

SMU Office of Engaged Learning

OEL Newsletter

Summer 2025

Issue no. 10

The Office of Engaged Learning had a summer full of Mustang spirit—partnering with the Spears Institute, teaming up with Honors and Scholars for a new Taos program, and playing a key role in a City of Dallas Veterans Wellness grant. Thanks to our friends in University Advising Center, First Gen and Transfer Student offices, Mustang Mentors tripled in size, and more than 30 faculty stepped up as mentors for the Summer Research Internship. From campus to Taos, the support and collaboration fueling our programs make SMU an exciting place to be—even in the Texas heat!

Jennifer Ebinger, Ed.D, Executive Director

Newsletter Highlights

Entrepreneurship

Undergraduate Research

High-Impact Practice Programs

Student & Staff Spotlights



All students in OEL programs are encouraged to apply to the Honors & Scholars Program in Taos

Students in the Honors & Scholars Program (L-R): Muxim Ge '27, Nelly Salas '27, Elle Caldon '27, Grant Simon '28, Trinity Gabreylski '28, Addison Woolley '28

Upcoming Events:

August

8/22 Transfer Social

8/28 PBI Welcome Social

September

9/2 Donuts in the Den

9/3 & 9/4 ELF Info Session

9/4 Welcome to Lyle: Pathways Prep

9/15 & 9/22 Big iDeas Pitch Practice

9/16 PBI PAL Build your Brand Bracelet

9/24 & 9/25 Coaching Session: Résumés for Researchers

October

10/1 & 10/2 Big iDeas Pitch Deck Prep

10/3 Big iDeas Business Plan Competition

10/6 Study Night in the Scholars Den with PBI and Mustang Mentors

10/7 History in Action: Pathways to Business and Beyond

10/8 & 10/9 Coaching Session: Personal Statements

10/22 & 10/23 Coaching Session: Engaging Presentations

10/25 E-Launch Bootcamp

10/28 Big iDeas Pitch Practice

10/29 Pathways to Careers in Business Journalism Alumni Lunch & Learn

Featured Events:

9/4 Welcome to Lyle: Pathways Prep

10/3 Big iDeas Business Plan Competition

10/29 Pathways to Careers in Business Journalism Lunch & Learn

11/4 Fall Research Symposium

See the full list of events and register on SMU360



Entrepreneurship

Startups in the Scholars Den



SMU Cox School of Business launched its inaugural **SPEARS Launch Accelerator**, a 12-week program supporting student-led startups with \$10,000 in seed funding and mentorship. Eleven teams used the campus Scholars Den as their main workspace to collaborate and develop their ideas. The program helps students build products, find customers, and prepare to raise additional funding. Startups included two former Big iDeas teams, **TIMIO News** and **Urban Crusader Technology's Oasis**.

Big iDeas also hosted SMU entrepreneurs for the **E-Launch Summer Bootcamp** with Entrepreneurship Fellow **Neha Hussein**. Students learned to create wireframes and mockups as well as dived into Primary Market Research.

Big iDeas in 2025-26

Check out the new schedule for competitions!

Oct. 3 Business Plan Competition

For students ready to take their business to the next level. Pitch to win up to \$5,000!

Oct. 30 Pitch Competition

For undergraduate students with early-stage ideas. Pitch to win \$1,000!

Spring 2026 Pitch Competition

For undergraduate students with early-stage ideas. Pitch to win \$1,000!

Pitch to win up to \$5,000!

SMU Big iDeas
BUSINESS PLAN COMPETITION

APPLY BY SEPTEMBER 26 ON SMU360



Research

SRI Three Minute "Thesis" Competition



OEL hosted its annual **Three-Minute "Thesis" competition** on July 24, showcasing the research of 27 undergraduate students from a variety of disciplines. The event, part of the **Summer Research Intensive (SRI)**, challenged participants to present their faculty-mentored projects in just three minutes. The SRI program emphasizes communication, critical thinking, and professional development through workshops and mentorship.

- **1st Place:** **Felipe Mancera** (mentors: Andrew Davies, Caitlin Charles, and Malia Brink, Deason Criminal Justice Reform Center)
- **2nd Place:** **Katie Andrews & Walker Homan** (mentor: Karissa Cloward, Political Science)
- **3rd Place (tie):** **Aubrey Brown** (mentor: Monnie McGee, Statistics & Data Science), **Sierra Woolsey & Ananya Anupindi** (mentor: Chrystyna Kouros, Psychology)

Dinosaur Choir Project

SMU's Dinosaur Choir, conceived by **Dr. Courtney Brown**, brings prehistoric sounds to life using life-sized, 3D-printed *Corythosaurus* skulls that replicate resonant nasal passages as playable

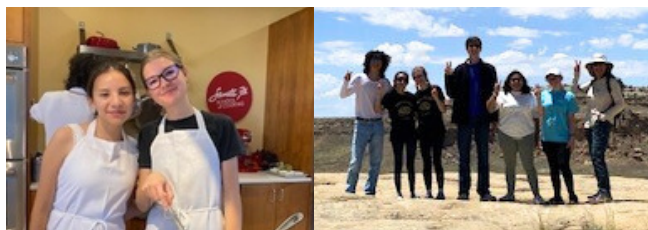


wind instruments. The project earned third place at GeorgiaTech's Guthman Musical Instrument Competition. SMU students **Ella Halverson** and **Qien Shensun** worked with Brown in the **First Year Research Experience (FYRE)** program. They co-authored a research paper and will perform "Anger at the Asteroid" as the Dinosaur Trio at an international music conference.

