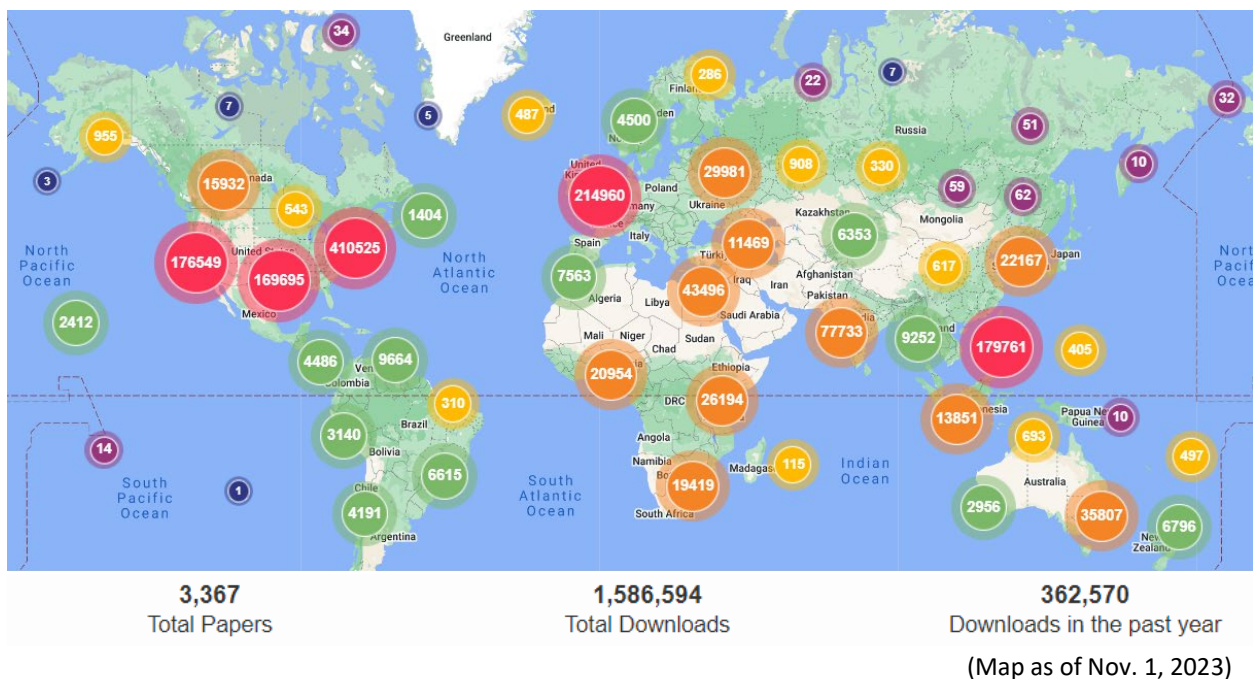


Research: Central to Burnett Honors Scholars' Achievements

By: Padmini Coopamah Waldron

In January 2022, the Honors Undergraduate Thesis (HUT) program, administered by the Office of Honors Research (OHR), reached a milestone: one million downloadsⁱ from UCF's collection of Honors undergraduate theses, housed in the John C. Hitt Library's online repository, the Showcase of Text, Archives, Research & Scholarship (STARS). The thesis collection was moved online in 2015 and quickly began to garner online views and downloads worldwide. In fact, the most downloaded item (among all publications, theses, and dissertations) in UCF collections is an honors undergraduate thesis: "*The Effect of Social Media on the Mental Health of Young Adults.*"

Map showing number and location of downloads of UCF Honors Undergraduate Theses



The Burnett Honors College's research efforts have experienced several achievements in recent years. In keeping with the emphasis on undergraduate research in both UCF's Strategic Plan, *Unleashing Potential*, and the State University System's [2025 Strategic Plan](#), the HUT program has raised both enrollment and retention, resulting in an overall increase in program participation from around 350 to approximately 500 annually in the past three years.

Additionally, program offerings have expanded: from the interdisciplinary thesis track, now offered in addition to the traditional honors in the major track, to the annual virtual Research Match Week, which allows Honors students and faculty across campus to connect for research opportunities, to an annual faculty panel discussion geared toward pre-medical/ pre-health

students to consider alternative research opportunities to those in their majors- Burnett Honors Scholars have a range of opportunities to engage in research.

New Research Initiative: FIO-SUS Honors Interdisciplinary Course

“Honoring the Ocean,” a new interdisciplinary, multimodal, experiential course focused on sustainability and the ocean, was developed by the Florida Institute of Oceanography (FIO) and honors partners at five Florida state universities and was piloted in spring 2023. The course brought together faculty from the arts and humanities, researchers, and honors students from the five institutions to explore the relationship between humans and the ocean during several virtual discussions, which then culminated in a hands-on, immersive experience aboard an FIO research vessel where students witness first-hand the critical issues facing Florida’s coastline and waters. At the end of the experience, students produced a research or creative project delving into the theme of sustainability and the sea.

