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Rebecca Rowe: Professor of Natural Resources and the Environment

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Mentor Highlight

Rebecca Rowe

—Erin Trainer

Rebecca Rowe is an associate professor and program coordinator for wildlife and conservation biology in the Department of Natural Resources and the Environment at the University of New Hampshire. Below is a correspondence with Dr. Rowe about her own research and her mentoring experiences with undergraduate students.

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

My research is focused on the population and community dynamics of small mammals (e.g., mice, voles, chipmunks) across space and over time. I am particularly interested in how species partition resources and thus co-occur at sites, in quantifying the impact of small mammals on forest structure and nutrient cycling, and in assessing response to changes in climate and land use. While many people might disregard small mammals as pests, they are a great group to study; there are many species with differing life histories, which renders them highly suitable for testing a range of questions in population and community ecology, and they are sensitive to changes in the environment. Because small mammals are embedded within the food web as consumers of primary producers and as a prey base for predators, they can also influence ecosystem function and serve as indicators of ecosystem health.



During my undergraduate experience at Bowdoin College, I was fortunate to have the opportunity to work closely with faculty members in both biology and anthropology. Those experiences solidified my interest in research and provided me with the confidence I needed to consider graduate work and a career in science. Although the specific focus of my undergraduate research projects is quite different from what I work on today, there are elements—namely, an animal's resource use and human-environment interactions—that have always fascinated me and still drive my research program today.

As a student I benefited tremendously from building relationships with faculty members through shared interests. Having someone who was invested in my learning and success was instrumental in shaping my career. As a faculty member, I now embrace the opportunity to form these connections with undergraduate students and hope these experiences enrich their time at UNH.

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

Mentoring provides students with an opportunity to gain specific skills and knowledge, but, more importantly, it provides exposure to the scientific process, which can enhance critical thinking and communication skills and advance career opportunities. Beyond these professional or academic benefits, I place greater value on the personal benefits to the student. These opportunities challenge students, and through the process of self-discovery they gain confidence, learn to work effectively both independently and collaboratively, and learn the value of failure and how it is inherent in any success.

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

As a mentor it is incredibly rewarding to engage students in research and to be part of the process through which they come to identify themselves as scientists. Beyond that, it is always especially gratifying when students receive external recognition for their work, for example, through conference presentations and awards, the publication of a paper, or acceptance into a graduate program.

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

It is often challenging for undergraduate students to recognize the value of the process and that research often does not go as planned. Although frustrating, those challenges can be the most personally rewarding, and the unexpected outcomes can lead to new and exciting questions and opportunities. As a faculty member it can be easy to forget what it is like to experience this process for the first time and, as a result, not to recognize when a student is frustrated or struggling.

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

Partnering an undergraduate with a graduate student or postdoc can be highly effective in keeping the project on track by providing more regular academic and personal support. This partnership also provides the undergraduate greater insight into the research process and career paths, and reinforces the highly collaborative nature of science. For the graduate student or postdoc serving as mentor, it is great leadership training and enhances both teaching and communication skills. As a faculty member, it is rewarding to engage in these multi-generational collaborations and see how they shape graduate student or postdoc perspectives and careers.

The UNH community is fortunate that the Hamel Center for Undergraduate Research provides such a wealth of opportunities through which undergraduates can engage in research both on and off campus. The strong financial support provided also ensures that these opportunities are open to everyone and thus fosters greater diversity and inclusion.