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Summer Cook: Associate Professor of Kinesiology, UNH - Durham

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Mentor Highlight

Summer Cook

—Brigid C. Casellini

Dr. Summer Cook is an associate professor in the Department of Kinesiology at the University of New Hampshire, where she has been since 2009. Below is a correspondence with Dr. Cook about her own research and her mentoring experiences with undergraduate students.

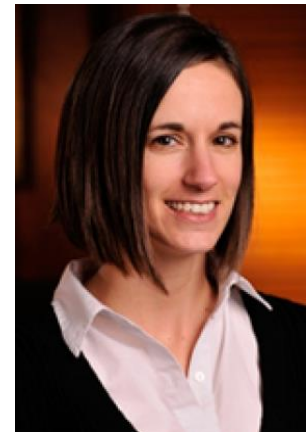
Inquiry: What is your current research? Did your undergraduate studies point you toward it? What interests you most about it?

I am an exercise physiologist who focuses on the nervous and the muscular systems. My research addresses how muscle force is produced and the resultant strength and muscle mass adaptations that occur from exercise training or the lack of exercise. I tend to give most of my attention to the aging population and how exercise or lack of exercise impacts their day-to-day function.

As a former high-school and college athlete and a current runner, I have always been interested in muscle function and how to optimize sport performance. My undergraduate studies in exercise science prepared me well and helped me to identify early on that I wanted to be a researcher. It was during that time that the Baby Boomer generation was beginning to turn sixty-five years old, and my undergraduate professors steered me into the field of gerontology to provide me with several research opportunities. I am most interested in studying older adults because their health and well-being are mainstream concerns as the percentage of older adults in the US population continues to grow.

Inquiry: What is the purpose of a mentoring relationship? What should the student and you gain from it?

To me, mentoring is a mutual relationship in which a student and I work together to achieve a common goal. Together we develop research questions, design studies, collect and analyze data, and then disseminate the results through research presentations and publications. We should both gain new skills and experiences that will shape future academic, research, and overall life situations.



Summer Cook

Inquiry: Please describe one or two memorable mentoring experiences or mentees.

All of my mentoring experiences are memorable, because each student is unique. I often find myself adjusting to the personalities and work ethics of each student, which constantly keeps the mentoring process different and exciting. One of my most memorable mentoring experiences occurred in my second year as a professor. A student whom I did not know came to me and asked to do a research study. She had an idea but did not have a professor that would take on the project. It was not necessarily within my area of expertise, but together we tweaked the study and learned together. There were several logistics involved in the data collection and methodological parts of the study that required extensive troubleshooting. She was a very independent, hardworking, and persistent student who not only completed the study but also won an award at the University of New Hampshire (UNH) Undergraduate Research Conference, and together we published the study. As a result of her research experience, that student changed her career focus and went on to graduate school to earn a Ph.D. I often see this former student at professional conferences, and we like to reminisce about that day she walked into my office to pitch her idea.

Currently I am working with a UNH student and two co-mentors as part of the International Research Opportunities Program (IROP). During the summer of 2017 my student will be at Murdoch University in Western Australia to work with colleagues I met while I was on sabbatical last year. The Australian researchers will be teaching her a new technique that stimulates the brain to produce muscular movements. I will be traveling to Australia with her for a few weeks to help get the study up and running and to learn the brain stimulation techniques. I am sure this international collaboration will be successful and will allow for future international co-mentoring experiences.

Inquiry: Please describe any difficulties or problems you have had in mentoring undergraduates.

As I mentioned above, adapting to each student's personality and work ethic is exciting and fun, but also challenging. I often have to ask students directly, "What kind of mentor do you want me to be? Do you want me to give you deadlines and hold you accountable, or do you want to work at your own pace and set your own time line?" Many students will flip-flop between the options, and as a mentor I have to know how much support and encouragement to give to each student. I also have to gauge how firm or flexible I am willing to be on certain aspects of the research. In addition, I constantly have to remind myself that research is not always the student's number one priority. Like me, they have work, families, school, and other passions in their lives. We strive to do the best research we can, but we take care of the other aspects in our lives as well.

Inquiry: What advice or tips would you give a faculty member new to undergraduate mentoring?

There are three tips that I would give a new faculty member as he or she takes on the mentoring of undergraduate students. First, get to know your student as a person and coworker. Learn about his or her family and friends and what the student likes to do outside of the lab. The more you can relate to the students as people, the stronger the mentoring foundation will be. Second, keep the research projects realistic and achievable. Many times students come to me with ideas for large-scale studies and I have to remind them that we probably won't win the Nobel Prize for our study, but we can still

answer some important questions with scaled-down projects. Finally, make sure your students love their research projects. Students often have to be engaged with their project for one to two years. If they are only following your research agenda and have little interest in the project, they will not give their best effort. Be flexible and give them autonomy and ownership of certain aspects of the project.

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