2025 Fall Symposium

Friday, September 19
2:00PM

Konover Auditorium
Dodd Center
Storrs, CT

EVENT SCHEDULE

WELCOME
Dr. Vin Moscardelli
Director, Office of National Scholarships and Fellowships &
Coordinator of the Holster Scholar Program
(2:00 p.m.)

PANEL #1: THE SCIENCE OF THE MIND
(2:10 p.m.)

COFFEE BREAK
(2:50 p.m.)

PANEL #2: BUILDING BETTER MATERIALS
(3:05 p.m.)

COFFEE BREAK
(3:45 p.m.)

PANEL #3: ADVANCEMENTS IN THE BIOLOGICAL SCIENCES
(4:05 p.m.)

CLOSING COMMENTS & THANKS
Dr. Jennifer Lease Butts
Associate Vice Provost for Enrichment Programs and
Director, UConn Honors Program
(4:35 p.m.)

PROGRAM

Panel #1: The Science of the Mind

CHRISTOPHER SMITH
Influence of Musical Training on BDNF, a Blood Biomarker of Brain Plasticity

HANNAH van RIJNSWOU
Lost in Translation: Chomskyan Analysis of Language Variation in AI, Post-Critical Learners, and Native Speakers

AKSHAT VISWANATH
How Attention Related Brainwaves Vary with Performance on Speech-In-Noise Tasks

Panel #2: Building Better Materials

ISABELLA KULAWIK
A Shocking Approach to Cleaner Chemistry: Using Electricity to Drive Chemical Reactions

SASHAH WILSON-THOMPSON
Multi-Bit-Per-Cell Phase Change Memory Devices for AI Applications

AKHIL POTDAR
Developing a Low Temperature Pathway for the Synthesis of Two-Dimensional WS2 Nanosheets

Panel #3: Advancements in the Biological Sciences

NEEKA OGHLI
The Impact of Long-Term Exposure to Lip Cosmetics on the Fertility of Female Drosophila melanogaster

DANIEL D'SOUZA
Investigating the Presence of R-loops at the Centromeres of Drosophila melanogaster

Introducing the 2024 Holster Scholars

Daniel D'Souza '28 (CLAS), from Cheshire, CT, is a Presidential and National Merit Scholar pursuing a dual degree in molecular and cell biology and applied mathematics, with a minor in bioinformatics. Throughout high school, he was deeply involved in athletics, serving as captain of both his school's cross-country and track teams. He was also the president of his chapter of the Science National Honor Society and a member of the math team. Outside of school, he was a member of the Boy Scouts of America, where he earned the rank of Eagle Scout. He also volunteered his time at the Quinnipiac Valley Audubon Society Wildlife Preserve and Midstate Medical Center. In his free time, Daniel enjoys running, hiking, camping, backpacking, and anything else outdoors.

Project: Investigating the Presence of R-loops at the Centromeres of *Drosophila melanogaster*

Mentor: Prof. Barbara Mellone, Dept. of Molecular & Cell Biology

Isabella Kulawik ’28 (CLAS & SFA) from Sarasota, FL, is pursuing a dual degree in chemistry and jazz, with plans to go into the field of drug discovery. She graduated from Pine View School, where she received the Senior Award of Excellence and served as Editor-in-Chief of the newspaper, *The Torch*. Over the years, she has dedicated time to the arts along with her academics, performing as the vocalist with an award-winning jazz band, directing plays and shows, and educating children about music as a summer camp student teacher. Off the stage, she participated in the Hugh O’Brien Youth Leadership Conference and was a Finalist for the League of Women Voters YVOTE essay contest. At UConn, Kulawik is an Associate Managing Editor for *The Daily Campus* and a writer for the *Nutmeg*. In her free time, she enjoys sewing, singing, and playing guitar and piano.

