Reflections and advice from prior GRAs

Summer, 2025: Dr. Bruno Ache Akua

Over the past five years, working under the mentorship of Dr. Samek (Di) in her Adolescent and Young Adulthood Development Lab has been one of the most enriching and transformative experiences of my academic journey. Under her guidance, I gained a wide range of skills that will remain invaluable throughout my career in academia. These include participant recruitment and follow-up, data collection, and advanced data analysis using software such as Mplus and SPSS, manuscript writing for publication in peer-reviewed journals, and presenting research from the lab at national conferences. I also developed strong skills in reading and summarizing research articles, engaging in critical discussions during lab meetings, and applying qualitative coding techniques like thematic analysis. Generally, I gained hands-on experience in lab management and was trained as a Level 1 administrator of PreVenture, a program that enabled me to participate in meaningful community outreach by administering the program in Lee County high schools. This aspect of the work was especially fulfilling, as it aligned with my passion for community engagement.

Working with Di has been a highlight of my graduate school experience. She is not only a seasoned researcher and expert in substance use, mental health, and adolescent and young adult development research, but also an exceptional mentor who genuinely cares about the well-being and success of her students. Her feedback is always timely, thoughtful, and constructive, and she consistently goes above and beyond to support her supervisees both academically and personally. While her expectations can be high, they are always rooted in a desire to help you grow and reach your full potential. Reflecting on our time together fills me with gratitude. Di challenged me, supported me, and helped shape me into the scholar I am today. She is truly a rare gem and a gift to anyone who aspires to pursue a doctorate.

Summer, 2025: Brooks

During my time in Dr. Samek's Adolescent and Young Adult Development Lab, I had the opportunity to support a longitudinal study focused on adolescent development and mental health. My role, along with the other wonderful undergraduate research assistants, involved recruiting participants, encouraging them to complete a follow-up survey, and updating their contact information across multiple databases. We also handled participant communication through emails, text messages, searches, phone calls and mailed letters, and were responsible for processing payments for those who completed the survey. One of the most critical aspects of our work was maintaining detailed and organized documentation. This ensured that all outreach and data tracking remained consistent and accurate across the team. This experience taught me the importance of clear, compassionate communication and organizational precision in research settings. It was a joy to work with Dr. Di this Summer and learn from her. She is passionate and understanding and I always knew that if I had a question or didn't understand something completely, I could go to her and we would process through it together. For future graduate research assistants in this lab, I encourage you to have a strong attention to detail, flexibility when working across different platforms or datasets, and a proactive approach to problem-solving. Keeping notes and documenting each step of the process not only supports the success of the current study but also provides a foundation for the next group of researchers. Most importantly, take time to understand the human side of the work. Every name on a spreadsheet represents someone who is contributing to meaningful research and I am very grateful for the opportunity I had to contribute as well. I look forward to continuing in the Fall as we unpack all the data we collected this summer!

Fall, 2024: Brianna

Taking directed research credit hours during the Fall 2024 semester allowed me to maintain my skills in SPSS coding and provided dedicated time for manuscript writing and revisions of our social media paper using the CES data. Additionally, I used this time to train for and partially conduct the Negative Thinking Preventure Program Group. While I had attended formal training and practiced with the manual in previous semesters, this semester's experience gave me the opportunity to dedicate more in-depth time to practicing the program with our facilitation team, as well as my first chance to interact with youth in schools. Overall, working on data coding and manuscript preparation helped me maintain and enhance my skills in those areas, while participating in Preventure facilitation provided valuable experience in achieving program fidelity and engaging with youth in a community setting.

Fall, 2023: Bruno

My name is **Bruno** Ache Akua. I am a doctoral candidate and a graduate research assistant in the Adolescent and Young Adulthood Lab of Dr. Samek (Di) and she is my advisor. Working in this role during the Fall semester has provided me with a valuable and enriching learning opportunity. I acquired highly important skills across various domains. I was afforded the opportunity by Dr. Samek to engage in the proofreading of an R01 grant, wherein I was able to provide my contributions and ideas pertaining to the grant's overall content. During the process, I acquired knowledge regarding the structure and composition of grants of this kind. This presents a unique opportunity, as it is uncommon for mentors to engage in such activities with their mentees. Furthermore, I have enhanced my research skills through the completion of supplementary modules of the CITI training. This training provided me with pertinent knowledge pertaining to the ethical considerations in research and the necessary requirements for conducting rigorous scientific research. One additional research experience of considerable value that I acquired involved the identification and examination of existing ongoing research within the lab, enabling me to remain up to date with the latest advancements in the field of substance use research. Additionally, Dr. Samek affords each research assistant the chance to select a relevant article relating to the laboratory's research, read and provide a summary of the article, and present the summary during our weekly or biweekly special lab meetings. This learning experience is highly advantageous as it provides the opportunity to develop concise summarization skills for scientific articles, as well as enhance presentation abilities.

