CAREER PATHWAYS
in Public Health Laboratory Science

Meet the Intern

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Kailey Underwood

Host Laboratory: Wisconsin State Laboratory of Hygiene

Degree of Study: Forensic Chemistry

Graduation: May 2027

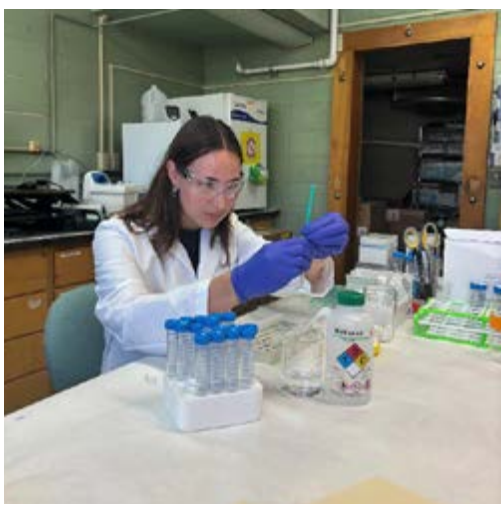
School: University of Wisconsin - Platteville

Tell us about your educational background?
I am currently a senior at University of Wisconsin-Platteville, and my current major is forensic chemistry with a DNA emphasis, as well as a minor in forensic Investigation.

What brought you into laboratory science?
I decided to major in the chemistry field because it has always been something I was "good" at, and I have enjoyed the math and theory behind it. I initially had a forensic investigation degree, which has always been my passion. When I learned I could combine it with a more challenging degree, I switched over to my current degree. Chemistry can be hard, but it is also so rewarding when it is applied to areas that help with public health and environmental issues.

How did you hear about the Public Health Laboratory Internship Program?
I got very lucky when I found the Public Health Laboratory Internship Program website while I was searching for internships for the summer. So, I found it with a basic Google search.

How did this internship match or exceed your expectations?
It absolutely exceeded my expectations. I was nervous walking into it because this would be my first experience in a professional laboratory. But I was welcomed with open arms by my coworkers and my mentor. They guided me just enough to get a grasp on how to effectively do the work that is involved in Per- and Polyflouroalkyl Substances (PFAS) research, but also trusted me soon enough to work independently and at my own pace. I was able to get into the rhythm of things quickly, and there was hardly a time when I was left with nothing to do, which I enjoyed. Overall, I have learned so many important skills that I feel can be applied to any laboratory that I apply for in the future.



Tell us what you learned from your mentor.
I learned a lot about the managerial and administrative side of working in a science field. Through college and my previous jobs, I only really got to see the laboratory and procedural part of science work. There is so much communication and planning that goes into receiving samples, solving problems, and basically being the middleman for the PFAS operation. So, I have grown a great appreciation for seeing how my mentor does her job and how much time and effort goes into that portion of the Wisconsin State Laboratory of Hygiene.

Tell us about your project assignments/laboratory roles.
This summer I was working in the PFAS Research Center. My task was to help the other employees catch up on sample processing of precipitation samples that were collected from various sites across the US. I did this by doing login, batching, filtering, solid-phase extractions, and integration of the data that was analyzed using the Liquid Chromatography-Tandem Mass Spectrometry instrumentation.

How has your internship experience inspired you?
The PFAS Research Center at the Henry Mall location is all run by women. That in itself is inspiring to me. I am a member of the Women in STEM program at my school, and it has been emphasized how important that community is within our society. These women work so hard every day and are able to problem-solve and get through tough battles when it comes to the constantly changing issues that science brings. There is a stigma that comes with women working in STEM-related fields that I have personally dealt with myself, so it is amazing to see so many people prove those who doubt them wrong.

What do you believe the next step will be in your career path?
I believe once I graduate, I would like to get right into the career field. I am still unsure exactly what job I would want to put my time into, since there are so many different paths that a chemistry degree can take you. I would love to work in either forensic toxicology or some sort of environmental chemistry lab in the future.

How would you describe the internship to other students?
The APHL Internship is a great way to really force yourself to get into the work that a professional lab does. It ultimately will help you to become familiar with some of the basic skills that can be applied to any field that you decide to be a part of. This internship also allows for independent growth and communication to be built in a professional manner. Making mistakes and stumbling through difficult tasks is one of the only ways you will be able to learn, grow, and figure out the best next steps for your future goals.

Aside from the laboratory and the science, did you gain any other beneficial life experiences?
I realized through this internship that it is so important to work in an environment that you love. That goes with loving the work that you do, having a great community to spend your time with, and being able to have a space in which your best work can be done. I have heard countless stories about how a toxic work environment can cause all kinds of problems, so it is important to pick a place where your skills will only blossom, and not wilt.