Project: A Shocking Approach to Cleaner Chemistry: Using Electricity to Drive Chemical Reactions

Mentor: Prof. Nicholas Leadbeater, Dept. of Chemistry

Neeka Oghli ’28 (CLAS), a STEM Scholar from Long Island, NY, is a pre-medical student majoring in physiology & neurobiology with a minor in human development and family sciences. In high school, she served as president of the Science National Honor Society, Women in STEM, and Breaking Borders while holding leadership roles in multiple other organizations. Outside of school, she worked as a math and science tutor at Kumon Learning Center, shadowed physicians, and volunteered at her local Farsi school. At UConn, Neeka is the president of the Honors in STEM group and a Junior Panhellenic Council member for Gamma Phi Beta sorority. Driven by a passion for women’s health, she hopes to make a meaningful impact through inclusive leadership and research that empowers underrepresented communities. In her free time, she enjoys listening to music, watching shows, going to the gym, and most importantly, spending time with loved ones.

Project: The Impact of Long-Term Exposure to Lip Cosmetics on the Fertility of Female *Drosophila melanogaster*

Mentor: Prof. Jianjun Sun, Dept. of Physiology & Neurobiology

Akhil Potdar ’28 (CLAS & ENG), from Charlotte, NC, is pursuing a dual degree in chemistry and materials science & engineering. In high school, he was a section leader and later president of his school’s marching band, a member of the Charlotte Pride Band, and would conduct (mostly failed) experiments in his garage. At UConn, he is a member of the UConn Chamber Orchestra Club, a part of the editorial team in the *Undergraduate Science Journal*, and does research with both Dr. Necmi Biyikli in the Department of Electrical and Computer Engineering and Dr. J. Nathan Hohman in the Department of Chemistry. Akhil is fascinated by the field of nanotechnology. After graduate school, he intends to pursue a research career in nanomaterials for electronics and biotechnology. In his free time, Akhil enjoys shiny hunting in Pokémon, playing the saxophone, and being with friends and family.

Project: Developing a Low Temperature Pathway for the Synthesis of Two-Dimensional WS2 Nanosheets

Mentor: Prof. Necmi Biyikli, Dept. of Electrical & Computer Engineering

Christopher Smith ’28 (CLAS & SFA) from Farmington, CT, is a dual-degree student majoring in physiology & neurobiology and music performance (violin). Graduating from Farmington High School, he was the president of the National Honor Society in addition to receiving the Farmington Board of Education Student Leadership Award and Student Citizenship Award for outstanding character and academic excellence. He attended the Hartt School of Music Community Division for eight years where he received numerous awards and won competitions. As reflected by his choice of majors, Christopher is quite passionate about both STEM and music; he plans to continue his studies in both topics going forward. He has earned a spot on the Dean’s List for both the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences and School of Fine Arts. Beyond academics, Christopher loves to attend classical music concerts and listen to a wide range of music (but mostly classical). He participates in the Honors Council and a piano trio ensemble with members of the UConn Symphony Orchestra, where he is currently principal of his section.

Project: Influence of Musical Training on BDNF, a Blood Biomarker of Brain Plasticity

Mentor: Prof. Erika Skoe, Dept. of Speech, Language, and Hearing Sciences

Hannah van Rijnswou ’28 (CLAS), from Bethel, CT (originally Manhattan, NY), is a psychology major preparing to add a second (individualized) major in criminal studies. At age 16, she started her own organization called InkWellness, an international writing competition that focuses on creative writing as a form of mental health support. At UConn, she works in the Fitch Lab, conducting independent and group behavioral neuroscience research. She is continuing her work with Linguistics Professor Harry van der Hulst, now helping to proofread and finalize the resources for his forthcoming monograph, *Genes, Brains, Evolution and Language* (Cambridge). Hannah serves as a first-year Honors RA in Shippee Hall, director of programming for the Residence Hall Association, and vice president and secretary of the UConn Costume Club. In her free time, she enjoys baking, cosplay, writing, birdwatching, and spending time with her family.

