

# Funding the *future*

The Emerging Scholars Program grants student researchers money and mentorship.

WRITTEN BY **MITRA NOURBAKHS** // DESIGNED BY **JESSICA CHEN**

**W**einberg third-year Maddie Kerr was about to do something that would have been unthinkable for them three years ago: present their original research in front of an audience of professionals. They had just flown to Philadelphia for the American Educational Research Association's annual conference.

Kerr's journey to Philadelphia was made possible by the Emerging Scholars Program, a funding program from the Office of Undergraduate Research (OUR) meant to make research more accessible to first-generation, low-income (FGLI) students or students of color wanting to pursue non-lab-based research projects in fields like journalism, art and social sciences.

Created in 2021, the program provides eight first-year students with 15 months' worth of research funding: \$750 per quarter during the academic year and \$4,000 each summer for two summers. It matches students with a faculty mentor and leads them through professional development workshops, building toward an independent research project.

The program's system of walking participants through the stages from research assistant to independent researcher is a unique model of mentorship that professors and students alike say is undervalued. For Kerr, that process was invaluable.

"I am a very anxious person," Kerr says. "I don't think I would have had

the confidence to even submit to the conference if I didn't have that prolonged period of building a support network and really gaining experience."

## The power of mentorship

Instead of jumping straight into an independent project, as Summer Undergraduate Research Grant (SURG) winners do, accepted Emerging Scholars spend the summer after their first year serving as research assistants to the faculty member they are matched with.

When Kerr applied to the program and ranked faculty they might like to work with, Bienen professor Sarah Bartolome stood out. As someone with a disability, Kerr was interested in Bartolome's work with children with disabilities. Bartolome selected Kerr to be her mentee that year, and the rest was history.

Kerr and Bartolome are not in the same field. While Kerr is studying the sociology of health and disability, Bartolome studies music education. However, the research methodologies that Kerr learned from Bartolome — ethnography and interview-based research — applied to their field.

"My relationship with my mentor has been the most incredible thing," Kerr says. "She's the best."

At first, Kerr transcribed and cleaned Bartolome's interviews, which they said helped them understand

how to direct a conversation without taking over. After some time, Kerr moved on to conducting independent interviews for the project.

Building those skills prepared them to tackle the independent research project they pursued the next summer.

“By the time I was designing my own project and submitting to the IRB (Institutional Review Board) and talking to these people in more of a high-stakes scenario, I felt like I had the experience to not mess up and do damage,” Kerr says.

### Competing interests

Shirin Vossoughi, learning sciences professor and an Emerging Scholars Program faculty mentor, says she likes that the program encourages students to form a sustained relationship with a professor who can model best practices for research and engage in “mutual learning and teaching.”

“Sometimes there’s a heavy emphasis on independent research as the only kind of valuable research,” she says. “And there’s some wisdom to that. But I also think there’s value in undergraduate students becoming a part of projects and staying connected with those projects over longer periods of time.”

Vossoughi says she thinks students learning from faculty members before they pursue independent research should be the norm, as it helps them develop a sensibility about what it means to be a thoughtful and ethical researcher.

That model, however, is not generally emphasized. Most students looking to engage in research through OUR apply for a SURG, which allows them to pursue any project of their choice with a faculty sponsor but lacks the prolonged mentorship and research assistantship that Emerging Scholars say they benefit from.

In the 2022-23 school year, 304 students were awarded a SURG while 72 were awarded a research assistantship through the academic year version of the Undergraduate Research Assistant Program (URAP).

The summer version of URAP was canceled last year, as OUR chose to prioritize funding independent research through SURG. Director of the Office of Undergraduate Research Peter Civetta says the decision was made based on a student focus group in which 62% of the students

preferred URGs, 14% preferred URAP and 24% felt they were equal.

Moreover, he says some students might already have the skills to do independent research and therefore wouldn’t benefit from a research assistantship, so OUR would rather fund independent research that surely benefits everyone.

While Kerr had a wonderful experience with their mentor, they may represent a best-case scenario. Bienen fourth-year and Emerging Scholar Olivia Pierce points out that not all faculty have the time to focus on undergraduates.

“You don’t always have someone who can pour into you as a mentor, even if you’re a research assistant,” she says. “There are other ways to get that mentorship.”

### The dual-pronged approach

After one summer serving as research assistants, it’s time for Emerging Scholars to work with their mentor and OUR advisors to create a proposal for independent

research. The summer after their sophomore year, they begin that research.

Kerr, inspired in part by Bartolome’s work studying music education for children with disabilities, decided to study the experiences of Ph.D. students with chronic illnesses or health conditions.

They conducted hour-long interviews with 16 Ph.D. students and found that these students described feeling a “simultaneous sense of invisibility and hyper-visibility.” With their data, Kerr put together recommendations for how administrators, faculty and institutional leaders could create more inclusive and accessible Ph.D. environments.

This kind of interview- or project-based research is precisely what the Emerging Scholars Program hopes to encourage, Civetta says, especially for students who may not know how university research works. Making a documentary, for example,

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**Maddie Kerr**  
3rd Year/Weinberg

could even be considered research.

An added barrier, he says, is that non-lab research lacks the incentive and infrastructure for faculty members to collaborate with students.

“When I was in graduate school and I was working on my dissertation, it occurred to me exactly zero times to get an undergrad involved in what I did,” says Civetta, who is a theatre professor. “The fact was, it never occurred to me because it’s just not how it works in my field.”

The environment in some non-STEM, non-lab fields can be much more, “I do my work, you do your work,” he says.

The Emerging Scholars Program creates both the infrastructure and the incentive. For Kerr, it also created a community.

“One thing that was really cool about it being directed towards FGLI and underrepresented students is it wasn’t so stigmatized to talk about things like money and affording apartments and summer housing,” Kerr says. “We could talk to each other about that and it wasn’t weird.”

Kerr has fond memories of going to the Adler Planetarium with other Emerging Scholars that first summer and says it was nice to feel a non-competitive camaraderie with other students in the program.

“It’s not like you’re vying for one spot,” Kerr says. “You’re all there already, and then you just get to learn from each other.”

### A look to the future

Civetta says OUR is not currently looking to expand the Emerging Scholars Program, as one of its assets is the community built through its small cohort of students.

The program was originally funded by a \$300,000 grant from the Arthur Davis Vining Foundation, but since then, Northwestern has added it to its undergraduate research grant repertoire and is fully funding the program itself.

For its small size, the Emerging Scholars Program has seen disproportionate success. SESP third-year and Emerging Scholar Kaylyn Ahn won the top overall poster presentation at the 2023 Undergraduate Research and Arts Exposition, where three of the other seven top poster awards were also given to Emerging Scholars.

As Kerr was on the plane to Philadelphia, Bartolome expressed how proud she was of them.

“They’re going to present their project at the American Educational Research Association Conference,” Bartolome says. “A full-on presentation at a conference, as a junior in college.”

In the last three years, Kerr has gone from someone who didn’t really know what research was to wanting to pursue a Ph.D. in Sociology — thanks, they say, to the program.

“If the Emerging Scholars Program didn’t exist,” Kerr says, “I don’t think I would have been able to do the things I’ve been able to do with my research.”