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Joanne Curran-Celentano, Professor of Animal and Nutritional Sciences

Jennifer Lee
University of New Hampshire

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mentor highlights

In a small, sunny office tucked between her two labs, Dr. **Joanne Curran-Celentano** pointed to a yellowed photo brochure pinned to the wall. “She was the first UROP student I mentored,” she said. That was in 1990, three years after the opening of the Undergraduate Research Opportunities Program (now the Hamel Center for Undergraduate Research) and barely four years after the start of her tenure track position at the University of New Hampshire. She is now Professor of Animal and Nutritional Sciences in the Department of Molecular, Cellular and Biomedical Sciences. Recently, Dr. Curran-Celentano helped found UNH’s new dual major in EcoGastronomy.

Since that first student twenty years ago, Dr. Curran-Celentano has mentored many more, sharing with them her excitement about her own research in the nutritional sciences, especially in the roles dietary carotenoids can play in human health. Even though mentoring is not counted in a faculty member’s workload, she feels it is part of her teaching role. Working closely one-on-one with a student is demanding but is “the fun part” and rewarding in a different way from classroom teaching. “I do it because I love it,” she said simply.

Her parents, both working in dietetics and food production, undoubtedly contributed to her early interest in food. “I loved to cook,” she admitted, “but it was the science of it I loved.” As a freshman at Rutgers University, she took a course similar to UNH’s popular “Food and People.” It sparked her interest enough that she did undergraduate research and got a degree in food science. She stayed on for a master’s degree in food microbiology, while taking courses in nutrition “out of interest.” For her doctoral degree at the University of Illinois, she moved into nutritional science and also became a registered dietitian.

After getting her Ph.D. she took a part-time position at UNH, which meant that she, her husband, Ray Celentano, one small daughter and another on the way moved to Durham. “We are very Durham-centered,” she laughed. “I walk to work.” Ray is the coordinator of special education at the Durham middle school. Both daughters chose to attend small liberal arts colleges, where they have done undergraduate research, but Dr. Curran-Celentano is enthusiastic about UNH: “What we do here for undergraduate research is really fabulous. The experiences we offer are equal to or better than elsewhere, and I have seen a lot of these programs.”

As a veteran mentor of undergraduate researchers, Dr. Curran-Celantano has some concerns. She notes that these students are usually curious and high-achieving with special talents to share, and it’s great for graduate students to see undergraduates doing research. However, “we need to remember that they are undergraduate, not graduate, students and not expect too much.” Otherwise, she explains, we could burn them out before they can become graduate students. It’s easy for us and them to have too high expectations for their research, and “the last thing I want is for them to think they have disappointed me, not met my expectations.” This undergrad research, she explains, is a learning experience; the students need mentoring by faculty and grad students as well as technical support. Some undergrad researchers may be ready to take on a challenge, but it is easy for a project to become very complicated and beyond what they should be taking on.



Dr. Curran-Celentano researches on the internet as well as in her lab and in the field.

Several of Dr. Curran-Celentano's mentees have authored *Inquiry* articles, which she has helped them write. She mentioned Gwen Stewart's research into the nutritional content of eggs ('07), Naomi Crystal's involvement with the glycemic index of nutrition bars ('09), and Hilary Snyder's complex blood analysis work in an ongoing study of macular degeneration ('09). In this (2010) issue, Kayla O'Meara describes her apprenticeship in a graduate student's project directed by Dr. Curran-Celentano, which involved field trips, analysis of cows' milk and cheese-making. "Research is not just in labs," Dr. Curran-Celentano noted.

Inquiry's broad audience is "one I would want my students to be able to speak to," she affirms. It was not, however, an audience she was accustomed to write for. The first time she saw a draft of an *Inquiry* article (Gwen Stewart's), she found it not as she would have written it. "I write like a scientist and nobody [outside my discipline] wants to read that," she admitted, but non-science writers sometimes "want an interesting story which is not quite right." She made several corrections and read several drafts of Gwen's article before it was completed. We want "interesting but *accurate* science," she emphasized. The following two articles went better. Hilary's project was complex, and "she wrote more about her experience, which was the interesting part for a future medical student." When she saw Kayla's proposal, Dr. Curran-Celentano was a bit "taken aback" by its non-scientific style. She was pleased, however, that Kayla "gets the science but puts it in colorful, even humorous, but *accurate* language."

Articles written by mentees of Dr. Curran Celentano:

- Kayla O'Meara, *Inquiry* '10: REAPing the Benefits of France, Cheese, and EcoGastronomy
- Naomi Crystal, *Inquiry* '09: Managing Blood Glucose with Local Nutrition Bars: A Collaborative Exploration
- Hilary Snyder, *Inquiry* '09: An Experience in the Challenges of Research: Prevention of Age-Related Macular Degeneration
- Gwen Stewart, *Inquiry* '07: Investigating the Effect of Diet on Nutrient Concentration in Eggs: How Your Breakfast Might Be Healthier than You Think