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A Career in Service: Caleb Heaslip Strives to Become a Physician Scientist

Chemistry Major Caleb Heaslip, BS '24, was recently awarded a position in the highly-competitive University of Michigan Cancer Research Summer Internship Program.

Caleb Heaslip, BS '24, lives for a career in service. When he was in high school, he had thought of becoming an officer in the Coast Guard Academy because he was attracted to the mission-driven work. However when a family friend's three-year-old daughter passed away from brain cancer, Heaslip felt that his talents were better served through a life of research and being a clinician.

Heaslip found himself researching the condition and was surprised to find a lack of medical therapeutics available for patients for this specific condition. With an interest in science and medicine, he plans to pursue a career as a physician scientist which would allow him to work on developing therapeutics in the lab and also treat patients in the clinic.

"This experience piqued my curiosity into why we cannot solve this dilemma, and it drove me to pursue a career dedicated to improving the treatment of cancer and instilling hope in the individuals and families who battle this disease," he says.

As a [Bachelor of Science in Chemistry](#) major, he has had a desire to obtain a strong foundation in research. He enrolled in the 2021 SURE Program at the Keck Graduate Institute in Claremont, CA. There, he researched the social determinants of population health in the United States and learned the processes behind drug design and development.

"These projects allowed me to broaden my perspective on medicine and consider the various obstacles and processes that influence how basic science is brought to the bedside, which I believe is essential for all scientists to be cognizant of as they conduct research," he says.

He is currently working as a research trainee in the Neppl Laboratory in the Department of Orthopedic Surgery at Brigham and Women's Hospital in Boston, MA. The lab focuses on uncovering the molecular agents at play in regulating skeletal muscle homeostasis. In researching how various genes and their RNA or protein products contribute to skeletal muscle growth and repair, he is working to identify potential targets for therapies for patients with muscular dystrophy.

"This being my first laboratory experience, I have learned that I thrive in the deeply collaborative and intellectual environment of academic medicine. Through oral presentations and lab meetings, I engage in scholarly dialogue with other lab members about how our experimental results fit into the big picture, and this investigative process is one I thoroughly enjoy. I have also learned that there is nothing more intrinsically motivating than when one's work involves contributing to the understanding of human disease," he says.

Heaslip was recently accepted into the University of Michigan Cancer Research Summer Internship Program. The 10-week program is geared towards exposing college students to cutting-edge research in cancer biology including DNA damage and repair. Based at the University of Michigan campus in Ann Arbor, Michigan, Heaslip will have the opportunity to work with physician-scientists, biologists and other researchers on a project in the field of cancer biology.

“I wish to one day help move the needle in the field of cancer biology and treatment, and I can only begin to ask the necessary questions if I immerse myself into this profession and feel the current pulse of cancer research. I am eager to apply the science and skills I have learned in the classroom and in the laboratory to a new, intensive research experience within cancer biology. The scientific training and mentorship I can receive makes this program an important step in my current education and future career, and I am motivated at this opportunity to contribute to the Cancer Biology Program at Michigan,” he says.

Assistant Dean of the School of Arts and Sciences J. Alex Trayford, MA, MPhil, has grown to know Heaslip well. He met Heaslip when he was a first-year student in his introduction to premedical studies course and later oversaw his research experience as part of the 500-level undergraduate research project course. Outside of these, Caleb also served as a Peer Mentor where he worked alongside Dean Trayford serving as a guide for groups of 30 first-year premedical students.

“I remember Caleb stating that he believed that for himself, a life without learning is a life not well-spent. While this is a notion I share, it is not something I would expect to hear from a teen and just starting his academic career. And yet, I cannot say I am surprised to hear it from Caleb. His passion and career goal come from what I perceive as an inborn need to challenge himself and push the boundaries of what he can do,” Dean Trayford says.

Beyond the classroom, Heaslip’s passion for service extends into a variety of forms, including as a medical writer/editor-in-chief for a community education group that seeks to make public health and medical information accessible to all readers. He also extends himself to young people, acting as a volunteer STEM tutor for young people in underserved educational settings and being a Big Brother at an inner-city Boston school.



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