Research on Capitol Hill Celebrates 25 Years of Undergraduate Research

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CEHS students participate in the Research on Capitol Hill event in the Capitol rotunda on February 20.
Left to right: Tessa Richardson, Emma Griffin, Alison Miles, Interim President Al Smith, Shaun Boyer,
Abby Julian, Lindy Strand, Rebecca Elwood, and Assistant Professor Kimberly Clevenger.

Undergraduates from Utah State University and the University of Utah, both Carnegie-designated R1 institutions, collaborated to present undergraduate research at the recent 25th annual Research on Capitol Hill event. Students visited the Utah State Capitol on February 20 to present their research projects to legislators during the 2025 Utah Legislative Session.

A limited number of students were selected to participate from each university. Among those selected to represent USU were six students from the Emma Eccles Jones College of Education and Human Services (CEHS): Rebecca Elwood, Kinesiology and Health Sciences (KHS); Shaun Boyer, Kinesiology and Health Sciences (KHS); Emma Griffin, Instructional Technology and Learning Sciences (ITLS); Tessa Richardson, Psychology; and Lindy Strand and Abby Julian, Human Development and Family Studies (HDFS). Each student was awarded the honor to participate by the USU Office of Research.

In the months leading up to the event, the student researchers worked on their projects with faculty members who served as their mentors. “I am incredibly proud of our undergraduate student researchers who showcased their hard work and innovation at Research on Capitol Hill,” says Shawn Whiteman, interim dean for CEHS. “Their discoveries and commitment to addressing real-world challenges in education and human services exemplify the meaningful research conducted every day in the CEHS. I thank these students for their contributions in shaping meaningful change today and look forward to how they will use research to enrich lives in the future!”

To bring awareness to the event and further honor the participating students, Utah Governor Spencer Cox declared February 20a statewide day of undergraduate research. “Participating in undergraduate research prepares students to enter the workforce, acquire advanced degrees, and equips them with the necessary skills to contribute to our state,” Cox wrote in the declaration. “Research is influential in informing policymakers on specific issues and topics pertinent to them.”

Alexa Sand, associate vice president in the USU Office of Research, said, “This year is exciting because we are celebrating two big anniversaries. The first is the 50th year of sponsored undergraduate research at Utah State University. The other is the 25th anniversary of Research on Capitol Hill, an annual collaboration between a University of Utah and Utah State University that celebrates real-world contributions being made by our top undergraduate researchers.”

Sand continues, “It is a wonderful opportunity for legislators to learn about the amazing returns on Utah’s investment in higher education and its public research universities and is a great experience for our student researchers to develop confidence and expertise in research communication. It is always a fun event and the energy is high.”

Rebecca Elwood, recent graduate from KHS

Understanding Recesses in Utah’s Elementary Schools

Undergraduate research student Rebecca Elwood, a recent graduate from KHS, conducted research by developing and distributing a survey to better understand recess in Utah elementary schools. “Since there is not currently a codified law in Utah, schools and districts

determine recess practices. We wanted to better understand what was happening across the state and if national recess guidelines were being met," says Elwood.

"Rebecca's project was a comprehensive look at school recess in Utah. Recess is the only chance during the school day for kids to do what they want—they can be active, social, or just get a break from the classroom and adult expectations. We found that a lot of schools are doing a great job of providing students with daily recess, but we also identified some problems, such as climate restrictions," says Kimberly Clevenger, assistant professor in KHS and Elwood's mentor on the project. "She has presented on campus and at multiple national conferences, but the Research on Capitol Hill event was really Rebecca's first chance to practice translating our research into something that anyone could understand. Rebecca is great at the balance between staying true to what the research said and what will be interpretable to educators and parents."

Emma Griffin, junior in ITLS

Sixth Grade Curriculum About Indigenous Culture
Emma Griffin, a junior in the Human Experience Design and Interaction program in ITLS, said, "For my research, I worked with Dr. Kristin Searle and her research team to develop and implement an interdisciplinary 6th grade curriculum about Indigenous culture. The kids learned about complex concepts like treaties, sovereignty, and food access through hands-on projects that involved e-textiles and circuits. We collected data through video-recorded class sessions, interviews, and observation notes. We found that when students were able to connect themes found throughout history to their own lives and communities, they became more involved citizens and more excited students."

"I am so excited that Emma was able to share our work on culturally responsive computing education with legislators," says mentor Kristin Searle, associate professor in ITLS. "I think it's important for legislators to know about the role of culture in schooling and how being connected culturally can help students be more successful academically. I have enjoyed having Emma as an undergraduate research assistant in my lab this year, and I love how much Emma enjoys diving into our data and communicating our research story to a non-academic audience."

The overall experience of being an undergraduate researcher has been life-changing for Griffin. "I would 100% recommend getting involved with research," she says. "It is a great way to make a difference as a student, to become more educated, and help other people learn about the things that matter to you."

Tessa Richardson, junior in psychology

The Impact of AI in Higher Education
Tessa Richardson, a junior in psychology, researched the perceptions and behaviors of university students and faculty regarding the use of AI in higher education. "Our focus has been specifically on text-generative AI programs like ChatGPT. To gather our data, we developed two surveys—one for students and one for faculty—to ask participants questions about their thoughts on AI and its usage, specifically in academic settings. We gathered this information in order to have more accurate information about how AI is being used and how people feel it should be used so that any policies being made regarding AI usage can be informed by accurate data."

Associate professor of psychology and faculty advisor Jennifer Grewe shared, "Watching Tessa develop her knowledge and skills beyond the classroom has been an incredible experience. She has demonstrated persistence, resilience, the ability to tackle difficult challenges, and the courage to take risks—qualities that will serve her well in the future. Seeing these attributes flourish in her has been truly inspiring. I have loved supporting Tessa throughout this process. I hope other students can learn from her example and know that these experiences are possible for an undergraduate student at Utah State University."

Richardson concludes, "Presenting at the Research on Capitol Hill event was an amazing experience. I had the chance to share my research with many different individuals, including legislators and members of the

public. I really enjoyed sharing the data that we collected, as well as making connections with legislators and other presenters."

Abby Julian and Lindy Strand, seniors in HDFS

Online Training for Adults on the Autism Spectrum
Research duo Abby Julian and Lindy Strand,seniors in HDFS, created an online training program for adults who are on the autism spectrum. The program used acceptance and commitment mental health therapy principles to improve the quality of life for participants. The program was created with the assistance of researchers, clinicians, an adult on the autism spectrum, and family members.

"Acceptance and commitment therapy is focused on acknowledging and accepting uncomfortable thoughts and emotions and then making choices that align with personal values despite the uncomfortable thoughts and emotions," explained Julian. "Through an analysis of interviews, we found that there were improvements in three psychological processes—emotions, thoughts, and behaviors—which led to improvements in two outcomes. These were the quality of relationships (more confidence in social situations) and the quality of life (self-confidence and desired changes in self)."

Heather Kelley, a researcher at the Institute for Disability Research, Policy & Practice, served as the faculty mentor for Julian and Strand. She said, "It has been so wonderful to work with Abby and Lindy and see them grow as students and researchers. They are extremely sharp and always excited to pursue new opportunities and experiences. I am excited to see what they will accomplish next."

Overall, the experience was unanimously positive according to each of the student researchers; they would highly recommend getting involved with undergrad student research because of its many benefits. "Research offers invaluable experience and allows you to develop a wide range of skills," concluded Strand. "It has allowed us to deepen our understanding of the research process and explore topics that we are passionate about."

To learn how undergraduate students can become involved with research through the Research on Capitol Hill event, visit the Office of Research website.