

Summer Research Fellow Spotlight: Samantha Jeune



Samantha Jeune, left, with faculty mentor Lisa Ruchti

The idea for Samantha Jeune's project for the Student Undergraduate Research Institute (SURI) came out of her own experience as a WCU student. Her research, "Does Matching Matter: The Relationship between Identity and Mentorship Programs for Students of Color at Primarily White Institutions," looks at whether underrepresented students integrate into college life more easily when they are paired with a mentor of the same race and gender.

When Jeune first arrived at West Chester University three years ago, she was worried about adjusting to college, both academically

and socially. Her parents are immigrants from Haiti who attended community colleges in New York City. They were supportive of Jeune's plans to go to a four-year institution but couldn't provide her with first-hand advice. Beyond that, Jeune attended a high school in Upper Darby, Pa., that is "extremely diverse. Virtually every nationality and ethnic group, as well as race, is represented," she says.

While Jeune knew that WCU has become more diverse in recent years, as a black woman she worried about fitting in at the University. Once she met her mentor from the Office of Multicultural Affairs, her fears were put to rest. The Mentoring Program is designed to help underrepresented students acquire the skills they need to acclimate to campus and forge connections with peers, faculty and staff.

"My mentor was a great role model and helped me not only as a first-year student, but also later, when I was deciding whether to change majors," says Jeune, a rising senior and a women's and gender studies major. "It got me thinking about whether the fact that my mentor was a black woman made the relationship different and perhaps more valuable than if my mentor was of a different race or gender."

"There is a school of thought that says it doesn't matter if the mentor is the same race or gender – all that matters is if the student has a mentor," notes Jeune's research adviser, Lisa Ruchti, who is chair of the women's and gender studies department. "In fact, one of the biggest names in this research area is Buffy Smith, a professor of sociology from St. Thomas University who spoke at WCU this past March."

Jeune attended that lecture, and that's when her research plans crystallized. She decided to interview students who went through the Mentoring Program to determine whether the race and gender of each student's mentor had any impact on their overall experience. She already had served as Ruchti's part-time research assistant for two years but knew that she needed a large block of uninterrupted time for such an extensive project.

"I was really happy when I found out that I was accepted as a SURI Fellow," says Jeune. "I was able to work on my research fulltime throughout Summer Session I. Dr. Ruchti helped me when I ran into

roadblocks. For example, it was hard to find enough students on campus during summer so we decided to develop an online survey to augment the in-person interviews. My plans are to conduct extensive interviews with 10 students and survey another 30 to 50 students via an email questionnaire.”

Jeune now has a new position keeping her very busy. She was accepted to the City of Philadelphia’s Mayor’s Internship Program, which is giving her the chance to engage in substantive research and administrative projects side by side with city officials. She has been assigned to work on education issues, including STEM initiatives, universal preschool, and community schools. “I know that having SURJ on my resume gave me an edge when I applied for this internship,” she says.

Despite her hectic schedule in the Mayor’s Office, Jeune is continuing her research project. She and Ruchti will write up their findings this fall, in time to present at a State System conference in November, to be held at Indiana University of Pennsylvania. They also participated in a poster conference in Harrisburg this past academic year.