2012 OSCAR Mentor Award  
Applicant: Daniel N. Cox, Ph.D.

Narrative Statement

Successful mentors effect change in the lives of their students. I would not be where I am today without the patience, guidance, and empowering influence my mentors had in shaping my academic and scholarly interests. Reflecting back, I can honestly say that apart from my parents, no other individuals have had such a profound impact on my life as that provided by my mentors. Under their direction, I was able to achieve my goals which extended far beyond the classroom and into the real world of scientific research and I have used their example to develop my own effective mentoring style with my own students. Moreover, I can unequivocally state that no other activity had a more transformative influence on my career trajectory than the opportunities afforded to me by my mentors to engage in undergraduate research.

As a consequence of my own academic experience, I have a firm commitment to “pay it forward” by offering these life-altering opportunities to the undergraduate students whom we are incredibly fortunate to have recruited to work in my laboratory. While my colleagues no doubt must think me “mad” at having taken on so many undergraduate research assistants, what they may or may not realize is how difficult it has been to turn down so many others.

My own perspective on what makes a successful mentor stems from my approach in empowering my students to recognize that to achieve success means taking risks and to develop the ability to approach a new and unfamiliar area of study with a fearless attitude. I do not have one specific mentoring style because no two students are the same and to allow each student to realize their full potential means recognizing these differences and exploiting them in a way that breeds success and confidence.

Mentoring in my laboratory is a tiered experience and while I actively engage in mentoring at all levels, it is critically important to develop good mentoring practices in my graduate students and senior undergraduate students who work so hard to incorporate other undergraduate and high school students into our projects. Moreover, I firmly believe that the greatest benefit is achieved when students develop strong mentoring relationships with faculty at the very earliest stages of their academic careers. As such, I actively recruit students from the freshmen and sophomore pools to get involved in scholarly activities as soon as possible. My goal is to practically demonstrate to students that they are capable of making significant and novel contributions to research even at a very early age. The benefits of these experiences for my students have manifest in innumerable ways from developing critical thinking skills, to communication, teamwork, and scientific writing skills. My greatest reward as a mentor is the ability to watch these students grow as individuals, to see their hunger and drive, and to provide the opportunities and guidance to enable them to achieve their goals. When my students succeed, I succeed.

I could not have been more excited or supportive of the selection of Students as Scholars as the QEP for Mason. Didactic learning, while still having an importance in foundational education, is merely the stepping-stone to the overarching goal which is to train a new generation of scholars. While I am but one piece in a very large mosaic of individuals across the University committed to this effort, at every available opportunity I commit myself to spreading the gospel of how the inclusion of undergraduates in my research program has been a game-changer for us. These students are a fully integrated component of our research program and they have had amazing success in their efforts. I view it as my responsibility to encourage my colleagues to take a chance on opening their minds to what undergraduate scholarship can offer them and their students. It is only through telling my own story and providing venues for my students to tell their stories that more and more students will have the opportunity to explore their own interests and realize their full potential as scholars.