[Read more in SMU News.](#)

Taos

Taos Honors & Scholars



The **Taos Honors & Scholars Program** launched its inaugural year of an immersive academic adventure blending challenging courses, a close-knit cohort, and the breathtaking landscape of northern New Mexico. Classes didn't stay in the classroom. Students explored the region's rich history and living traditions, visiting Taos Pueblo, Chimayo, the St. Francis Cathedral, and other landmarks. Between sessions, the cohort took a cooking class with a celebrated local chef to make tortillas and authentic New Mexican green chile and journeyed to the ancient pueblos of Chaco Canyon. The program is supported by the **University Honors Program, Office of Engaged Learning**, and funded by **Richter Fellowship** and **Friends of Taos**.

Student Spotlight



Sophomore music therapy major and President Scholar **Trinity Gabreylski** joined the Taos H&S program seeking CC credits, but found a passion for traditional healing practices, which became a focus for her research project, *The Therapy and Medicalization of Curandero and Shaman Practice: The Power of Traditional Healing* and earned her an Engaged Learning Fellowship. [Read more on the OEL Blog.](#)

REU in Taos

smu.edu/reu

SMU's **SCALE (Complex Coordination and Autonomous Learning for Emerging Researchers)** course, taught by **Dr. Joe Camp** from Engineering, combined with the **NSF Research Experiences for Undergraduates Modeling and Computations for Complex Systems**, led by **Dr. Alejandro Aceves** in Mathematics. 17 students from SMU and other Universities participated in an 11-day immersive course in Taos, NM, followed by five weeks of research in Dallas. Students explored cutting-edge applications in AI, robotics, and drone communication and conducted their own research.

PBI

Pathways to Business and Industry Playbook

Pathways to Business and Industry initiative is a community of valuable resources on campus to help students explore strong career paths to business outside of the business school. To help students find their path, we offer the PBI Playbook.

HOW IT WORKS

Personalized Playbook

Provides various “plays” students can use—courses, internships, workshops, networking opportunities—so each student can mix and match these options to fit their goals.

Resource Hub

Highlights important campus resources including advisors, peer mentors, workshops and digital tools for students to know where to turn for support.

Action-Oriented Guidance

Outlines key activities to complete as well as electives which allow students to tailor their experience. Those who complete activities within the first two years will receive exclusive benefits and opportunities.

Scan the QR code for the digital version of the PBI Playbook



SMUPATHWAYS 

Business and Industry

Join Today at smu.edu/pbi
Questions? E-mail pbi@smu.edu

Student and Faculty Spotlights

SRI Student Spotlight

Walker Homan, a senior majoring in economics with minors in mathematics and political science, spent the summer continuing research with political science professor **Dr. Karissa Cloward** on the impact of



African legislators with professional experience in the NGO sector. This is his second summer working on the project, which led him to add a political science minor after his first year. Describing his experience working on faculty-led research, he shared:

"I have noticed a shift in how I engage with academic material; I feel like the exposure to Dr. Cloward's thought process has made me a more analytical student."

Along with fellow student researcher **Katie Andrews**, they presented their research in under three minutes and earned second place in the Three Minute "Thesis" competition. Walker's advice for presenting in 3 minutes or less: "Figure out how to connect your research to your audience. Once we had our motif, it was easier to structure our presentation."

Entrepreneurship Student Spotlight

SMU senior **Jonathan Zanzuri** (Finance and Entrepreneurship major and BBA Scholar) and alumnus **Amar Khoja** ('25), have swept multiple campus pitch competitions with their venture



Campus Cleans, formerly Dorm Room Cleans. After winning \$5,000 in the Big iDeas Business Plan Competition last spring, the duo went on to earn first place in both the Hilltop Founders Pitch Competition and the Innovate X Pitch Competition hosted by the **SMU Entrepreneurship Club**. Campus Cleans provides professional, on-demand cleaning services tailored to college dorms and apartments, offering everything from living space tidying and bathroom sanitization to linen changes. Their success shows how a simple idea can grow into a thriving student-led venture.

Faculty Spotlight

Dr. Eli Olinick is an Associate Professor in the Department of Operations Research and Engineering Management in the Lyle School of Engineering and serves as a faculty mentor for undergraduate research assistants in the Summer Research Institute program. Students in his lab assist with developing and testing optimization algorithms for complex routing problems in transportation and telecommunication networks. He also serves on the Undergraduate Research Steering Team and will be a faculty mentor in the First Year Research Experience (FYRE) Program.



Staff Spotlight

Dr. Jennifer Ebinger, Executive Director of the Office of Engaged Learning, has spent more than seven years helping SMU students turn classroom knowledge into real-world impact. She leads programs in research, entrepreneurship, mentoring, and career readiness, and also teaches the First Year Research Experience (FYRE) course. As co-PI on NSF REUs and Dallas City Grants, Dr. Ebinger expands student opportunities for hands-on discovery and community impact. She recently shared SMU's FYRE model at the ConnectUR conference. And as the photo shows, her Mustang pride runs deep—she, her daughter, and her niece are all proud SMU alumnae.



Our Mission

The Office of Engaged Learning provides the institutional framework for SMU undergraduates to complete signature work, a significant project that demonstrates application of knowledge, skills and responsibilities to a real-world situation, through capstone-level research, service, internships, creative and entrepreneurial projects.

Support OEL

It costs approximately \$2500 to fund a student project. Want to make a difference? smu.edu/givenow

