

Fulbright scholars pursue psychology degrees at Oakland

Anna Szala (from Poland) and Rania Bellaaj (from Tunisia) came to Oakland under the prestigious Fulbright scholarship program, which is designed to increase understanding between people of the United States and people of other countries.

📅 April 15, 2019

SHARE THIS STORY



Last August, Oakland University's Department of Psychology welcomed Fulbright scholars Anna Szala and Rania Bellaaj to campus.

Szala, who hails from Toruń, Poland, earned a M.A. in psychology from Kazimierz Wielki University, and a M.S. in biology from the University of Wrocław, in Poland. She has also worked as a

researcher at the Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology in Germany, the Åbo Akademi University in Finland, and the University of Oxford in England.

At Oakland, she is pursuing a Ph.D. in psychology, with a focus on human attractiveness and mate selection from an evolutionary perspective. She will conduct research in the lab of her adviser, Todd K. Shackelford, Ph.D., distinguished professor of psychology.

"Evolutionary psychology focuses on how evolution has shaped the human mind," Szala explained. "It is highly useful in research because it offers strong, biology-backed potential for explaining various quirks of human behavior, such as mechanisms driving the assessment of a person's mate value."

Drawing on her biology background, Szala is also collaborating with Fabia Battistuzzi, Ph.D., associate professor of biology, to analyze the genes of plasmodium, a parasite that causes malaria.

"Among the many genes in this pathogen, some are more likely than others to allow the pathogen to successfully infect its host and escape the immune system," Szala said. "We are interested in understanding the evolutionary mechanisms that drive changes in these genes that allow plasmodium to be a very effective pathogen."

She added that once these mechanisms are known, scientists may be able to manipulate these genes to improve drug and vaccine success against malaria.



Fulbright scholars Anna Szala, left, and Rania Bellaaj are pursuing graduate degrees in OU's Department of Psychology.

Bellaaj has a bachelor's degree in English linguistics, literature and civilizations from the University of Arts and Humanities, and a bachelor's degree in physical therapy from the University of Sciences and Techniques of Health. Both institutions are in her hometown of Sfax, Tunisia.

At Oakland, she is pursuing a master's degree with a focus on personality and social psychology, under the direction of Virgil Zeigler-Hill, Ph.D., professor of psychology.

Her research combines personality and organizational psychology. She focuses on how basic need satisfaction in the workplace impacts employees' job-related attitudes (e.g. job satisfaction) and how that ultimately impacts job commitment and organizational commitment – which is the feeling of responsibility a person has towards the mission of an organization. After graduation, she plans to get professional experience by working for international organizations, and eventually pursue a Ph.D. with the goal of teaching in her home country.

“In Tunisia, psychology is only taught at two universities, in the capital,” she said. “I feel a responsibility to contribute to the field, and to expand it in my country.”

The Fulbright program is sponsored by the U.S. government and foreign governments. It is designed to increase understanding between people of the United States and people of other countries. The program is competitive and only about 20 percent of applicants receive an award. Grants are available for U.S. citizens to go abroad and for non-U.S. citizens to come to the U.S.

Szala and Bellaaj each said they came to Oakland after researching programs at universities around the world. Their decisions were motivated in large part by the opportunity to work with their respective advisers, Dr. Shackelford and Dr. Zeigler-Hill.

“It's very important to find a professor whose work fits your interests,” said Bellaaj, adding that a Skype interview with Dr. Zeigler-Hill cemented her decision to come to Oakland.

Szala said she was always interested in her specific research focus, and earning a Fulbright scholarship allowed her to come to Oakland to work on her ideas with Dr. Shackelford, a world-renowned expert in the field.

“I want to see how researchers of various backgrounds use an evolutionary framework to explain human behavior,” she said. “Working in different countries allows me to learn about their points of view and use their insights to come up with the most accurate ways to understand observed phenomena.”

Szala and Bellaaj also credit the staff at Oakland's [International Students and Scholars Office](#) (ISSO) with helping ease their transition to living and studying in the U.S.

“They helped with permissions, applications, documents transferring credits...” Szala said. “They're wonderful, patient, and friendly people who are highly experienced with the problems international students might encounter when starting a new life in the U.S.”

Learn more about OU's Department of Psychology at oakland.edu/psychology.