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A Unique Mix of Genetic Biology and Animal Behavior Offers an Irresistible Opportunity to Students

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Dr. Anne Houde, Professor of Biology at Lake Forest College

When it comes to lab opportunities in the Biology Department at Lake Forest College, there is hardly a shortage of available possibilities. The faculty's interests are very diverse, ranging from the complexities of molecular genetics and neuroscience to much broader topics such as ecology and evolution. Students are presented with a plentiful array of experiences to pick and choose from to match their own pursuits. One lab in particular, however, seems to be extremely proficient in producing successful, knowledgeable students.

Dr. Anne Houde came to Lake Forest College in 1992 as an assistant professor. She has since served as chair of the biology department and is now a full professor specializing in the fields of behavioral ecology and evolution, sexual behavior, and behavior and evolution of the guppy. Guppies are Dr. Houde's passion. "Basically, she's great," states Jillian Olejnik '09, who speaks positively when asked about her experiences in Dr. Houde's lab. She says that it offers a "really nice mix of genetic biology and animal behavior."

The general format of a lab at Lake Forest College consists of a specialized professor working on his or her own research, and anywhere between one and eight students working in groups or individually on a specific project. Students typically pick labs that correspond to their own interests.

"Research in Dr. Houde's lab usually starts with her offering an idea or helping you develop a good idea for a project—whether it's on a topic you've found reading research papers or on something she thinks is in need of some further study. She makes reading both current and old research on guppies a huge part of her lab. But even if she helps you to find something to study, I've always felt like it's been my work because she allows her students to be really independent."

Independence seems to be the key for producing immediate, superior results. "After she approved and critiqued my actual methods for my projects," Jillian says, "I did everything else on my own. She always checks in to make sure you're doing okay, but she allows her students to take charge." Allowing

students to venture forth into the scientific world on their own permits them to obtain experience that is critical for further research at higher levels of education.

It also seems to be a gateway to successful student publications. When asked about publications in Dr. Houde's lab, Jillian states that "she just makes it seem like it's a possibility. She strengthens your research through the whole process so that any results would be worthy of publication." Jillian's paper on Female Responsiveness and mate-choice copying in the guppy is currently in preparation for publication.

Participation in labs at Lake Forest College helps shape students into formidable opponents in their field. Dr. Houde's lab is an example of many, but the results are unmistakable. Jillian and her peers are well-equipped with the knowledge of how to succeed in the biological community, and Dr. Houde's lab will no doubt continue its trend of producing excellent biologists.

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