Invited Letter: iLab at St. Petersburg College offers unique opportunity for students to work collaboratively in a technology playground

Keywords: iLab, intelligent cameras, collaborative learning environment, URE

I am writing this letter to express my gratitude for the opportunity to work with Endrit Ngjelina, an exceptional student from St. Petersburg College (SPC), on his research project titled "The Building, Use, and Importance of Intelligent Cameras in the 21st Century." As a Librarian and Assistant Professor managing the Innovation Lab (iLab) on SPC's Seminole Campus, I have been privileged to work with Endrit and witness his growth and dedication throughout this research project. The iLab is a collaborative learning environment, often referred to as a "technology playground," where people with similar interests in science, technology, engineering, digital arts, and math can meet, socialize, and collaborate while sharing ideas and learning new skills. SPC offers an 8-week Undergraduate Research Experience (URE) program facilitated by faculty mentors in the student's field of interest. My role is to guide students through the research process, produce a collaborative and comfortable environment where they can contribute their ideas, provide access to resources and opportunities, and help students refine their research questions and methodologies to ensure they are on a clear path to success.

Endrit's project involved building a device to demonstrate computer vision, a branch of Artificial Intelligence that enables computers to understand and interpret the visual world. Endrit demonstrated a remarkable ability to design appropriate experiments and analyze the device's output. I learn while working with these bright students, and believe that students benefit from working on problems as a team. For example, Endrit could not get the device to work, and we struggled with it, but we finally discovered that we were using the wrong power supply. Sometimes, there is an easy solution sitting behind complex trials and errors that provide that spark of intellect when found. When the device started to function properly, we were ecstatic. Working with students in the URE program has provided rewarding experiences. It has given me opportunities to guide and learn from students as they explore their academic interests, develop crucial research skills, and make meaningful contributions to their fields of study.

To improve successful undergraduate research at community colleges, establishing mentorship programs like this one will provide students with guidance and support from experienced faculty members who have shared interests with the student. Offering writing workshops and presentation skills training so students can showcase their research through events like symposiums or conferences would help create a sense of achievement while motivating others to participate. Finally, community colleges should continue establishing solid partnerships with local industries, governmental organizations, and/or foundations to support these research endeavors financially.

Once again, I want to express my gratitude for the opportunity to work with Endrit. I am confident that he will have a bright future ahead. I also want to extend my appreciation to your publication for encouraging and supporting undergraduate research initiatives.

Sincerely,

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