The Story of Four Fellowships

Meet four recipients of UNLV’s most prestigious graduate fellowships and learn about their research and their gratitude for the funding that made it possible.

Profiles by Jean Reid Norman

ISAAC ALVARADO
LIFE SCIENCES

When Israel Alvarado says he’s been as busy as a bee, he knows what he’s talking about. But he might be just as inclined to say he’s as sick as a bee.

Alvarado’s research takes him deep into an illness that affects 4 percent of honey bee hives inspected in a U.S. Department of Agriculture survey. American Foulbrood Disease occurs when honey bees larvae are food contaminated by the spores of a seed-like bacterium, and it can kill a colony. Alvarado is trying to figure out how the disease establishes itself in hives and what substances have the potential to halt it.

“AFB disease can impact the health of the honey bee colonies we use to pollinate our crops,” he says. “So this can have a significant impact.”

His doctoral research takes Alvarado into multiple scientific disciplines, including physiology, microbiology, and biochemistry. He works with life sciences professor Michelle Elekonich and chemistry professor Ernesto Abel-Santos, both of whom have been critical to his success.

“Without their support, I could not have accomplished what I have so far,” he says, noting that he has received a grant from the U.S. Department of Agriculture to support his research.

This year, he also received the Hermsen Fellowship, which is specifically designated for doctoral students in life sciences.

After graduation, Alvarado hopes to land a postdoctoral fellowship and then establish a career in academia. He would also like to turn his research into an entrepreneurial venture that can help agriculture.

“The dream of any researcher is to contribute to research fields and to society,” he says. “I try to encourage undergraduates to think of graduate school as a viable option.”

He says he encourages his students to continue their education because graduate studies have been so important to him.

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Evans is conducting her doctoral research on the processes that led to these incredible geologic changes. Geologists call this process “extensional tectonics,” or the widening and stretching of the Earth’s crust.

Evans feels fortunate to study this subject in Nevada, which she says is a natural laboratory for geologists.

“There’s so much extension here that it exposes lower levels of the crust we wouldn’t see otherwise,” Evans says, adding that rock features that are more than 10 miles underground in other places sit above ground here.

Evans is trying to reconstruct a timeline of when this important period of extension occurred in Nevada. She’s using relatively new technology called thermochronology to determine the temperature of a rock in a certain time frame.

Her research is important for understanding how the Earth’s crust evolved in similar places around the globe. It could also help locate natural gas, oil, and mineral deposits more efficiently, as such deposits often occur in extensional regions, she says.

Evans says she has been well supported since she began her studies in fall 2011. When she entered the program, she received the Fay and Jack Ross Fellowship through the geosciences department. In addition, she has received grants and fellowships from the Geological Society of America, the Nevada Petroleum and Geothermal Society, ExxonMobil, and the geosciences department.

This year, she is also the recipient of the UNLV Foundation’s President’s Fellowship. She is grateful for her fellowship and the experiences she has had throughout her education, including her doctoral studies at UNLV.

“I’ve had incredible support for my entire graduate career while studying world-class geology around Nevada,” she said. “I’ve had some fantastic experiences.”

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**NICK PELLEGRINO**

**HISTORY**

When Nick Pellegrino started his doctoral studies at UNLV four years ago, he became a rebel in more than one way.

Of course, he became a UNLV Rebel, wearing his scarlet and grey proudly. But his research into the history of church-state separation also has a rebellious streak to it.

“I have taken issue with many of the accepted narratives that we read in school,” he says. “Part of what I’d like to do as an historian is broaden our understanding of America’s past by challenging these narratives, especially those about religion.”

More specifically, his doctoral dissertation seeks to show that Catholics, as a persecuted minority in England and Ireland, helped transform American thought on the church-state relationship.

Because religious liberty and church-state issues are so central to the current culture wars, Pellegrino realizes his research has the potential to make some waves.

“My work is part of a larger movement that calls on policy-makers to get their history right before making suggestions about church-state relationships in the 21st century, independent of what those policies may be,” he says.

While he studies issues that divided people in the past, he says he feels lucky to be surrounded today by people who are united in creating a supportive environment for him and his research.

“I’ve heard many stories of rather cut-throat academic and graduate student interactions in departments across the country,” he says. “But I’ve found a wonderful academic climate at UNLV where everyone is genuinely interested in helping in any way they can.”

He extends that appreciation to his students, as a former graduate assistant, he taught undergraduate history classes.

“There is nothing more satisfying than seeing a student struggle the first few weeks before making a commitment to their academic life and rising to the top of the class by the final exam,” he says.

While he enjoys the classroom, he will use his UNLV Foundation Board of Trustees Scholarship this year to focus on his dissertation research. In addition to his fellowship, his work also has been supported by the Maryland, Massachusetts, and Virginia Historical Societies and a Summer Session Scholarship, which helped him travel to archives for his research.

Pellegrino plans to pursue an academic career after graduation and believes his doctoral work is preparing him for that. But, he notes, graduate school is also giving him the opportunity to be the kind of student he wasn’t earlier in life.

“I never paid much attention or did much homework when I was a child, so graduate school has helped me catch back those lost years,” he says. “It offers a wonderful opportunity for people to learn about things that secondary and undergraduate schools simply do not teach.”

**JESSICA URGELLÉS, PSYCHOLOGY**

When Jessica Urgelles arrived in Las Vegas from New York to begin her doctoral clinical psychology, she found a city in need.

Las Vegas is not have enough psychologists to provide sufficient appointments, she discovered, and many people in need could not afford to get help if they could get an appointment.

This created an opportunity that Urgelles says she may not have had elsewhere.

“The city is growing faster than the infrastructure can handle,” she says. “A graduate psychology student can do a lot of hands-on work in the community; they may not have that opportunity in other cities.”

Urgelles has been able to make the most of the opportunity, working through a practicum with victims of domestic, physical, and sexual abuse, particularly teenage girls who have fallen victim to human trafficking. She also managed the Family Research and Services lab, led by psychology professor Brad Donohue, and has done research on child neglect and mothers’ drug abuse.

The work on child neglect and mothers’ drug addictions has special interest for Urgelles; she will build on the lab’s research for dissertation research.

“Increasing our understanding of child neglect from substance abuse, you think many would want to do anything for their children,” Urgelles says. “But I’ve seen it with my own eyes. If they’re really dependent on a substance, their decisions are completely skewed by the drugs they’re using.”

The lab developed an intervention for families that had been reported to the county for child neglect where the mother was abusing drugs. Workers would go to the homes and work with the mother and children trying to help the mother stop using drugs and give priority to the family.

The program required that a significant other – husband, boyfriend, parent, or even just a friend – participate and provide support. Urgelles is focusing on the role of the significant other.

“Unfortunately, many of our clients had trouble keeping the significant other engaged,” Urgelles says. Sometimes the significant other didn’t finish the treatment or never showed up. “Some people with drug problems have trouble making appropriate friends.”

While relatives volunteered as the support person, sometimes it was helpful, sometimes it wasn’t, she says.

“For instance, if the parent is putting them down or causing shame or guilt, it might work against them or hurt them,” she says.

A recipient of the Eureka Fellowship and the Patricia Sastaunik Scholarship, Urgelles hopes to figure out a way to help long-term users with children kick the habit and become responsible parents.

“We have to find something to help these families,” she says. “Even if we can discover just a small piece of the puzzle, we can do more research to learn more.”