

Now pursuing research and academia

From GED to Ph.D. candidate

CONFRONTED WITH AN EYE-OPENING job search at 18 years old, Alex Williams began to reevaluate his choices about the future.

Williams, who had no work experience and a GED, said he never planned to go to college.

"Looking for a job with just a GED was really difficult," Williams said. "I remember I came really close to getting a job, not getting it and thinking, 'This is not a very sustainable path.'"

Now a doctoral student at the University of Pennsylvania Annenberg School for Communication, a recent Google Journalism Fellow at the Pew Research Center and a Collin College alumnus, Williams looks back at his life less than a decade ago.

A Radical Transformation

After recognizing the obstacles of his job hunt, Williams enrolled in his first college courses.

"I grew immensely at Collin College," Williams emphasized. "What I probably benefited most from was the close mentoring of Dr. Lisa Roy-Davis, my English professor."

Dr. Roy-Davis, as Williams explained, took the time to meet individually with each of her students. Williams' and Dr. Roy-Davis' partnership, which started as the fulfillment of a requirement to discuss the course one on one, served as the spark for a swift and drastic turn in the direction of Williams' career.

"She went above and beyond, doing things like loaning me her personal books," Williams said.

Academically, Dr. Roy-Davis encouraged Williams to identify something he was passionate about. Together, they determined that his passion resided in studying the impact of the No Child Left Behind Act on at-risk students, particularly students like himself, who felt pressured to drop out by administrators. He began to explore the question and focused on this topic for the remainder of Dr. Roy-Davis' course.

From there, Williams began pursuing other research areas, presented at conferences and began earning competitive and prestigious fellowships and grants.

Speaking to a group of several hundred students in his keynote address at the Collin College Undergraduate Interdisciplinary Research Conference last spring, Williams said when he was at Collin College, he did not realize the significance of the elite work he was doing.

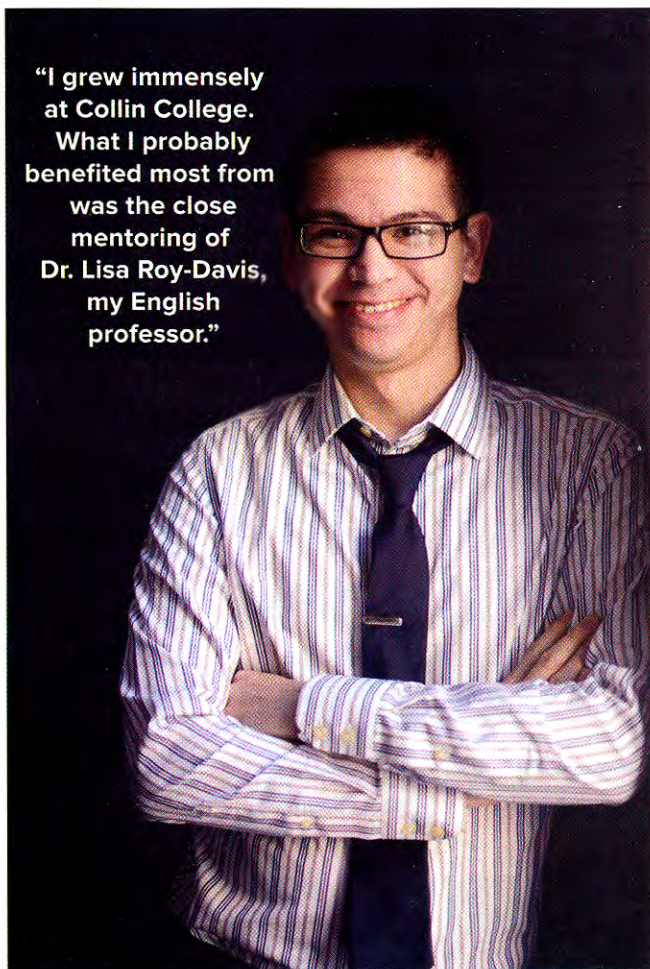
"When I wrote a paper and presented at a conference for the first time, I didn't drive home and think, 'Wow my future is completely different now,'" Williams recalled.

However, when he inquired about the reason for his acceptance to nationally competitive undergraduate fellowships at the University of North Texas, he was told it was that experience presenting at conferences that gave him an edge.

Today, Williams' research, supported by a \$132,000 grant from the National Science Foundation, explores how political, economic and technological changes influence media innovation and political discourse.

"What I try to do at Annenberg is analyze how the changing business models of journalism are impacting news coverage of political debates," Williams said. "I think it's important to understand how news coverage is being shaped by the economic factors that go unnoticed and that shape the

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Former Collin College student Alex Williams.

content that people receive and use to form their political opinions."

One of only 11 selected from more than 1,300 applications, Williams spent the summer of 2014 working through a

MELANIE HESS is a public relations associate with Collin College.

Google Journalism Fellowship, which pays students summer salaries to work at various news organizations. Assigned to the Pew Research Center, Williams said he was excited to be able to gain more attention for his area of focus.

"I recently published a popular report, with more than 19,000 views that week," Williams said. "It got attention from other news organizations like *The Guardian*, *Huffington Post*, and *The Washington Post*. Like any researcher, my goal is to reach a broader audience, so coverage from other news organizations is really important."

Dr. Roy-Davis said Williams is a truly extraordinary individual, and she considers collaborating with him the highlight of her academic career.

"Part of what makes Alex so remarkable is his ability to reflect on his learning and envision new routes to awareness and action for himself and others," Dr. Roy-Davis said. "Alex is already a powerful advocate for those who share some of the similarities of his upbringing and background, and his continued work in academia has amazing potential."

Future Goals and Giving Back

Inspired by several of the Collin College faculty, Williams



Williams with his Collin English professor and mentor Dr. Lisa Roy-Davis.

aims to one day become a professor.

"My Collin College professors really helped me build my confidence, research skills and maturity," Williams stressed.

He laughs as he notes the small student-to-faculty ratio and group work at Collin College worked in his favor in terms of growing, sometimes in unexpected ways.

"I got a really tailored education. Professors, rather than teaching assistants, read my work and gave me feedback, and the smaller class sizes allowed for more group work," Williams said. "That's actually how I met my wife—in a Collin College government class."

A long way from where he started, Williams expresses his excitement about recent

opportunities to mentor undergraduates, an experience he hopes to make his career.

Crediting Dr. Roy-Davis' mentorship as the catalyst for his pursuit of research and academia, Williams says it is his goal to one day work as a professor and do the exact same thing—teach, mentor and guide students, so they can reach potential even they may not know exists.

For more information on programs at Collin College, visit www.collin.edu. 