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Summer innovation at Mayo Clinic

By Kari VanDerVeen

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At the beginning of the summer, a group of St. Olaf College students took on the task of evaluating the marketability of an online learning curriculum developed by a Mayo Clinic surgeon.

Just four weeks later, they presented a 75-page report outlining their research and recommendations to an audience of nearly 60 people at the world-renowned medical facility.

It was all part of the first Mayo Innovation Summer Program, an expansion of the [Mayo Innovation Scholars Program](#) that is offered during the academic year. The Mayo Innovation Scholars Program [engages science and economics majors](#) at select Minnesota private colleges in evaluating the commercial potential for inventions and discoveries by Mayo Clinic physicians and researchers. Working in small teams, students research and evaluate new medical technologies, devices, and ideas submitted to [Mayo Clinic Ventures](#).



Associate Professor of Biology Kevin Crisp (far left) and Entrepreneur in Residence Sian Muir (far right) advised St. Olaf students (from left) Casey Keyes '12, Apoorva Pasricha '14, Sarah Fleming '12, and Ryan Johnsrud '14 as they participated in the first Mayo Innovation Summer Program.

"It's a fast-paced, high-stakes crash course on market research, intellectual property, and the medical device industry," says Associate Professor of Biology Kevin Crisp, who serves as the faculty advisor to St. Olaf's Mayo Innovation Scholars.

Until this summer, the program — founded by St. Olaf alumnus John Meslow '60 in 2006 — had only been offered during the academic year. But when Mayo Clinic general surgeon David Farley brought forward a project this spring that needed quick attention, Meslow saw a good opportunity to pilot a summer program.

He approached the staff in St. Olaf's [Harry C. Piper Center for Vocation and Career](#), and they recruited a team of students for the inaugural summer program.

The students — Casey Keyes '12, Sarah Fleming '12, Ryan Johnsrud '14, and Apoorva Pasricha '14 — began working on the project soon after classes ended this spring. Their task was to evaluate the marketability of online learning modules that Farley had created for his surgical residents.

"He asked us to consider the trends in medicine, technology, education, and health care to determine whether putting his modules in the market would be feasible," Pasricha says.

An intense internship

How they went about the project, however, was completely up to the students. So they began by surveying the directors of surgical residency programs across the country, as well as surgical residents and medical students, to determine what they're looking for in online learning tools. Then they connected with representatives from other companies and institutions that provide similar online learning tools to get a better sense of the market.

"We also researched education and online education concepts to determine if this product is educationally effective," says Johnsrud, a mathematics and economics major who plans to pursue a career in business.

It was an intense month of research and teamwork that culminated in what Keyes describes as "a stressful sprint to the finish," but all four Oles agree that it provided them with an unparalleled experience in seeing firsthand how science and business intersect.

"The intensive nature of this internship gives student a remarkable opportunity to become consultants in a field where they had little or no previous experience," says St. Olaf Entrepreneur in Residence Sian Muir, who along with Crisp served as an advisor for the summer program. "This really challenges our talented students to 'hit the ground running' and use their critical thinking and research skills to rapidly develop the expertise they need."

Summer success

Meslow says the summer program was a success, noting that Farley, the Mayo Clinic surgeon, called the group's final presentation "extraordinary, analytical, and engaging" in a letter.

And while it's yet to be determined whether the summer incarnation of the program will continue and expand to include other schools, Meslow likes that it gives students the chance to participate outside of the academic year.

Fleming — a biology major who plans to attend medical school — says she has always been interested in participating in the Mayo Scholars Innovation Program, but was never able to do so because of scheduling conflicts during the academic year. When she heard that the program would be offered this summer, she jumped at the opportunity.

"I really appreciate that this internship pushed me outside of my learning comfort zone, allowing me to learn about the other side of health care from a marketing and educational standpoint," she says.

Pasricha agrees, noting that the program made her realize how rewarding it can be to tackle such a comprehensive project.

"We could have approached the project any way we wanted, do whatever we wanted with it," she says. "I loved that we were working toward an end goal that mattered."

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