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Public Policy student wins a top research prize

Jodi Lewis, who will receive her professional master’s degree in Public Policy & Administration on Saturday, May 24, at Sleep Train Arena, won the $5,000 Gloria Rummels Memorial Award for “best quantitative paper” at California State University’s recent Social Science Research & Instructional Council student research conference, held at CSU Fullerton.

Lewis submitted a 20-page research summary and made a presentation based on her thesis, “Improving Bachelor’s Degree Completion Rates: An Examination of First Year Experience at Sacramento State.” Earlier this spring, her oral thesis presentation earned her a Sacramento State Provost’s Award for Research Excellence, which came with a $500 prize.

Based on Lewis’ outstanding Provost’s Award presentation, the College of Social Sciences and Interdisciplinary Studies (SSIS) – home of the Department of Public Policy & Administration – paid her travel expenses to compete at CSU Fullerton.

“Jodi has been an excellent student, and her research is exemplary,” says Edward “Ted” Lascher, interim dean of SSIS. “She’s achieved exactly what we hoped from our graduate program in public policy and administration: Her work underscores the fact that we teach students to do rigorous research with practical implications, while also helping them to present findings in a way that can be widely understood.”

Lewis’ award-winning research is an effort to better bachelor’s degree completion rates, especially in the CSU.

“Improving graduation rates is an important policy focus because of the significant dividends that bachelor’s degree graduates pay to society,” Lewis says. “By improving its graduation rates, the CSU has an opportunity to improve outcomes for students, as well as to fulfill the workforce needs in California.

“My study examines the effect of First Year Experience on graduation. Using regression analysis, I hold constant many factors in a student’s life that studies show influence outcomes, such as parent education, high school GPA and remedial coursework.”
Three important outcomes in her study, she adds, point to the significant influence on graduation of academic achievement and engagement during the freshman year.

“Holding background characteristics and pre-college academic experiences constant, I find that participating in First Year Experience, either through a first-year seminar or a learning community, is associated with a 38 percent greater likelihood of completion compared to nonparticipants. Holding those same variables plus many college experiences constant, I find that freshman year GPA and number of units taken during freshman year are positively associated with graduation,” she says.

Based on the results, Lewis suggests that the CSU continue its investment in First Year Experience and “consider other opportunities to support freshman achievement to help freshmen fully engage in college life and to establish a confident academic mindset.”

Following this weekend’s Spring Commencement, Lewis will continue to study higher education issues as a full-time research specialist at Sacramento State’s Institute for Higher Education Leadership & Policy (IHELP).

“California is home to some of the best educational institutions in the nation,” she says. “Research on student outcomes helps inform efforts by educators, institutional administrators and state legislators to keep those institutions working efficiently for the benefit of California and the nation.”

For media assistance, contact Sacramento State’s Office of Public Affairs at (916) 278-6156. – Dixie Reid

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