



2025-26

LEVINE SCHOLARS PROGRAM

Annual Report



ETHICAL LEADERSHIP • COMMITMENT TO COMMUNITY SERVICE • INTELLECTUAL CURIOSITY

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◀ JULY 6-AUGUST 2

Study Abroad in Spain

◀ AUGUST 10

New Scholar Orientation

◀ AUGUST 16

Charlotte Knights Baseball Game

◀ SEPTEMBER 16

NEW EVENT!

Community Partners Reception

Recognizing the lasting impact of our community collaborations and the role they play in shaping our scholars as leaders and humanitarians, our nonprofit partners were invited to the The Dubois Center at UNC Charlotte Center City to celebrate the many long-lasting contributions made in the Charlotte community.

◀ OCTOBER 3-4

NEW EVENT!

Alumni in Residence

Brandon L. Nixon '16, a Brand Strategist at Google, was honored as the very first Alumnus in Residence for the Levine Scholars Program. Through a two-day programming series, Brandon offered unique mentorship opportunities to our current scholars, including a book club meeting, a panel with two other Levine alum, an early morning run across campus and more. Recognizing the importance of partnerships across campus, Brandon utilized his network to invite three additional successful Charlotte alum working in creative fields to participate in a panel discussion open to all students, faculty and staff on campus.

◀ NOVEMBER 8

Playhouse Build

◀ NOVEMBER 13

Chancellor's Reception

◀ FEBRUARY 22-23

Finalist Program

◀ MARCH 7-12

Alternative Spring Break

◀ MARCH 16

Levine Connect Launch

◀ MAY 1

New Class Named

◀ MAY 8-9

Class of 2026 Graduates

From OUR DIRECTOR



As I write, we have just welcomed the incoming Levine Scholars Program Class of 2030 and celebrated the remarkable achievements of the Class of 2026. Among these new LSP alumni are UNC Charlotte's first Marshall Scholarship national finalist, a Campus Compact Newman Civic Fellow, the 2026 Chancellor's Bonnie E. Cone Leadership Award recipient, a Commencement Speaker for the College of Health and Human Services, the president of UNC Charlotte's chapter of the National Society of Black Engineers, multiple Niner Guides and a record number of scholars who translated pre-professional internships into full-time offers.

This year also marked the launch of two new alumni and community-focused initiatives. In October, LSP welcomed Brandon Nixon '16 as the program's inaugural Alumni in Residence. Over two days, Brandon engaged current scholars and local alumni through events focused on community building, professional development and navigating the

creative industry. In September, LSP hosted its first Community Partners Reception at the DuBois Center at UNC Charlotte Center City, where scholars shared posters highlighting internships, research and civic engagement partnerships with Charlotte-area nonprofits. Both initiatives were well received and are expected to continue every two to three years.

While 2025-2026 brought many firsts and notable achievements to the Levine Scholars Program, this year's Annual Report is shaped by a university-wide milestone: UNC Charlotte's official recognition as a Carnegie Classified Research 1 Institution of Higher Education. R1 status affirms the range, depth and impact of research taking place across campus. For Levine Scholars, it also confirms what they already know: Charlotte is a top-tier research institution where exceptional faculty are deeply committed to student-centered learning and mentorship.

Levine Scholars are contributing to this research mission in meaningful ways. They learn from national and international experts, work alongside doctoral students, postdoctoral researchers and faculty, and represent research teams at scholarly convenings. They also help disseminate new knowledge through editorial leadership, conference presentations and, in some cases, co-authored manuscripts and proceedings. We are proud that Levine Scholars are key contributors to Charlotte's R1 mission.

In the pages that follow, we highlight research accomplishments and stories from the past year that celebrate UNC Charlotte's R1 status and LSP's programmatic support of that achievement. This report also features LSP's first Faculty Associate Director, Dr. Stephanie Norander, whose role includes supporting scholars' professional development and research-related endeavors. LSP is grateful to The Leon Levine Foundation and the University for supporting the transition of the former Faculty Fellow role into this full-time position. Having two full-time, research-active faculty on LSP's staff strengthens the program's connection to Charlotte's R1 mission, provides scholars with in-house research mentorship and contributes to LSP's distinctiveness among peer merit programs.

As always, we strive to set the Levine Scholars Program apart as one defined by excellence and impact. I trust that this year's annual report demonstrates we are meeting that goal in the realm of research.