Anna Voyatzoglou '22 shared her experience as a program participant: *“I’ve always lived in Florida, but I’ve never truly had the educational opportunity to immerse myself in marine research or in understanding how we can sustain the waters that surround our state. Through this class, I’ve... learned so much about the ocean — through the fields of writing, politics, art, and journalism.”*

Another Fruitful Year for Prestigious Awards

The impact of research participation is apparent in the high proportion of UCF award-winners who are undergraduate researchers. Burnett Honors Scholars continue to shine by winning multiple prestigious awards, which in 2023 totaled more than \$610,000. Completion of an Honors undergraduate thesis (HUT) is a strong driver and predictor of success in attaining these honors.

- Two of three 2022 recipients of the Goldwater Scholarship belong to the Burnett Honors College and completed a thesis. [UCF ranked in the top 20 institutions in the country for the number of recipients of this prominent undergraduate STEM award, tying with Ivy League institutions such as Yale University, Harvard University, Cornell University, and Brown University.]
- Two of the three UCF winners of the Astronaut Scholarship are Burnett Honors Scholars.
- Four of UCF’s ten NSF Graduate Research Fellowship recipients are BHC Scholars, with three of them being participants in the HUT program.
- The second-ever UCF recipient of the Udall Undergraduate Scholarship in 2023 is a HUT Scholar.
- Five out of the ten UCF students who won a Fulbright Student Grant were BHC Scholars, and four wrote a thesis. [UCF was also recognized as a Fulbright HSI Leader for 2022 and 2023, a recognition awarded to fewer than 50 HSI-designated colleges/universities in the country that show noteworthy engagement with the Fulbright Program.]

Rhodes Scholar Helps Fellow Knights Follow in His Footsteps

Building on the infrastructure built by and the accomplishments of OPA staff in previous years, BHC Faculty Fellow Tyler Fisher '02 '03, UCF's first Rhodes Scholar, has been preparing students for U.K. scholarships such as Rhodes, Gates Cambridge, and Marshall. Under his tutelage, several students have reached the final stages of these prestigious awards.

- **Christopher Clifford '21, a Burnett Honors Scholar, earned the Gates Cambridge Scholarship**, one of the most competitive and prestigious international scholarships.ⁱⁱ As a freshman, Clifford obtained a Burnett Research Scholars grant from the Office of Honors Research and engaged in extensive research throughout his undergraduate career. In 2019, he was awarded a highly selective Astronaut scholarship.
- **Devin Burris '22, was UCF's first finalist for the Marshall Scholarship.** Burris's deep and broad research experience provided her with excellent credentials for her Marshall Scholarship application. In addition to on-campus research in Dr. Charissa de Bekker's biology lab, she spent two summers participating in an NSF Research Experience for Undergraduates (REU) at Washington University in St. Louis, Missouri. A Goldwater Scholarship in 2021 supported research that would turn into her honors thesis. Burris is now pursuing a Ph.D. in cellular and molecular biology at the University of Pennsylvania.
- **In 2023, Justin Davis, a BHC Scholar in the HUT program, was named a semifinalist for the George J. Mitchell Scholarship.** Chosen out of 350 applicants, Justin has reached further than any UCF student has gone in this competition. His honors thesis, written under the mentorship of Dr. William Self, Professor in the Burnett School of Biomedical Sciences, combines his interest (and majors: a BS in Biomedical Sciences, Biology, and Biotechnology, and a BA in Political Science) in science and policy, studying *C. difficile* infections in hospital settings and implications for healthcare policy.ⁱⁱⁱ

As it marked the fortieth anniversary of the establishment of the Honors program at UCF, the twenty-fifth anniversary of the creation of the College, and the twentieth anniversary of the opening of its physical location in the heart of campus, the Burnett Honors College had much to celebrate in the accomplishments of its Scholars because of their research accomplishments.

"Most importantly, we want to recognize that without the faculty and staff at BHC and UCF, none of this would be possible. It is the UCF community that provides the opportunities, support, and intellectually challenging environment that fosters curiosity," says Dean Sheila Amin, Dean of the Burnett Honors College.

ⁱ In July 2023, that figure reached 1.5 million.

ⁱⁱ Clifford is currently enrolled in a Ph.D. program in bioengineering at Harvard-MIT.

ⁱⁱⁱ If awarded the scholarship, which covers the full cost of a Master's degree at any university in Northern Ireland or the Republic of Ireland, Davis intends to join Trinity College Dublin's LLM in International and Comparative Law.