



## INTERVIEW: RHONDA PHILLIPS

Dr. Rhonda Phillips is dean of the Honors College at Purdue University. She holds a doctorate in city and regional planning and an MS in economics from the Georgia Institute of Technology. She previously served as associate professor and director of the Center for Building Better Communities at the University of Florida and as associate dean for Barrett, The Honors College, at Arizona State University. As a community and economic development specialist, community investment and well-being comprise the focus of Phillips's research and outreach activities.



### **Tell us about your college experience. Did you do undergraduate research?**

I became interested in research and scholarships as early as my freshman year. I was always asking why things were happening in my region in the southeastern US. I grew up in a rural area hit by the decline of agriculture and

deindustrialization of America. When I got to college, I was full of questions. How can we make things better? How can we go beyond what we see? How can we chart our own course? I studied things like geography—an understanding of the world and of the relationship between the physical and natural environments. I was driven by the social side of inquiry and research. I needed to learn something I could help others with and then apply that knowledge. I pursued graduate studies in economics and economic development for communities and regions and earned my doctorate in urban region planning with an economics emphasis.

Sometimes I worked with professors and in small teams. My research was driven by the need to help communities and community partners, so I was involved in projects that researched, for example, the best approaches to try something new. This included an internship program

with students to pair them with community partners. My undergraduate degree focused on applied research and my doctorate was traditional empirical models of scientific inquiry. In the last 10–15 years, my research focus has shifted from community and economic development to encouraging community well-being through environmental, physical, and cultural realms.

### **Is there anything that has surprised you about Purdue as a community compared to Arizona State, where you were before?**

The role, nature, and community of Purdue are very different. It has a reputation as a solid research university in a small college town. The midwestern friendliness exceeded my expectations. People are engaging on campus and beyond. That's been wonderful. I've also found that, even though Purdue is a research institution, research is also embedded within the culture. Research begins with undergraduate education, which is transformative. Not all universities believe this, so they struggle to create and provide opportunities for undergraduate research. When I got to Purdue, my colleagues and I formed a team of faculty, staff, and undergraduate students to establish a strategy for broader research. This enables effective collaboration across what others consider barriers. Purdue demonstrates excellence within its disciplines, but we want to create excellence *across* disciplines. That's where undergraduate research can play a leading role.

### **Why do you think an undergraduate should think about doing research? What are the benefits of it?**

As freshmen, we think we need to learn X amount of knowledge to be proficient enough in our major to get a job or go to grad school. We feel compelled to learn about certain things. Research broadens that horizon. It's not enough to know one discipline. How do you think creatively about solutions? How do you work across perspectives, cultures, and issues? Research develops ways of thinking about the world that are beneficial. All types of research—quantitative, qualitative, exploratory, scientific inquiry—push us to think creatively beyond limitations that we place on ourselves. Research is that freeing mechanism of the mind.

### **How would you suggest one go about choosing a type of research to get involved with?**

Follow your passion. If you're invested in something, seek out people who are doing that. Share your interests with professors, then join a team. You can also conduct your own research. That's the beauty of the Honors College model. The undergraduate thesis or research project gives an early, meaningful research experience. Sometimes it resonates with students and they continue on that path of research by going to graduate school or pursuing an internship. It's a mind-expanding opportunity. It's not that you have to do a thesis; it's that you *get* to do a thesis. You get to work with professors, graduate students, and a research team. That's a valuable, compelling opportunity.

### **How has the Honors College incorporated undergraduate research for its students?**

Each student is required to do a thesis or creative project. This develops skills beyond what's expected. It pushes the boundaries of creative thinking. The Honors College invested in interdisciplinarity to expose students to perspectives beyond their disciplines. Having groups of students across disciplinary barriers working together toward a solution/challenge/research topic broadens education and research experiences tremendously. The goal is to encourage interdisciplinary collaboration to give all undergraduate students that valuable experience.

### **Do you think that undergraduate research is just something that Honors students should do?**

Any student who has the desire to push the learning experience has ways of engaging in research. You can work with professors or teams of other students. Present your findings at academic or scientific conferences. Participate in the numerous competitions across campus in design, technology, and science. Present at DiscoverU and other campus venues. Showcasing what you've learned and communicating that effectively to others is critical. Many

classes here incorporate projects or research opportunities in the coursework, so students may work individually or together on an issue in a class. Find ways to engage in those and to help disseminate the results, like in *JPUR*. We have many projects, ideas, applications, and experiments. The whole range of research is happening at Purdue; we need to encourage others to be engaged and involved.

### **What are your ambitions for undergraduate research at Purdue? Is there further work the Honors College will be doing to encourage it?**

Yes. The Honors College wants to partner with units across campus so students have access to research as undergraduates. This year we joined the Clinton Global Initiative as 1 of 30 university members in the world. CGI allows college students to present their potential solutions to problems facing the world. Students from all over the world convene annually to present research. Purdue sent seven students to the competition in March, one of which made the top two of 32 teams. Purdue is also a member of the Council for Undergraduate Research (CUR), which I'll be working more closely with to identify, design, and develop proposals for expanding undergraduate research at Purdue. CUR has an annual research poster presentation for undergraduate students. We had 600 students apply across the nation and 60 accepted, two of which were Purdue students. We also house the Office of National and International Scholarship (NISO) that serves all Purdue students. These scholarships enable highly competitive students to pursue research and graduate school around the world. We've created a community of scholars around leadership development, interdisciplinarity, research skills, and creative thinking. We rarely do research alone. You have to work in teams to conduct research to impact others. I look forward to working with colleagues across campus to further benefit students.

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## **Interviewer**

**Brooke Haltzman** is a sophomore in the College of Liberal Arts pursuing a major in professional writing and minors in mathematics, global studies, and communications. She has served as the journal coordinator for this volume of *JPUR*, holds the position of a resident assistant in Wiley Hall, and is heavily involved with the campus ministry Cru.

