

Newton Hood always knew he wanted to be a scientist. But as a junior undergraduate student at the University of Illinois, he didn't know the steps to take in order to get there. So Newton decided to attend a meeting for juniors and seniors, which focused on research experience, the GREs, and the next steps in achieving their goals. It was there that he officially met Andy Suarez.

Newton was actually in Suarez' animal behavior course, a class of over 100 students. He always sat in the back. So when Suarez recognized Newton as one of his students, it had an impact. They went back to his office that day to discuss research experience and opportunities, and from there, Newton was hooked.

"I started by helping graduate students with their projects," says Newton, adding that as he gained more experience, he began to work on his own projects. "I had never conducted a scientific experiment before, until I started working with him. Now we're working on a publication."

Newton attributes many of his accomplishments to Suarez himself, noting that his mentor empowers his students. "His ability to direct people in the right directions without giving them the answer is great," says Newton, adding that Suarez words his corrections in a way that doesn't exactly point out what's wrong, but invites the student to improve the work overall. "He doesn't make you feel wrong if you get something incorrect. He's very supportive, and just a generally great person to be around."

The environment that Suarez has established in his lab is friendly and open, with Suarez constantly telling stories or cracking jokes. "I don't know if he's purposely doing it to make the environment better," says Newton, "but he might just be an awesome person." The lab also has students from all levels working together, which encourages fast friendships. "I'm happy to say we'll be friends for years to come," Newton adds.

When asked about the impact that Suarez had, Newton doesn't hesitate. "I have become a research scientist," he says. "Because of him, I'm a more complete research scientist. I'm better at networking and communication." All of this can be attributed to Suarez, who refers his students to other researchers with their questions, even if he knows the answers. "I wouldn't be where I am without his help," affirms Newton. "He's a phenomenal researcher and a better person. He makes you want to do research, and he makes research fun."

Newton hopes that others can learn from Suarez' example, by "reaching out to underrepresented minorities, and letting them know that they're welcome in the environment and there are people there to help them out." He wants mentors to prove to their students that you don't have to be a genius to be a scientist. "If you don't know something, that's great," he says. "That's an opportunity to learn. Science is filled with being wrong. There's nothing wrong with that."