One piece of advice I can offer to new undergraduate research assistants (UGRAs) in the lab is that you will have the opportunity to learn a great deal about research, data collection and management, scientific writing, and the benefits of teamwork. You can rest assured that there is no need to worry when it comes to working with Di. She consistently utilizes a learner-centered approach in all her interactions with her mentees. She strives to understand and address your specific needs and meet you where you are in your learning journey. She is an excellent researcher/academician and is well on top of her game as far as substance use research is concerned. Prepare yourself for a multitude of lucid explanations regarding our ongoing research in the lab, as well as any individual questions or concerns you may have, as she is an exceptional instructor. In this role, you will have the opportunity to work in a highly supportive and collaborative environment. Di is both flexible and dedicated, always prioritizing the needs of her students/mentees.

Spring 2023: Bruno

During the Spring semester, I had the opportunity to work as a Graduate Research Assistant (GRA) in Dr. Samek's Adolescent and Young Adulthood Lab. This experience proved to be a significant learning opportunity for me. Di is my academic advisor and is providing me with mentorship to pursue a career as a tenure-track professor. During the Spring semester, I developed significant skill sets that are crucial for my future career and professional endeavors. I received training from her on the methodology of collecting data from research participants. I learned how to invite and follow up with survey participants, enter survey responses into multiple databases, pay research participants, and follow up with participants to collect sleep data. She also instructed me on how to retrieve survey responses from Qualtrics and generate online reports with them. All of these are essential skill sets that any aspiring professor should possess. am extremely grateful to have been granted this opportunity. One notable approach employed by Di in her laboratory is the allocation of special lab meeting days where each lab member is afforded the opportunity to choose a peer-reviewed article of their preference and engage in group discussions. Engaging in this activity is beneficial for all students as it facilitates the acquisition of skills in comprehending scientific literature for its pertinence.

I recommend that prospective Graduate and Undergraduate Research Assistants (GRAs, UGRAs) seize the opportunity to work in Di's laboratory due to the abundance of knowledge that can be acquired and applied in their future professional pursuits. The laboratory in question exhibits a significant degree of collaboration, communalism, and healthy interaction. With that being said, there is no need for concern if you encounter any obstacles. She consistently demonstrates availability and punctuality in providing assistance and feedback to all her mentees. In addition to her academic responsibilities and mentorship role, Di exhibits a highly hospitable demeanor and is receptive to discussing personal matters.

Spring 2022: Brianna

Working in the lab is really what you make it. Di is an extremely supportive mentor and will provide a solid foundation to get started (i.e., working on data extraction and general lab tasks) then from there if something strikes your interest, talk to her about it. Before working in lab this semester, I had very limited experience with SPSS syntax and using it weekly to create the survey reports strengthened my interest in learning it. From there, we set up times to work together on cleaning the survey data and I have learned so much. My knowledge of data collection and extraction has grown greatly this semester and so has my confidence for working with syntax.

My biggest advice would be to remember that you are working to better both the lab and yourself. Work hard at the assigned tasks to get your footing and learn the ropes then take initiative to become involved in aspects that interest you.