Heather Smith, Ph.D.
Faculty Director



Contributing to **CHARLOTTE'S R1 MISSION**

The Levine Scholars Program provides opportunities for scholars interested in research, regardless of discipline. Through facilitating the LSP Research Mentoring Initiative (LSPRMI), the program integrates research opportunities into LSP summer experiences and cultivates strong relationships with UNC Charlotte research partners. As a high-impact learning practice, undergraduate research is core to the university's R1 mission and to LSP's core component of intellectual curiosity.

LSPRMI

LSPRMI, initiated in 2017 by Dr. Heather Smith in her role as Faculty Fellow, facilitates long-term mentoring relationships between Levine Scholars and research mentors, both on campus and in the Charlotte community at large. On average, between 8 and 12 scholars participate in LSPRMI each year, conducting in-depth research on a range of social issues and scientific questions.

FALL 2025

Noor Chima, Irene Quinones-Olmeda and **Akshara Sisodiya** worked with Dr. Martin Shuster, Professor of Philosophy and the Isaac Swift Distinguished Professor, on an interdisciplinary team analyzing the political economy of policing.

Madison File and **Yazi Bulluck**, under the mentorship of Dr. Victoria Scott, Associate Professor of Health Psychology, examined the improvement of youth access to mental health services through the federally funded Youth Access to Psychiatry Program (YAP-P).

Naami Abbey and **Rishita Rokariya** train with Dr. Kiril Afonin, Professor of Chemistry, on biomedical applications of Nucleic Acid Nanoparticles for cancer and infectious diseases.

Several other scholars also continued LSPRMI research assistantships this year with longstanding mentors.

Rachel Alexander (Dr. Daniel Janies, Bioinformatics and Genomics), **Eden Gibson** (Andrea Price, Atrium Health Family Medicine Research), and **Rayney Maxwell** (Dr. Sandra Clinton, Earth, Environmental and Geographical Science) all joined their respective projects in their freshman year.

With such strong and sustained mentorship, scholars are well-positioned to launch independent research, join more advanced projects and apply to graduate school and other research-related post-graduate opportunities.



STUDY ABROAD

Many students participate in the annual Levine-led summer Study Abroad Course to fulfill their international experience requirement. The global opportunity culminates in an independent research project that allows students to design and propose their own academic study. Scholars bring their unique academic and professional perspectives to engage in culturally situated academic inquiry. In summer 2025, 15 scholars, under the guidance of Drs. Smith and Norander and faculty at the University of Cantabria, Spain, presented their Climate Change research, addressing a wide range of significant challenges. For example:

Computer science major **Rohan Salwekar** used a hybrid machine learning model on historical sea level data to predict near-future changes in northern Spain.

Tori Teague applied her communication studies major to analyzing the city of Santander's Climate Change Adaptation Plan, proposing strategies for stronger public engagement.

Engineering major **Jairus Cook** proposed methods for using renewable energy to create more sustainable manufacturing processes.

PRE-PROFESSIONAL SUMMER EXPERIENCE

Another way that LSP centers student research opportunities is through the pre-professional summer experience. For students pursuing graduate studies or research-related careers, an invaluable option is to pursue an advanced research opportunity during their pre-professional summer.

In the summer of 2025, **Abby Cameron** was selected for a highly competitive Research Experience for Undergraduates (REU) at UNC Charlotte, a paid summer research program funded by the National Science Foundation. Through this advanced research mentorship, Abby conducted the first spatiotemporal study of severe weather reports in the Charlotte Metro area.

This summer, three Levines will embark on advanced research pre-professional experiences. **Natalie Doerfler** will spend her summer as a research assistant at the Shannon Point Research Center and the Padilla Bay Reserve Research Lab. By collecting samples in the field, conducting site monitoring and learning more about the state of Washington's coastal ecosystems, Natalie will contribute to the Eelgrass Restoration Project and the Invasive European Green Crab Research Project. **Shreyas Raychaudhuri** will join the Stanford Cardiovascular Institute Summer Research Program as a National Institutes of Health Undergraduate Student Scholar. He will take part in comprehensive training in cardiovascular science and career development. **Arnav Sareen** will complete his pre-professional internship at the University of Waterloo in Canada as a recipient of the prestigious Fulbright Canada-Mitacs Globalink Internship. Arnav will join a team of researchers studying machine learning and artificial intelligence.

RESEARCH DISSEMINATION *and* SCHOLARLY IMPACT



The Levine Scholars Program continues to prepare students as rigorous researchers, effective communicators and emerging leaders. In 2025-2026, Levine Scholars shared their work through state and national symposia, specialized conferences, publications, public media and campus research opportunities.

