Together, their research collaboration in artificial intelligence with Krebsbach explores ways to improve heuristic search techniques applicable to a wide variety of problems, including areas as diverse as generating driving directions, scheduling package deliveries, planning Hubble Space Telescope observations and even generating candidate answers for IBM’s Jeopardy-playing Watson.

“Once these guys began thinking like researchers,” said Krebsbach, “the problem became keeping them from working on too many ideas at once. We’ve focused on seeing our best ideas through, including writing professional articles—a difficult skill to acquire even for the best students. But the countless editing sessions have paid off. These accomplishments are rare for undergraduates, and will open up exciting opportunities for them to grow, both personally and professionally.”

But Krebsbach stresses the role that the Senior Experience program at Lawrence has played to make these impressive undergraduate achievements possible. He points out that undergraduates have not typically competed at this level, but that the recently implemented Senior Experience fund has leveled the playing field. “Without Senior Experience funding, we could not have purchased a high performance multi-core computer to run hundreds of thousands of experiments, and the students would not have been able to afford to present their results at an international conference. The students deserve to be supported and recognized, and the Senior Experience program has made that possible.”

The experience, Potts said, has helped him focus on different career paths after Lawrence. “A lot of the stuff we’re doing really gives you a better idea about what your life would be like if you chose to pursue a research career. It’s really an invaluable experience to just jump into it in this early and get a feel for how these things work.” Estrem agreed that his time at Lawrence has played a major role in forming his ideas about what he wants to do next. “I think the Senior Experience program at Lawrence has been the biggest thing that has happened to me,” Estrem said. “I love the fact that I can do things with my projects that you normally don’t get to do in college. You’re working with cutting-edge technology and solving real-world problems, and you can really have a say in what you’re working on. It’s been a great experience for me.”

The experience has also made it possible for Potts to take his research to the next level. “I’ve been able to work with some of the best researchers in the field, and I’ve been able to contribute to some really exciting projects,” he said. “I’ve learned a lot from them, and I hope to continue working with them in the future.”

While the experience has been rewarding, both Potts and Estrem agree that it has been challenging at times. “There have been some tough moments,” Potts said. “But overall, it’s been a great experience for me.”

The Senior Experience program at Lawrence has been successful in part because of the support and encouragement of the Lawrence faculty. “I’ve had great mentors who have helped me develop my research skills and pushed me to work hard,” Potts said. “I’m grateful for the opportunity to work with them.”

The experience has also been beneficial for the Lawrence community as a whole. “The Senior Experience program has helped Lawrence attract some of the best students in the country,” said Krebsbach. “It’s been a win-win situation for everyone involved.”

For Potts and Estrem, the Senior Experience program has been a turning point in their lives. “I’m really grateful for the opportunity to work with Kurt and the other students,” Potts said. “It’s been a great experience for me, and I’m excited to see where it takes me.”

Estrem agrees. “I’m really looking forward to seeing where this takes me,” he said. “I’m excited to see what opportunities are out there for me.”

The Senior Experience program at Lawrence is just one of many ways in which the university is committed to providing opportunities for its students to succeed.

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Writing in the Woods

By David McGlynn, Assistant Professor of English

Lawrence’s Senior Experience program aims to help students channel their academic majors toward the career paths they’ll follow after graduation. For students interested in creative writing, however, that path is often not defined. “It’s hard to discern, let alone follow,” said the chalice of the starving writer endures precisely because it’s true: the number of writers who began their professional careers immediately after college is small enough to count on one hand with a few fingers left over. For the rest of us, the journey from student to scribbler is a long and winding road.

The best way to mitigate the uncertainty is to seek advice from those who have been down the road before. Since 2009, the Mellon Senior Experience Grant has helped Lawrence students advance their writing careers by working closely with renowned fiction and nonfiction writers. Writers such as Jill McCorback, Thomas Lynch, Debra Monroe and Robin Hemeny—all of whom teach in nationally ranked graduate writing programs—have come to campus to read from their work. But the writers who visit Lawrence do far more than just stand behind a podium. They join students for lunch, hold extended Q&A sessions, and in many cases spend the weekend at Björklunden with small groups of advanced students. The Door County retreats provide the space and time for the visiting writer to conduct master classes, lead workshops, and even meet with students one-on-one to discuss an original story or an essay. Nearly every Lawrence student who participates in a writing retreat returns to campus encouraged and energized about his or her own work. Magdalena Was ’11 said, “The weekends with visiting writers at Björklunden provided a completely new approach to a college experience. Visiting writers drew us into a more professional world where we didn’t have to think of our writing as just homework. The relaxed setting made it possible for me to ask accomplished writers questions about the process of becoming a writer that wouldn’t have been possible during a brief visit. I got hands-on experience and knowledge that I couldn’t get out of a textbook or a homework assignment.”

Indeed, it’s hard to overstate the distinctiveness of the Björklunden weekends for new undergraduates, whether they attend small liberal arts colleges or large research universities, get to spend such extended periods of time with professional writers. Meanwhile the master classes simulate graduate-level writing workshops and give students firsthand glimpses of graduate-school life. Alison Thompson ’13 said, “The writing weekends and Björklunden trips helped remind me that writing is a living, generative art produced.