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Damian Hutchins '19 Learns More About Condition He's Had From Birth



Photo by Ethan Loveless

BOILING SPRINGS, N.C.—Born with a weak immune system and no pituitary gland, Damian Chance Hutchins '19 spent much of his early life in the hospital. The experience gave the Gardner-Webb University senior an appreciation for caring practitioners and a

desire to help others.

Hutchins, of Cherryville, N.C., is majoring in biology with a concentration in biomedical sciences, and his goal is to become a physician assistant and clinical researcher. He was one of 13 GWU students who conducted research during the 2018 summer terms with a grant from the Undergraduate Research Scholars Program. He worked 40 hours a week for five weeks on his project, which he is required to present in a professional forum. The faculty mentor who worked with him was Dr. Meredith Rowe, assistant professor of biology.

His research on growth hormone replacement helped him get answers to questions he's been asking for a long time. "I chose to do research on how growth hormone affects cognitive function in humans," Hutchins shared. "I have taken growth hormone injections since I was born. I always asked my mother why I had to get poked with a needle day after day. I was curious if there was a reason, other than the simple fact that society is less inclined to accept an infant-sized adult in the workplace."

As he reviewed recent findings, Hutchins received advice from Rowe on how to process everything he read. "She helped me become acclimated with scientific rhetoric," he observed. "There was certainly some jargon and policy that I was not accustomed to which might have caused me to make very large errors without her aid. She also helped guide me to my final research topic. I love learning and because of that I may have lacked focus early in the research session. She helped me to find a focal point for my research. I would say she helped me to become a better scientist overall."

Hutchins was astounded by what he discovered. "Growth hormone is theorized to play a large role in human cognition," he stated. "Growth hormone treatment was shown to increase both long-term and short-term memory in growth hormone-deficient patients. This effect is theorized to occur due to growth hormone's role in regulating glutamate receptors which are surmised to play a role in memory storage. My own hypothesis is that growth hormone affects memory and intelligence."

He plans to present his findings at the national Alpha Chi Honor Society conference and at GWU's Life of the Scholar Multidisciplinary Conference. He would also like to see his review published in the Gardner-Webb academic journal and Aletheia, Alpha Chi's academic journal.

While the summer study prepared him for graduate school, he also gained professional preparedness. "This whole experience was kind of like an apprenticeship for my desired career," Hutchins acknowledged. "By reading so many articles, I gained knowledge I will use for my own physical research in the future, and I learned how to write a proper scientific article. I also gained knowledge I might use to help aid future treatment of my patients. I also developed a healthy work ethic. The summer scholars program makes you

the boss of your own business in a sense. You decide when and how long you work. The experience has not only prepared me to work in my field, but also to work effectively in any occupation.”

Located in the North Carolina foothills, Gardner-Webb University is a private, Christian, liberal arts university that prepares students to become critical thinkers, effective leaders and compassionate servants in the global community. Emphasizing a strong student-centered experience and rigorous academics, Gardner-Webb is a place where Christian service meets inspired research. Ignite your future at Gardner-Webb.edu.