Fall 2021: Mary

Throughout this semester’s directed research hours with Dr. Samek I learned an abundance of skills related to SPSS and Excel and in undergraduate mentorship. Every experience I have with Dr. Samek, I learn more about statistics and statistical software. This semester I learned about data extraction and completed data extractions for the College Experiences Study. I enjoyed learning more about Qualtrics and have even used some of what I’ve learned to survey/poll my students and adjust my teaching strategies. I learned more about SPSS syntax too. I think it would be beneficial for me to save a copy of the SPSS syntax we’ve used this semester, so I have something to look back on in the future if that is allowed. During the first half of the semester, I was creating the survey reports manually without using the syntax provided. Once I learned about the syntax that easily made the survey report they took less time to complete, but through both methods I gained new skills. Dr. Samek uses Excel with great aptitude so I have learned many skills directly from her that I would not have gained on my own. In addition to what Dr. Samek taught me, I followed an account on Instagram run by an Excel expert who provides helpful tips on utilizing Excel shortcuts. I gained numerous skills from this account as well. I always enjoy working with the undergraduates in our lab, but I especially enjoyed working with them this semester as it’s the first time I was working on the same goals that they were. I thought that the undergraduates that worked for us this semester were especially on top of their work and they led us to achieve excellent contact and completion percentages. I look forward to using these skills moving forward in my education and in my future career. Hopefully I will be able to use them to benefit the lab and our team members as well.

Spring 2020: Mary

I have gained many skills during our lab this semester. Those skills include:

* Writing and checking syntax in SPSS
* Social media post creation and dissemination
* Running statistical models different than what I have been previously trained in
* Working as a group to create a conference presentation that all relate to one another
* Meeting virtually via zoom
* Other skills related to connecting virtually via internet
* Creating meeting agendas
* Facilitating lab meetings
* Bettered skills of working with a group
* More knowledge of other lab members’ research

Spring 2020: Bruno

From the very first day I set foot in the Adolescent and Young Adulthood Development Lab Space at 218 MW Smith, it has been a smooth learning curve for me and I have acquired tremendous amounts of knowledge, skills and experiences. I have gained much needed and very necessary skills of how to read scientific articles and make sense out of them; how to chart articles with respect to certain relevant themes and look for gaps in existing literature; and how to approach the writing of the introduction/literature review sections of an article meant for publication.

I am very happy to have learned these skills because there are vital skills and I will always need them throughout my academic pursuit. The journey has just begun, I am fully engrossed into the learning process and I know that there is so much to learn in the days ahead. I am very much privileged to be working under the supervision of a well-grounded and seasoned academician who is ready at all times to patiently and diligently walk me through the learning process. So, it is obvious that I am on track.

I have worked alongside very smart and wonderful humans in the lab (Brian, Mary and Cortney). They gave me a sense of the human touch, something I probably wasn’t expecting and one that I will never forget.

Thank you, Dr. Samek, for everything so far.

Spring, 2018

Dear future GRA’s,

Working as a Graduate Research Assistant for the past 2 years has been the **most** valuable part of graduate school. In the lab is where I learned how to clean and manage data, supervise undergraduates, manage multiple tasks, **problem solve**, and create/edit surveys on qualtrics. In the class room you learn a lot, but in the lab you practice these things. Research methods was an excellent course, but the lab is where I really learned how to do the day to day jobs that are required to keep a research lab moving. The first time Di asked me to work on syntax, I was terrified, and it probably took me a week to complete the simple task she assigned, but it was a GREAT learning experience. Trial and error, taking the time to google EVERYTHING was one of the best ways I learned. I was also never left in the dark or thrown to the wolves. Rebecca (pHD student) and Di were so helpful in answering my questions, and sitting beside me literally showing me what to click, what to type, and what different commands actually do.

I would say that taking the time to sit down and wrestle with things that are difficult is the best way to learn, especially in the lab. Don’t expect someone else to do it, but take the time to work through it yourself, that is how you learn!! Take the initiative and ask for responsibilities once you’ve completed tasks. Di works harder than pretty much anyone I know, so try and do the same. She will *never* take advantage of your time, and is generous with giving you time off for rest, so when you’re working, work hard! Work hard, take initiative, and don’t be afraid to ask questions (once you attempted finding the answer, but in the same breath, if it is something someone can answer in 2 seconds, but is taking you an hour to work on, go ahead and ask!:)).

As a GRA you’ll have a lot of managing responsibilities, but don’t worry!! It is totally doable. Use a google calendar, it will be your best friend. Always back up the files to the flash drives every week, and if you think you’ve deleted something, tell someone ASAP!!

All in all, this will be a great experience, and you’ll love working for Di, she’s the best! Have a good time, and learn a lot! If you ever have any questions about the study, where something is, or how I handled something in the past, let me know. I love the College Experiences Study, and want it to do well, so if there is any way I can help, I’m a quick call or email away… Lucy