

Research and recognition propel student success

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A moment of courage opened up a world of opportunities for Casey Hopper in his second year as a Bachelor of Arts student at Thompson Rivers University (TRU).

It was 2020, classes had gone remote and Hopper had developed a passion for psychology, which would soon become his major. He felt motivated to expand his knowledge beyond the classroom and was encouraged to reach out to Faculty of Arts department chair Dr. Catherine Ortner to enquire about research possibilities.

"It was a big leap for me to reach out to faculty, but she was really open and kind," says Hopper. "She took me under her wing and even allowed me to present (online) at the Society of Affective Science conference — the biggest emotions science conference in North America."

He became a research apprentice, and the next semester was hired as Ortner's research assistant. In his third year, Hopper took another leap and began exploring research opportunities beyond the psychology department, leading to several roles within the Office of Student Research and Community Engagement. He spent a summer working on a team under Dr. Will Garrett-Petts, TRU professor and special advisor on strategic integrated planning, who was then the research director of a national research program exploring the cultural future of small cities. The team used cultural mapping to discover ways to engage more people in community research.

Hopper was able to take that research experience and use it as a springboard to future roles, including research ambassador, research coach, community-engaged research fellow and wellness ambassador.

"Casey Hopper took on a leadership role in terms of undergraduate research, co-leading the development of a report on the meeting place between community engagement and student research," says Garrett-Petts.

"As a research ambassador he has become a mentor for less experienced students; and as an emerging researcher, he has made outstanding contributions to our cultural mapping and community-engaged research initiatives at TRU. Casey embodies the spirit of student research engagement."

Ken Lepin awards recognize excellence



Casey Hopper graduated with a Bachelor of Arts in psychology (honours) with a minor in sociology.

Along his academic journey, Hopper was rewarded for his hard work and commitment to excellence with several achievement awards — in 2021, he received the TRU Foundation Undergraduate Achievement Scholarship and in 2023, the Magdalen Mak Award and the Stollery Charitable Foundation Bursary.

His crowning achievement came in April 2024, shortly after completing the last final exams of his undergrad when he was awarded a Ken Lepin Prize of Excellence in Bachelor of Arts — given to the top graduating BA student. The selection considers academic achievements, research accomplishments, leadership activities and active involvement in the university and/or general community.

"I was super amazed and very thankful when I found out I got the award. I feel really thankful that all the work I have put in is recognized," says Hopper, adding that receiving the award became even more impactful when he was able to meet his benefactor, Ken Lepin, in person.

"Meeting him inspired me to continue working hard and continuing on this journey."

Engaging other students

Passion and tenacity helped Hopper forge connections that led to research opportunities early in his scholastic career, but finding such opportunities is difficult for many first- and second-year students. When Hopper joined TRU's research rookie program as a co-facilitator, he helped remove some of the barriers that prevent students from engaging in research. The team asked students what was holding them back from exploring research opportunities and then gave them the tools to remove those obstacles, including teaching them how to reach out to a professor and how to connect with the research office.

"Peer support and mentorship is really important," says Hopper. "Participating in the rookie program makes people feel like they belong in research and really boosts their confidence."

Working as a wellness ambassador also gave Hopper plenty of opportunities to connect with and support fellow students, but over time, he began looking beyond campus for ways to make a difference. A book recommended to him by Ortner, his honours program supervisor, introduced Hopper to the often-disturbing world of social media content moderators and inspired the development of his thesis research topic. He was fascinated by the Sarah T. Roberts book, *Behind the Screen: Content Moderation in the Shadows of Social Media*, and felt compelled to delve further into the topic.

Hopper's research, which he conducted with fellow honours student Hayleigh Armstrong, looked at the overwhelming burnout, including post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety and depression, among content moderators and explored how they regulate their emotions.

Content moderators act as the gatekeepers for social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram and TikTok. They are tasked with finding, assessing and removing content that is deemed unlawful or inappropriate before it has a chance to harm online viewers.

"A lot of the time the content that they view is violent, discriminatory or pornographic in nature. It's really nasty stuff and they're the filters," says Hopper, adding that these people are often paid extremely low wages and receive little to no counselling or support to help them deal with the fallout from the work they do.

Based on that research, Hopper was again invited to present at a Society of Affective Science conference — this time in person.

"It was in Long Beach, California, and we presented with the biggest of the bigs from all over — like Harvard — which was pretty amazing. I was starstruck," he says.

Hopper's future plans include pursuing a thesis-based master's program and then a PhD, but for now, he's looking forward to soaking up the glory of convocation and getting used to his status as a fresh TRU alum.

Graduating with a BA in psychology (honours) with a minor in sociology, he's grateful for all the research work he was able to be part of and encourages current students to make the most of the substantial research opportunities available at TRU.

"Research puts knowledge into practice and allows students to use critical thinking to test their knowledge in a new, applied way," says Garrett-Petts. "TRU's goals challenge us to become Canada's leading university in research and scholarship based on community partnerships and undergraduate research training."

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