

UNDERGRAD FELLOWS VALUE COLLEGIAL ATMOSPHERE OF MARIAL

Andrea Barrocas enjoyed being in the company of great thinkers every week. Tage Rai gained confidence as a public speaker, found his voice as a researcher, and made an unexpected discovery. Rob Shore was forced to focus sooner than he would have otherwise on his honors thesis, which gave him more time to fine-tune his research project.

All are recent Emory graduates who spent their senior year as undergraduate fellows at the MARIAL Center. They shared time with faculty, postdoctoral fellows, and graduate students from many different fields during their tenure.

“It was a great opportunity,” said Barrocas, a psychology major who learned about MARIAL’s undergraduate fellowships from her adviser, Robyn Fivush, a MARIAL faculty fellow. Attending weekly colloquia and workshops exposed Barrocas to “a diverse, well-rounded group of people, all with interesting research to talk about.”

Rai, also a psychology major, said the best part of his fellowship was being treated as a colleague by the people at MARIAL. “The respect that everyone gave helped me to gain confidence in my ideas and to find my own voice.” His MARIAL experience culminated in a workshop during which he presented his research on narratives and mental resilience to media coverage in the aftermath of the 9/11 terror strikes. “That was one of the best experiences I had as an undergraduate,” he said. “To have the floor for two hours and to be able to engage everyone really validated my work, and we generated many ideas which I carried into my final paper.”

His research was successful, even though his original hypothesis was flawed, said MARIAL Director Bradd Shore. The guidance and advice he received from MARIAL faculty and fellows led him to do more research. “What he found out was much more interesting—he discovered something,” Shore said.

Rai had expected that people who know more about their family history would experience less stress while watching video of 9/11 events. His data, which included questionnaires and measures of blood pressure, heart rates, and skin conductant tests, showed participants had more stress. When he studied their responses to interview questions, he discovered that they felt empathy for the victims, which led to higher stress levels while revisiting the events. “It turned out that he was actually measuring their capacity to empathize with others and to

imagine the suffering of others,” Shore said. “That’s a far more interesting observation.”

Shore said undergraduate fellowships may help to create the next generation of scholars who examine American middle-class family life. Identifying them is a goal of the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, which funds the MARIAL Center. Undergraduate fellows conduct research in support of their independent study or honors theses on some aspect of ritual, narrative, or mythology in middle-class American family life.

Each undergraduate fellow can get up to \$5,000 to cover costs of research, travel, and production of their thesis. Undergraduate fellows work closely with MARIAL faculty and graduate fellows, and they are required to attend regular MARIAL workshops and colloquia. Each fellow must submit a copy of her or his honors thesis to MARIAL as soon as the thesis has been approved, where it may be published as a working paper.

Undergraduate fellow Rob Shore, an anthropology and film major, said he enjoyed “getting to participate in discourse with some brilliant and accomplished academics as somewhat of an equal.” He added that for those who aspire to an academic career, “the MARIAL Center is a great way to get a taste of the life of an academic.”

The MARIAL fellowship helped Shore set up a timetable for his research—he had to present his findings at a MARIAL workshop before his honors thesis was due. “I was forced to start getting my thoughts together sooner than I might have in order to present my research to my fellow ‘MARIAListas,’” said Shore. Currently on a two-year Peace Corps assignment in Mongolia teaching English, Shore said he became more confident speaking in front of a large group because of the fellowship.

Rai’s MARIAL fellowship allowed him “to transition from being a student to becoming a researcher in a safe environment.” This experience was reflected in recommendation letters he received for graduate school, which he thinks gave him an edge. “It really set me apart from other applicants.” Rai is now at UCLA, pursuing graduate studies in cognitive psychology. “I hope to stay in the academic sphere and become a professor. I never would have accomplished this without MARIAL, nor would I have learned that this is really what I wanted.”

Barrocas plans to work on a doctorate in clinical psychology in the next couple years. She is now working on a depression project in the psychiatry department at Emory. ■



Andrea Barrocas



Tage Rai explains his poster in Chicago.

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