STATE AND NATIONAL RESEARCH PRESENTATIONS

Levine Scholars shared their work at major research venues, including the State of North Carolina Undergraduate Research and Creativity Symposium and the National Conference on Undergraduate Research. Four Scholars presented at SNURCS, where Rachel Alexander received the George Bartholmus Undergraduate Research Award for her geospatial analysis of H5N1 cross-species transmission. Eleven Scholars presented at NCUR on topics ranging from PFAS in drinking water to socioeconomic conditions in Latin America.

SPECIALIZED CONFERENCES AND PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

Scholars also presented at specialized conferences, including the Ecological Community Psychology Conference and a Georgetown University convening on affective polarization among young people. Rachel Alexander further expanded the program's research visibility through a peer-reviewed publication in Computational and Structural Biotechnology Journal and participation in a Queen City News panel on AI in Carolina schools.

CAMPUS RESEARCH LEADERSHIP

Campus partnerships, including with the Office of Undergraduate Research, strengthen the program's research culture. In 2025-2026, 13 Levine Scholars presented at OUR-sponsored symposia and conferences, six participated in OUR Scholars positions, and two received inaugural Scholarly Undergraduate Research Grants: Annabelle Hill for field work in Mexico related to deportation policy and governance in Latin America, and Rayney Maxwell for research on heavy metal impact on the freshwater clam species *Corbicula fluminea*.



UNDERGRADUATE RESEARCH PUBLICATION

Levine Scholars also hold several leadership roles with ETHEL Undergraduate Research Journal, UNC Charlotte's undergraduate research publication, which showcases student work across disciplines through written publications and podcasts.

Together, these accomplishments reflect the Levine Scholars Program's commitment to helping students advance meaningful research and share their work with audiences within and beyond UNC Charlotte.



LSP RESEARCH ACTIVE FACULTY

Dr. Stephanie Norander

I joined the Levine Scholars Program in 2024 as the inaugural Faculty Associate Director. This year, I was most proud to lead the scholars' research engagements, helping them cultivate strong mentoring relationships and preparing them for and traveling with them to the annual SNURCS and NCUR conferences. The best part of my work is seeing a student grow in skills and confidence as they participate in increasingly complex research projects and present their work to diverse audiences.

Before I joined the Levine Scholars Program, I was the Executive Director of the university's Communication Across the Curriculum program. I led efforts to enhance writing and speaking instruction for all majors, working with Deans and Department Chairs to implement high impact, evidence-based pedagogies in undergraduate education. I also hold the position of Full Professor in Communication Studies and am an award winning Organizational Communication researcher and educator. This unique background helps me approach my work with Levine Scholars with a robust mix of academic and professional experience. I can help scholars navigate academic research culture while attuning them to how such work strengthens their professional communication and development.

In my own research, I am actively involved in the Civic Engagement Research Collaborative interdisciplinary research team at UNC Charlotte. Together with Education, Political Science and Sociology colleagues, I explore ways to develop civic empathy, and thus conditions for civic engagement and discourse, in the education sector. I enjoy applying insights from this work in the Levine Scholars Professional Seminar classroom. Additionally, I have the opportunity to invite interested scholars to contribute to this research by participating in data collection, analysis and presentation.

Outside of work, you can find me enjoying the outdoors, reading for entertainment, and spending time with my family and dog. A proud 49er, I joined UNC Charlotte in 2015 and consider it a great opportunity to work with a growing, innovative institution and phenomenal students. I look forward to this next year of supporting Levine Scholars in their educational journey!

Two Sisters, Two Research Paths, **ONE SHARED COMMITMENT TO IMPACT**

As sisters and former Levine Scholars at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, alumnae Allison File '23 and Madison File '26 pursued distinct academic and research paths while sharing a common commitment to creating meaningful impact through their work. Allison focused on mechanical engineering and renewable ocean energy systems, while Madison pursued chemistry and pre-med studies centered on healthcare, cancer research and student wellness initiatives. Both women credit the Levine Scholars Program's emphasis on leadership, service and community engagement with shaping their desire to use research in service of others.



Allison is currently a first-year mechanical engineering PhD student and National Science Foundation Graduate Research Fellow at North Carolina State University, where she is working on the development of an adaptive wave energy converter (WEC) that harvests energy from ocean waves and adjusts in real time to changing sea states. Unlike conventional wave energy devices that perform efficiently only under limited conditions, this adaptive design aims to maintain more consistent performance across a wide range of ocean environments, improving reliability, overall energy production and the commercial viability of wave energy technologies. Marine renewable energy technologies have broad applications, including powering oceanographic sensors and data buoys, supporting aquaculture and maritime infrastructure and serving remote coastal communities.

