Summer Scholars

By Kim Weaver Spurr ’88

Exploring public art and human rights in Mexico, studying Russian wetlands policy, revealing delays in North Carolina’s appellate court process and dispelling misconceptions about women of the Middle East—these were a few of the research projects undertaken last summer, not by senior faculty, but by Carolina undergraduate students.

Each year the Office of Undergraduate Research in the College of Arts and Sciences awards Summer Undergraduate Research Fellowships (SURFs) to 60 to 65 young scholars to encourage discovery beyond the classroom. Guided by faculty advisers, undergraduates conduct research that spans the fine arts, humanities, business, sciences and social sciences. Students share their findings each spring at the Undergraduate Research Symposium on campus.

“It’s exciting to carry out a project of your own design as an undergraduate,” said Patricia J. Pukkila, director of the Office of Undergraduate Research and a professor of biology. “It’s also an effective way to learn, to understand the limits of conclusions and to gain confidence in your abilities to address future unsolved problems.”

The sampling of projects featured were funded with $3,000 stipends from the Frances C. and William P. Smallwood Foundation, the College, General Administration’s Undergraduate Research Expansion Fund and the Robin March Hanes Fund for Studio Art.

ART FOR CHANGE IN OAXACA, MEXICO

Katie Almirall landed in the middle of a major news story last summer—a political uprising in Oaxaca, Mexico—while pursuing her SURF project on using public art to raise awareness of human rights issues.

In a backlash against Governor Ulises Ruiz, teachers went on strike, and people camped out in the streets and organized protest marches.

“When I went out the morning [of June 14] for my Spanish class, there was tear gas in the air, helicopters, and teachers were running through the streets. It was crazy,” said Almirall, a native of Oak Island, N.C. “I didn’t tell my parents until I got home.”

Never once did Almirall, a senior studio art major pursuing a minor in Spanish, think that maybe she should go home. It was a ripe environment for encouraging artistic comment from the 16 young students she taught in an art class at the Center for Human Rights in Oaxaca. Students discussed the explosion of art going on around them in reaction to the political unrest: puppets, life-size dioramas, banners and graffiti.

Guided by Almirall, students brainstormed and created their own interactive public art project: A huge, inflatable hand out of clear painter’s plastic, a hand large enough for people to walk inside. The students filled it with index cards full of facts...
about human rights and markers so that passersby could write reactions of their own. The giant hand was displayed in the center of town.

“People were drawing on the inflatable [hand] which was great — they felt compelled to do that,” Almirall said.

UNC art professor Beth Grabowski, who served as Almirall’s SURF adviser, was impressed with her resourcefulness, vision and initiative.

“In that kind of situation, you’re an art director, an art teacher, a conversation facilitator … there are lots of different skills to draw upon,” Grabowski said.

Almirall says the SURF project helped her to build bridges between the Oaxacan art students and the Latino immigrants she teaches in a Carrboro art class. The two groups worked on art projects to exchange with each other.

“Although there was a lot of political conflict, I also got exposed to normal life in Oaxaca. I got to know so many interesting people who were involved in the community,” she said.

STUDYING POST-SOVIET WETLANDS POLICY

Dylan Trettin combined his interest in environmental policy and history to examine the impact of the fall of communism on wetlands policy in Russia, home to about 40 percent of the earth’s wetlands.

“Russia’s wetlands are an immensely important global resource, playing a significant role in carbon absorption and regulation of global warming,” said Trettin, a junior international studies and history major from Mount Pleasant, S.C.

Trettin spent the summer in Moscow interviewing scientists and governmental officials, poring over policy briefs and visiting a wetlands research site with scholars from the Russian Academy of Sciences.

He hypothesized that Russia’s democratic transition had improved the ability of the scientific community to impact wetlands policy. His findings weren’t quite that simple.

Major funding cuts, layoffs and a market plagued by corruption are hampering professionals’ ability to shape policy, Trettin said.

