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UWF chemistry student accepted into top-ranked graduate visitation programs

Pensacola, Fla. – Nov. 21, 2016 – Aaron Mena, a senior chemistry major at the University of West Florida, was recently accepted into visitation programs at three of the top-ranked graduate chemistry programs in the United States.

In October, Mena attended both the DOW-MIT Access Program at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and the ASPIRE program at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, which are ranked No. 1 and No. 6, respectively, out of the Top 10 graduate chemistry programs in the country. He is the fifth UWF student to attend the prestigious DOW-MIT Access program since 2013. The weekend programs aim to increase the diversity of qualified applicants to Ph.D. programs in chemistry, chemical engineering and materials science throughout the U.S.

Mena also visited the University of Wisconsin-Madison for the Chemistry Opportunities Program, or CHOPS, in September after being accepted in June 2016. The all-expenses paid weekend visitation program is offered to approximately 20 highly qualified prospective students each year to tour the No. 9 ranked graduate chemistry program.

Mena credits the Department of Chemistry, housed within the UWF Hal Marcus College of Science and Engineering, with helping him determine his dream career path—pursuing a Ph.D. in materials or physical chemistry.

“In my freshman year, I thought I wanted to pursue a career in oncology, due to a prominence of cancer affecting my immediate family,” he said. “However, through the faculty and advisors in UWF’s chemistry department, I was able to discover my true calling: chemistry. I soon realized that although medical doctors have quite an impact on the lives of their patients, it is chemists who derive and design the necessary medications and medical equipment that save the lives of millions.”

Mena also said his undergraduate college experience has provided him with the knowledge and skills needed to succeed in graduate school and beyond. During his time at UWF, he has been involved in UWF Chemistry Scholars and currently serves as president of the Chemistry Club. He

was also one of three UWF students selected to join the prestigious National American Chemical Society Scholars Program for the 2016-17 school year.

Through the UWF Chemistry Scholars program, Mena has gained extensive undergraduate research experience while studying zinc oxide quantum dot characteristics under Dr. Karen Molek, associate professor and Chemistry Scholars program director, as well as Dr. Alan Schrock, chair of the chemistry department and research associate, and Dr. Pam Vaughan, associate professor. Mena said he's also learned valuable professional skills, such as writing CVs, resumes and personal statements as part of the program. He credits the ACS Scholars program with allowing him to further pursue a career in research by recognizing him as a competitive, minority research student and providing him with "a recognizable title that promotes diversity within the sciences."

"UWF has prepared me for my next steps in every way possible," he said. "Chemistry majors are some of the luckiest UWF students in regards to student-teacher interaction and research and academic opportunities."

To learn more about the UWF Department of Chemistry, visit uwf.edu/chemistry.

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