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Page 2

STAFF PROFILE



INTERVIEW WITH LAUREN STULGIS

SWANSON DIRECTOR OF PROJECT TEAMS *By Olivia M. Hall*

Meet Lauren Stulgis, Cornell Engineering's new Swanson Director of Student Project Teams. She moved to Ithaca from North Carolina this past August with her husband, two kids, and a pack of three rescue dogs. Stulgis will be overseeing the largest program of its kind in the U.S., boasting 29 engineering project teams which allow students from across the 14 Engineering majors and all seven Cornell colleges to work together with faculty and staff to solve complex problems with innovative approaches. She holds a B.S. in Earth and Ocean Sciences from Duke University and an M.S. in Marine Studies from the University of Delaware.

Welcome to Ithaca and Cornell, Lauren! Before you launched a career in student services, you completed a lot of work in oceanography and marine studies. How did you develop that interest?

My dad raised my sister and me in New Hampshire. We were always hiking and backpacking and camping,—something special I shared with my dad. I got certified as a Christmas present the year I turned 13 and did my first international and warm water diving when I was 14. I got to see the Great Barrier Reef—talk about being spoiled, though it took a year's worth of fundraising to make it happen. My science and marine oceanography perspective definitely stems from the early years diving and the remarkable trip I was able to take.

I also grew up as a very hands-on kid and young adult. My very first job was at our local hardware store, as soon as I was old enough to work. I did lots of home improvement projects and car and yard projects with my dad. He was the ultimate DIYer. So when it came time for college, I prioritized schools that had strong marine science programs and actual marine facilities like a special lab you could go to. I got into Duke and majored in Earth and Ocean Sciences.

Who and what were some important influences along the way?

I was a first-generation college student, low income, I didn't know anything from anything, but knew enough to find people who could give me good advice. At Duke I had a wonderful faculty mentor early on, Susan Lozier. Along with a couple of other female faculty members, she opened my eyes to lots of possibilities. Looking back now, that is what connected with me about moving, as I eventually did, into student affairs and higher ed management. The power of that strong mentorship I received, feeling like I had people who were helping me to navigate this and put my own story together.

What other lessons did you learn early in your career?

A semester I did at the Duke Marine Lab on this little island off the coast of North Carolina was defining for me. It showed me the power of experiential learning, because it's so hands on and immersive. I decided to go to grad school, found an amazing lab to join at the university of Delaware. After only a year I realized that was not what I wanted to do at all.

My wonderful adviser, Charles Epifanio, could tell I was really struggling. I had been accepted into a Ph.D. program, and he said to me, "If you're not absolutely sure this is what you want, I'll do my best to talk you out of it."

So I left there with my master's and took a position in environmental consulting for a big design-build-construct firm in Chicago, where my now-husband had gotten a job. It turned out not to be the right fit either—very corporate, not a lot of freedom or flexibility. But the number one thing I got out of this difficult atmosphere is that now I'm totally fearless in professional settings.

I reached out to friends from grad school and told them about my quarter-life crisis: "I don't know what to do next, I feel like everything I've tried has been a no, it's been a big waste." My dear friend Brandon said: "You've been figuring out what you don't want to do, so now you don't have to do it anymore." The number of students I've said that to since that point is too large to count.

How did you end up transitioning into student services?

Chuck Epifanio, also a Duke alumnus, encouraged me to apply for this jack-of-all-trades job—recruiting, enrollment, academic advising, course scheduling, some res life—at the Duke Marine Lab, where I'd spent a semester myself. It seemed like a good way to try out this field. I was there for six and a half years, both my kids were born there. I really worked hard to tool myself up, because I didn't have a student affairs or higher ed administration background. I asked a ton of questions, read a lot, connected with wonderful colleagues at Duke and so many other schools, and decided I actually really love helping students

put their own pieces of the puzzle together. Plus organizational and leadership development—that's my jam.

In 2013 I got a position at the engineering school on Duke's main campus, working with project teams, but also big events, and as the admissions liaison, I got into the facilities side of things.

What excited you about the position you now have at Cornell?

I had just taken a new position at Duke in entrepreneurship programming when I heard about this job, so the timing wasn't ideal, but I just couldn't get it out of my head. It was everything I loved doing most, but taking it up in scale and scope at a school like Cornell. And I love my engineering students! They're the most creative people I've ever met.

The student project teams program here is also really unique in being so organized, structured, integrated into the curriculum, and clearly valued by the College and School. Just the amount of resources that have been dedicated to it in terms of manpower, physical space, finances. I knew I'd have the support to take this from an amazing program up another level to something world-class that peer institutions will point to as an example.

What is interesting to know about the project teams?

I've started meeting with all 29 teams to learn about them in more detail. There is such a wide range and variety. There are the mechanically inclined and competition-based teams such as Baja, Cornell Racing, and CUAUV; teams on the biological or chemical side of things that maybe look a little more like research, such as iGEM and the ChemE Car; and social impact teams like Engineers in Action and Engineers Without Borders.

In total, more than 1100 students participate. That's incredible, a huge impact if you have approximately one third of the undergraduate student body having this experience.

What does your job as director of student teams encompass and how do you see your role?

I'm charged with oversight of the program as a whole, including everything from the finances, fundraising, and philanthropy, to helping the students understand how to prepare a budget and proposal, manage that money and track it all. There's also a huge safety oversight aspect, including travel safety, build and chemical safety, data privacy and access considerations.

And really, my role here is to be an advocate for students. They are so passionate and invested in what they are working on. I want to be that voice at the college and university levels, talking about what they're doing, asking for the things they need, helping them troubleshoot when difficult things come up. I've told all of them that they might not always like the answer I have for them, but I'll always be honest and transparent. I want to set them up for success, which doesn't necessarily mean winning the competition—which is great—but getting the most out of the process from a growth and development perspective, ensuring that each student has the best possible experience from an educational standpoint.

You've called yourself an experiential education evangelist. What do you mean by that?

I don't really like the term "evangelist," but I do like a good alliteration. In projects, students are doing real things, but with a safety net. They can experiment in a relatively low-risk environment, but there are real consequences to the decisions they're making. And then if you reflect on that and talk about it and synthesize it, that's where the magic happens.

I'm never going to argue that you don't have to take a traditional class on thermodynamics. But when you get to a point when you are making sometimes difficult decisions about tangible things that exist out in the world beyond a theoretical classroom exercise or controlled lab experiment, that is so powerful.



Cornell Rocketry Team 2019

What vision do you have for the future of the project teams?

I've been meeting with a whole host of people who are excited to talk about what's possible, what decisions we can make intentionally to make this even better. For example, there's a focus within the college to articulate professional skills students need to develop next to their technical skills. I'll oversee a new course starting next year for team leaders focused on leadership development. I think that will pull in partners from across campus to make sure these students are getting specific training and intentional discussions woven into their experience serving as leaders on these project teams.

I have only been here a short time, but I am so impressed with what I've seen and learned so far. There is such deep support and belief in the value of the student project teams, and everyone has been open and willing to engage as I get settled into this new role. And of course we have amazing students, so that has been the best part. Starting a new job is always overwhelming, but I am so energized and excited to dive in and take this program to the next level.