

LAUNCHING PAD FOR CAREERS

Fralin Futures helps scholar begin cancer research while a student

BY KARENNA GLOVER

Since she was a little girl, Hannah Puskar wanted to study science and work in the medical field. When she was in seventh grade, her cellular biology class turned her toward the field of oncology. But when COVID hit her sophomore year, her path took an unexpected jog.

A first-generation college student, Puskar had always seen herself on a clear path from high school to a four-year college and then on to medical school. But as she was preparing to graduate from Glenvar High School in 2022, she felt overwhelmed by the idea of navigating a large campus, and even the application process was daunting.

She applied for the CCAP scholarship at Virginia Western and when she received it, she decided Virginia Western would be a “launching pad” for her career in oncology.

Eligible for Fralin Futures through her STEM-related studies, Puskar said the relationships she’s built with like-minded student scholars have really contributed to her academic success. “Fralin Futures has given me the space to feel connected and flourish with other determined and motivated students,” she said.

Additionally, the opportunities the program provided have opened doors and validated her interest in

oncology. Through Fralin Futures, Puskar learned about the Blue Ridge Partnership for Health Science Careers (BRPHS), a regional partnership to fill the STEM-related career pipeline. In the fall of 2023, she became a student ambassador for the BRPHS. Through that opportunity, she learned about an internship at the Fralin Biomedical Research Institute (FBRI) at Virginia Tech Carilion. Leveraging the career prep resources provided through the Fralin Futures program, she applied, interviewed and was accepted as Virginia Western’s first student intern at FBRI.

Working alongside graduate students, post-doctoral students and PhD candidates 20 hours a week, Puskar’s lab work focused on the circadian clock and its relationship to cancer therapies.

“Being in the lab has allowed me a chance to work in cancer research, and supported my goal to just learn as much as I can about the disease and field I want to work in,” she said.

Puskar graduated from Virginia Western in May 2024, but will continue her work at FBRI as she pursues a microbiology degree from Virginia Tech. “Being a Fralin scholar connected me with opportunities I would never have been able to get on my own, and experiences I would not have had if I had gone to Virginia Tech directly out of high school.” ■

Fralin Futures success coach Schuyler van Montfrans works with Hannah Puskar.