“[The partnership] was very conducive to learning.”

Trettin is continuing his work abroad this spring on an internship with the U.S. Embassy in Russia, in the Office of Environment, Science and Technology.

ANATOMY OF DELAY IN THE STATE COURT OF APPEALS

Sam Hartzell said only a college student would spend his summer poring over 1,636 court cases decided in 2005 by the North Carolina Court of Appeals.

The junior political science and philosophy major from Raleigh, N.C., wanted to determine the speed with which cases receive appellate review in the state system — and to compare those numbers with American Bar Association (ABA) guidelines.

It turns out his SURF project yielded major findings. Hartzell found that in 2005, the state Court of Appeals fell substantially short of the ABA recommendations. It was data that Hartzell
said the National Center for State Courts confirmed had never been gathered before.

Political science professor Georg Vanberg admitted he was a bit skeptical at first that Hartzell could complete such a daunting project.

“I wasn’t sure an undergraduate could pull this off in a summer,” Vanberg said. “Hopefully he’ll turn this into an honors thesis. All of our undergraduate theses are good, genuine pieces of scholarship — but I think Sam’s will be a standout piece.”

The ABA recommends that 75 percent of all cases be resolved within 290 days from filing the notice of appeal, with 95 percent of all cases resolved within one year of filing. Breaking his preliminary findings down into data on civil and criminal cases, Hartzell found:

- The North Carolina Court of Appeals resolved 75 percent of criminal cases within 21 months, 2.1 times as long as the ABA guideline;
- The Court resolved 75 percent of civil cases within 18 months, 1.8 times the ABA guideline;
- The Court resolved 95 percent of criminal cases within 32 months, 2.6 times the ABA guideline; and
- The Court resolved 95 percent of civil cases within 24 months, 2 times the ABA guideline.

Hartzell said the delays were occurring even though the Court judges issued significantly more rulings than the national average.

“The research suggests that cutting appeal times may be more a matter of trying to change how things are done rather than changing how hard people work,” he said. “If the Court judges were not unusually productive, the backlog would be longer.”

Hartzell hopes to publish the research and share it with the Court. He adds that working on the SURF project was “the best summer job I’ve ever had.”

Chaudhry said it’s generally presumed that women living under a Muslim government are suppressed and oppressed because of their gender. But even Chaudhry admits she was surprised by one of her findings: 50 percent of the students surveyed said that the government should enforce women wearing the hijab or “the veil.” She found that:

- 50 percent of the participants said wearing the veil (described as head-to-toe covering) was extremely important; and
- 34 percent said that Islam requires a woman to be modest but does not require a woman to wear the veil.

“Most of the women I spoke to felt [wearing the veil] was a part of their culture, less a part of their religion than their culture,” she said.

Chaudhry also found that 76 percent of those surveyed said they would like to incorporate some ideas of the West within their own lifestyle, such as the freedom to wear what they want, and more work opportunities and education choices.

The SURF experience further whetted Chaudhry’s appetite for digging deeper for the facts. She hopes to combine her love of journalism and international study and to get a job with Al Jazeera, a broadcast media company based in the Middle East.

Chaudhry asked sociology professor Charles Kurzman, an expert on the Middle East and Islam, to help her formulate survey questions for her project.

“She’s an enthusiastic student who’s a real self-starter,” Kurzman said. “It was an ambitious project on a topic that’s of interest to many academics as well as to the public at large, the issue of Islamic identity.”

MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT WOMEN OF THE MIDDLE EAST

Marium Chaudhry, a native of Pakistan, wanted to dispel some of the misconceptions that Westerners have about women of the Middle East. So she decided to go straight to the source: surveying her peers at the University of Jordan.

The senior journalism and international studies major spent the summer in Amman for her SURF project. She interviewed 50 college students, 19 men and 31 women, about their views on culture, religion, gender roles, education and lifestyles of women in the Middle East.