Allison was first introduced to marine energy research during her time at UNC Charlotte while working with Dr. Wesley Williams in the Water Bros research group as part of the U.S. Department of Energy Waves to Water Competition. That project focused on designing a modular wave-powered desalination device intended for emergency response in coastal communities. Following graduation, she completed a post-baccalaureate research position at the National Laboratory of the Rockies, where she contributed to computational modeling tools for wave energy converter systems. These experiences ultimately motivated her to pursue a PhD focused on advancing marine renewable energy technologies.

Over the past year, Allison and her team have designed, fabricated and tested a prototype capable of generating electrical power from wave motion. The device was first evaluated in a laboratory wave tank and later deployed in open water in Croatan Sound, North Carolina. During testing, the system demonstrated real-time operation, wireless monitoring, electrical power generation and adaptive control in an ocean environment, validating the feasibility of the approach under changing wave conditions.





Madison's research reflects a different dimension of impact, centered on community health, youth well-being and access to care. Her work through Dr. Scott's Collective Wellness Lab under the Youth Access to Psychiatry Program, which contributed to her selection as a Newman Civic Fellow, highlighted the importance of community-centered research and its role in improving access to care.

A major component of the lab's work involved conducting needs assessments focused on school-based health centers. These assessments identify the strengths, challenges and unmet needs within schools by gathering input from students, educators, families and stakeholders. This process helps researchers understand barriers to accessing adequate mental and physical health support and informs improvements in services and resource allocation. Through this work, Madison saw how research can directly contribute to creating more equitable and supportive environments for youth.

Working collaboratively within the lab also strengthened Madison's ability to communicate findings across diverse audiences. The lab emphasizes collective care and shared responsibility, prioritizing the lived experiences of the communities it serves and ensuring that community voices are reflected throughout the research process. This experience broadened her perspective on the role of psychology and public health in addressing systemic barriers to care.

Madison's experience demonstrated that impactful research requires both analytical rigor and meaningful community engagement. It reinforced the importance of interdisciplinary collaboration in addressing complex social challenges and highlighted how research can be used to inform policy, improve services, and strengthen community support systems. For students interested in research, she encourages pursuing opportunities aligned with their passions, as meaningful research is rooted in curiosity, collaboration, and the desire to create positive social change.



WHAT AM I DOING?!?

Arnav Sareen

When choosing a career path before college, most students ask what they enjoy, what skills they have and what kind of future they want. For me, the criteria were simpler: I needed a career where looking things up on the job was acceptable, and where my mistakes would not endanger my life or anyone else's. Consequently, my mother's dreams of me entering the medical field were swiftly eradicated.

Computer science fit that requirement. Its constant innovation demands constant learning; and experimentation is fundamental to the field. Throughout my studies, I have found that research is the best incubator for that learning and tinkering process. For undergraduates, research can be intimidating; it asks students near the beginning of their academic journey to think beyond what they know and place their work before those with far more experience. However, with the right guidance, support and topic fit, research can quickly become one of the most intellectually stimulating and rewarding parts of an undergraduate career. It may not start that way—my journey certainly didn't—but with the guidance of brilliant professors at Charlotte, the support of the Levine Scholars Program and quite a bit of fortune, research has become a core part of my academic career and one I hope to continue pursuing for years to come.

Over the past few years, I have explored artificial intelligence technologies for high-performance computing systems, or by the much cooler moniker, supercomputers. These systems power much of modern science, including biological simulations, particle physics and climate modeling. Because of their scale, improving them is complex, requiring researchers to explore, tweak and analyze countless possibilities. The goal of my field is to build automated solutions that can complete that process in an accessible and accurate manner.

When I first began, my head felt paralyzing. Developing an expertise in AI, understanding HPC hardware and figuring out how to merge the two yielded an intimidating mountain of literature. I felt like I would never catch up. However, Professor Dong Dai knew how to manage the anxiety of young researchers with the reassurance of incremental progress. Through his mentorship, I became invigorated by the learning process—not inundated—and discovered what it was like to collaborate with accomplished scientists, communicate my findings effectively and push the frontiers of science.

Those early moments of anxiety eventually transformed into tangible progress. Over the past three years, I have co-authored two papers, presented our findings at conferences across the country and received the Barry M. Goldwater Scholarship, the preeminent national honor for undergraduate STEM researchers in the United States.

