

"It's All About the People": Lessons From an Eight- Year Aggie | College of Engineering

10/07/2021

Oct. 7, 2021 — Darcie Christensen has so many memories of her time at Utah State, and she should, since she's been here for eight years. She can recount how she's transformed from the shy, hyper-focused freshman to the more easygoing, confident three-degree engineer she is today. But if you sit with Christensen long enough, she'll tell you that the biggest lesson she's learned as an Aggie is that it —and by it, she means everything — is all about the people.



*Darcie Christensen
BS '17 Biological Engineering
MS '19 Environmental Engineering
PhD '21 Engineering Education*

An Engineering State alum with an interest in the medical field, Christensen came to USU to study biological engineering, and she meant business. As a freshman she landed a research fellowship, so she spent most of her first two years trekking back and forth between her apartment and classrooms and the lab.

After returning from a Latter-day Saint mission in Indiana, Christensen was invited to join Engineering Council, and that experience changed how she understood her college experience. She got involved with more clubs and spent more time studying in the computer lab, making connections at every turn.

"It took a lot of work, but I found out how much value comes from these experiences and not just doing your homework. I was still able to succeed academically, but I also had more friends than ever before," she said. "Even if you're shy or awkward or introverted, it's really important to find your people."

As she wrapped up her senior year, Christensen was feeling more confident, but she wasn't sure she could see a future in biological engineering. Her research mentor from the Biology Department could tell.

"She sat me down and said, 'I can tell you're not passionate about this research; you've got to find something different.' And I cried in her office. I was like, 'I don't know what I'm doing, I really love engineering, but I just don't know where to go with it.' That's when I reached out to Engineering Education. I've always wanted to be a teacher, but I didn't know how that integrated with engineering."

In the past four years, Christensen successfully obtained a National Science Foundation graduate research fellowship; earned a master's in environmental engineering (which biological engineering served as a good foundation for); completed an internship with the Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum; and defended her doctoral thesis on improving peer mentorship in engineering with the help of her doctoral advisor Dr. Idalis Villanueva Alarcón. The people she connected with along the way made all the difference.

"People are always more important than assignments or projects because those things will get done. They have to get done; there's no option. But people aren't necessarily always going to be there or be in that situation," she said. "I wouldn't have stayed for grad school if I didn't have the connections I did, and I don't think I would have finished grad school and found my dream starting position unless I had the mentor I did. You have to find those positive influences and stick with them."

This fall, Christensen will start her next chapter at Minnesota State University, Mankato, where she will teach engineering courses as part of its award-winning transfer student engineering program. And she knows exactly the kind of professor she wants to be.

###