

Bajrovic: “Research Opportunities at UT Give Students Tools to Change the World”

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By Irela Bajrovic - Special to the American-Statesman

With student debt rising and an increasing number of college graduates unable to find work, many question the value of a four-year degree — especially for those who come from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. Fortunately, universities are creating programs, such as the Intellectual Entrepreneurship Pre-Graduate School Mentorship at the University of Texas, that are designed to help students discover their passion, explore viable career options and maximize the value of undergraduate education.

As the child of Bosnian refugees and a first-generation college student, taking advantage and maximizing the value of a college education has been a difficult struggle for me. I was initially drawn to UT due to its motto, “What starts here changes the world.” Coming from a difficult upbringing, I knew that I not only wanted to change the world but was also obligated to do so.



Irela Bajrovic is the child of Bosnian refugees and a first-generation college student.

My quest to make a difference started with research, and UT provided me an opportunity through the Freshmen Research Initiative. After two years of conducting research, I found a home in the Croyle Lab in the Pharmaceutics Department. I was assigned my own project and started developing a new form of vaccine delivery that might prevent Ebola. This project led me to join the IE program, which is part of UT's Division of Diversity and Community Engagement, hoping to gain the confidence I needed to pursue graduate school and a possible career at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Through IE, I had the opportunity to discuss my research ideas and make weekly progress reports. These presentations are required of graduate students, enabling them to practice speaking about science with a group of their peers. As an undergraduate, this experience was extremely challenging and the source of much stress. But I soon learned how to prepare for lab meetings and now have very few qualms about presenting my work to members of the scientific community.

Another invaluable experience made possible by IE and my scholarship through the Kuhn Scholars Award was attending the annual meeting for the American Association of Pharmaceutical Scientists — an opportunity afforded to a few undergraduates.

I learned about the dynamics of oral and nasal delivery of drugs as well as the keys to success in the field of pharmaceutics. One of my favorite lectures was on women in pharmaceutics, which discussed the struggles women in STEM fields experience and how by having the right mentors these struggles can be addressed. This experience gave me a thorough understanding of what is expected of graduate students, the value of a doctorate degree in pharmaceutics and how I can use my knowledge for the overall betterment of public health.

My experiences have calmed fears I had about graduate school, corrected many misconceptions and resolved my confusion. After this past semester in IE I have gained a kind of clarity I have never had before. Not only do I know that graduate school is the most direct path to the CDC, a longtime dream, but it is a journey I look forward to embarking upon. I am starting this new journey in my life with my eyes wide open. I know it will be hard. I know I will be tired. But I also know that it will absolutely be worth it.

Thanks to UT, I now appreciate the value of a college degree. What starts here does indeed change the world.

Bajrovic is a biochemistry senior in the Colleges of Natural Science and Pharmacy.