As part of my Goldwater application, I also reflected on my passion for disseminating knowledge through teaching. Service and volunteerism are key components of the Levine Scholars Program, and giving back through education has become one of my greatest joys and motivators. This summer, I will continue exploring that passion through a research internship at the University of Waterloo via the Fulbright Canada MITACS Globalink program, where I will study strategies for improving student persistence and outcomes in AI courses. Educational research represents a new frontier in my academic arc, and it will undoubtedly come with its own steep learning curve. However, I have finally realized that the hallmark of any true research experience is starting out with absolutely no idea what you are doing—and then slowly working to figure it out.

Levine Class of 2030

SCHOLAR PROFILE

In keeping with the momentum of prior cycles, recruitment efforts for the 2025 - 2026 season focused on expanding the reach and awareness of LSP. Zack Newsome, Associate Director for Recruitment and Operations, has coordinated 77 recruitment-related events—including 43 out of state site visits—to meet with school counselors and college advisors. Through providing resources and information, these consistent efforts have led to a higher level of recognition of the prestige and brand of LSP on a national level. This is evident in the addition of two new states represented by the class of 2030: Arkansas and Vermont. Two new North Carolina counties have also been added to the map: Bladen and Person.

In the fall, the program will welcome 22 exceptional young leaders to UNC Charlotte as first-year Levine Scholars. As Chancellor Sharon L. Gaber said, "We are expecting great things from the Levine Class of 2030 in the future."

3000

NOMINATIONS

1260

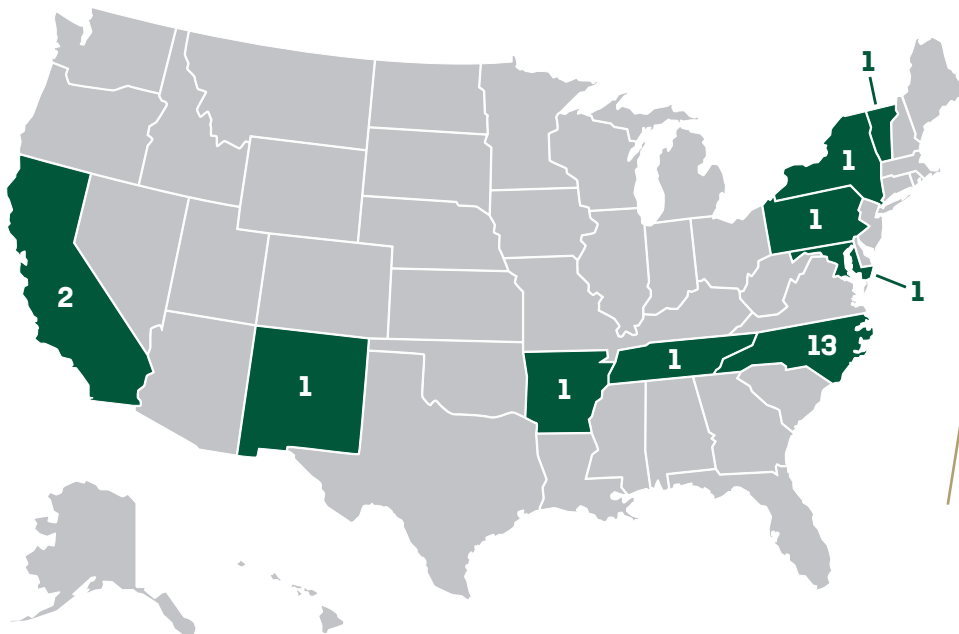
APPLICATIONS

22

SELECTED

13 IN STATE • 9 OUT OF STATE

13 FEMALE • 9 MALE



4.4

AVG. WEIGHTED GPA

3.8

AVG. UNWEIGHTED GPA

ACADEMIC COLLEGES REPRESENTED:

8 CHESS • 4 BCOB • 4 CCOE • 3 CHHS • 3 KCOS

Meet the **LSP TEAM**



Heather Smith, Ph.D.
Faculty Director



Stephanie Norander, Ph.D.
Faculty Associate Director



Zack Newsome '03
*Associate Director for
Recruitment and Operations*



Tiffany Kelley, Ed.D. '25
*Coordinator of Scholar Support
and Initiatives*



Misty Morin '19
*Alumni Engagement and
Communications Specialist*



Tonderai Mushipe '12, '16
University Program Associate



Carlette Smith
Business Services Coordinator