Department Spotlight: Cassity Haverkamp

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Cassity Haverkamp, MEd, is a PhD student in the School Psychology Program at Utah State University. After completing her undergraduate degree at Weber State, a faculty member and an advisor both recommended she continue her education at USU. She originally applied and was accepted into the School Psychology Program to receive an EdS, and she is now pursuing a PhD.

Haverkamp is passionate about her research and excited to study under-researched populations and areas. Her research focuses on two key areas. First, Haverkamp is studying technology-based intervention for children with Autism and other neurodevelopmental disorders. She sees technology- and app-based intervention as a convenient and efficient way to support the children without requiring much effort on the part of parents and educators. Second, Haverkamp researches cultural and linguistic diversity between communities and disabled populations. She hopes to broaden the knowledge base surrounding how the understanding of intellectual disabilities may vary depending on the culture of a community.

Why did you decide to pursue a graduate degree in school psychology?

When I was an undergraduate, I worked with an after school program. We got to do 70 hours of volunteer work at Youth Impact. The program supports racially and ethnically diverse youth as well as low socioeconomic students. It gives the students a place to go after school so they are less likely to get into trouble or do drugs. The students can play and hang out, but we also had some social skills groups. We had a group for younger kids, and then a goal-setting group for adolescents. It was a helpful thing in deciding this was the path I wanted to take.

For school psychology students, I think it is difficult to decide if you want to be a practitioner in schools or whether you want to get a PhD. I struggled with it. I was not sure whether I really wanted to pursue a PhD program or whether I wanted to be done after two years, continue into an internship, and have a job. A PhD leaves your options more open, but you probably are not going to be a practitioner. You will probably do more clinical work, perhaps in a hospital, or work in academia or work in a private research setting.

Tell us about your research.

I am interested in Autism and neurodevelopmental disorders, such as ADHD and intellectual disabilities. My specific area of interest is about using technology for intervention specifically in schools and for kids with developmental disabilities. One of my projects focused on academics, which is an under-researched area with these populations. What services are the individuals getting? Where do they struggle in academics? How do we use technology to help bolster those areas? My thesis focuses on behavioral aspects. I review emotions and emotion understanding in kids with Autism and using an app for that.

Another area I am interested in is cultural and linguistic diversity within disabled populations. Kandice Benallie, another PhD student in the school psychology program, and I have been working on a project researching how Native American populations perceive neurodevelopmental disabilities. We have been putting together a project looking at the parent’s understanding of these disabilities. We also look at the understanding of the education professionals that work within the Native American community. Our research questions what the cultural understanding of the community is and how that understanding pertains to their state requirements.

What is the most important thing you have learned so far?

It is important not to compare yourself to others. You have to believe that what you are working on is actually important and that you are making progress. I think it is good to have comradery within your program and cohort. Graduate school is inherently competitive in many ways,
but it is also critical to recognize that togetherness and closeness are important.

**What advice do you have for other students in the psychology department?**

First, graduate school is a lot of work, so it is easy to burn out. My advice would be: take time for self-care, and get to know your cohort and rely on them for your emotional needs.

Second, the first semester I had a feeling that I was not as smart as everyone else in the room. That happens to every person. It is okay to feel that, but it is probably not true. Everyone has their own areas of expertise and knowledge bases, but you also have something to offer the class. You do not have to stay quiet because you feel that you do not have anything to offer. There is always something to offer.

**Share your best college memory.**

Two peers in my EdS cohort were leaving to go to an internship. Right before the end of the semester, we had a class where a faculty member hosted a huge party. She had a photo booth where we could take photos with mustaches and hats. She put together gift bags for everyone in the class. She put up streamers and had balloons. It was a good time and a special way to say good luck and farewell to these people I was really close to.