bit of kibble.

"We're learning that a dog's personality may not always determine self-control," AuBuchon said. "Some of the more hyper dogs show amazing self-control, while some of the shier ones don't have any self-control. Like any personality trait, self-control varies by dog and it doesn't matter if the animal is young, old, calm, hyper, shy or social."



Piper performs a series of tests conducted by Assistant Professor of Psychology Ellen Furlong (left) and Steph AuBuchon '16.



Steph AuBuchon '16

This is significant, AuBuchon said, because her study could help in developing a quick impulsivity test that could be done in animal shelters or veterinary offices. "Prospective owners could choose a dog at the shelter that fits their ability to deal with different levels of self-control," said AuBuchon. "If the vet can tell the dog's owner that he or she might be a handful, the owner would be more prepared to deal with the dog's behavior. Overall, this study is the foundation for helping dogs find forever homes and not be turned over to shelters." Knowing that she could be helping reduce those shelter populations has been the greatest reward of the experience, AuBuchon said.

At Illinois Wesleyan she is a member of Alpha Gamma Delta sorority and volunteers at the IWU Peace Garden and the Humane Society of Central Illinois. She is also a teaching assistant in the biology and psychology departments. "I love helping other students succeed and better understand difficult material," said AuBuchon, who is also majoring in **women's and gender studies**. That desire to help other students drives her long-term goal to become a school psychologist. She wants to help children who are struggling as she once did, in much the same way she wants owners to know their dogs' challenges and limits in controlling their own behavior.

"One of the best ways to make sure animals are treated well is to give people information about them, so they can understand animals better," she said.

The Eckley Scholars program is designed to develop and deepen a student's research and creative competencies. Working with a faculty mentor, students are guided in their independent research or artistic projects. Eckley Scholars receive a \$4,000 stipend and on-campus housing.