Project: Lost in Translation: Chomskyan Analysis of Language Variation in AI, Post-Critical Learners, and Native Speakers

Mentor: Prof. Hendrikus (Harry) van der Hulst, Dept. of Linguistics

Akshat Viswanath ’28 (CLAS) from Charlton, MA, is majoring in physiology and neurobiology, with a minor in English. At Saint John’s high school, Akshat was a high honors student, captain of his school’s varsity swim team, member of the crew team, president of the Worcester Youth Jazz Ensemble, contributor to the school magazine, and a member of the national honor society. He enjoys making origami architecture and playing the saxophone, having performed at Mechanics Hall in Worcester and Berklee Recital Hall in Boston. A recipient of an academic excellence scholarship at UConn, Akshat aspires to a career in medicine. Volunteering and shadowing in hospitals and clinics inspired him to join the pre-medical society and UConn’s Bridge to Guanin, where he performed clinical service in the Dominican Republic. At UConn, he is also a proud member of the Honors Council and the Indian Students Association. In his free time, you will see him hanging out with friends, at the gym, or finding beauty in the (infrequent) quiet moments of college life.

Project: How Attention Related Brainwaves Vary with Performance on Speech-In-Noise Tasks

Mentor: Prof. Heather Read, Depts. of Psychological Sciences and Biomedical Engineering

Sashah Wilson-Thompson ’28 (ENG) is a computer engineering major from Waldorf, MD, and a Cigna and STEM Leadership Scholar at UConn. She is passionate about technology, community service, and making the most out of every opportunity. From building her first gaming computer at 14 and completing a 4-year network engineering program (CISCO) to conducting nuclear physics research at Michigan State’s Facility for Rare Isotope Beams (FRIB), she has always been driven by curiosity and a love of learning. In high school, Sashah led on and off the field, captaining her lacrosse team, playing field hockey, and founding the North Point HS Symphony Orchestra as first chair trumpet. At UConn, she served as president of the National Society of Black Engineers Freshman Leadership Initiative (NSBE-FLI) and participates in Honors Across State Borders (HASB). Outside the classroom, Sashah loves playing video games, running, performing at campus events, socializing, listening to music, and staying active in service and leadership.

Project: Multi-Bit-Per-Cell Phase Change Memory Devices for AI Applications

Mentors: Prof. Ali Gokirmak, Dept. of Electrical & Computer Engineering and Prof. Jake Scoggin, School of Computing

ABOUT THE PROGRAM

Administered through the joint efforts of the UConn Honors Program and the Office of National Scholarships & Fellowships, the Holster Scholars Program is supported through the generosity and vision of Robert and Carlotta Holster who, together, established an endowment fund in 2009.

Inspired by Robert Holster's own excitement in discovering new paths of learning as an undergraduate at UConn, the Holster Scholars Program is a selective enrichment opportunity for curious, first-year Honors students who wish to pursue independent research, design, or creative projects during the summer following their first year.

Holster Scholars past and present constitute a community of scholars. Because the awards go to students at an early stage of their undergraduate careers, the program has an outsized impact on the students, their trajectories, and their development. In the process, “Holster Scholar” becomes an identity that shapes Scholars’ experiences throughout their time at UConn, and often beyond.

Learn more about the program at honors.uconn.edu/holster-scholars.

ABOUT ROBERT & CARLOTTA HOLSTER

Robert Holster and Carlotta Detomaso Holster both entered UConn in 1964. Bob was a member of the inaugural cohort admitted to the Honors Program. They are proud Class of 1968 alums: Bob graduated with a B.A. in Economics and Carlotta graduated with a B.S. in Family Studies.

The Honors Program wishes to acknowledge and thank the Holsters for their enduring gift and its lasting impact on the UConn Honors Program.

HOLSTER SCHOLARS THROUGH THE YEARS

2011

2012

2013

2014

2015

2016

2017

2018

2019


NEAL KRISHNA
KATIE HOOKER
JOSHUA YU
CHARLIE SCHWARZ
ELISA SPAROLLI
PAUL ISAAC
NANDHINI GOWDA
SARAH MARDE
JEROME JACOBS

2020


The 2021 Holster Scholars

(credit Defining Studios)

2021

2022

2023

2024

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HONORS PROGRAM