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Triton College

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From Classroom to Coastline: Triton Students Explore Science at Sea



Triton College students Matthew Michaels (back center) and Trinity Robin (front center) spent a week at sea off the coast of Panama as part of a research expedition with the STEMSEAS program. The two were selected from a nationwide pool of applicants to conduct geoscience and oceanography research.

RIVER GROVE, III. — Triton College students went on an oceanic adventure in February, spending about a week at sea off the coast of Panama as part of a research expedition with the STEMSEAS program.

Matthew Michaels and Trinity Robin were two of 8 undergraduate students selected nationwide to participate in the program from Feb. 2-11. Funded by the National Science Foundation (NSF), STEMSEAS (STEM Student Experiences Aboard Ships) provides ocean excursions for students to conduct real-world research and foster a sense of belonging in STEM fields — science, technology, engineering and math.

The pair accompanied Dr. Sheldon Turner, chair of Triton College's Science Department, who served as chief scientist aboard the research vessel *Atlantis*. After disembarking from Panama City, the crew navigated the Panama Canal, crossing from the Pacific Ocean to the Caribbean Sea before arriving in Tampa Bay. Aboard *Atlantis*, students used onboard labs to conduct geoscience and oceanography research, collecting and analyzing water samples and mapping the seafloor.

"The point of the program is to give undergraduates a chance to see what this life is like and what types of careers are involved in research at sea," Turner said. "For anyone who thinks they might want a career in science or engineering, it's very worthwhile because it provides experience with equipment and procedures used professionally."

Turner emphasized the program isn't limited to STEM majors and benefits from students of diverse academic backgrounds.

Robin, an English major at Triton College, applied to experience life at sea and inform her creative writing. She is working on a series of fantasy novels, including one that takes place largely at sea.

"I've plotted it out so one of the books will take place with the characters traveling overseas, and I was like, 'This is the perfect opportunity,'" she said. "And it genuinely turned out to be the best opportunity. I learned so much about ships, and that was really what I was going after because I like to make my writing educational and realistic in that sense."

Robin added that the trip opened her eyes to other career paths that might also align with her interests, such as a specialization in science communication.

For Michaels and Robin — after battling initial bouts of seasickness — the trip was a life-changing event. Michaels, a second-year biology student at Triton, was amazed by the aquatic wildlife they saw, including dolphins and flying fish.

Michaels was also excited to launch an XBT (expendable bathythermograph), a torpedo-shaped device that measures the speed of sound in water to help calibrate mapping software.

"It was just an amazing trip the entire time," said Michaels, for whom the trip marked his first time traveling outside the United States. "I was having the time of my life every day."

The expedition and the STEMSEAS program are funded by the National Science Foundation through a grant to Columbia University and Indiana University of Pennsylvania (IUP). STEMSEAS is also supported by a partnership with the University-National Oceanographic Laboratory System (UNOLS).

To read the students' blog during the excursion, visit stemseas.org.

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ABOUT TRITON COLLEGE:

Triton College, located at 2000 Fifth Ave., River Grove, is a public institution of higher education dedicated to student success. Recently recognized by the Aspen Institute as one of the Top 200 community colleges in the nation, Triton offers more than 130 degree and certificate programs that prepare students to pursue meaningful careers, transfer to four-year universities, and thrive in a global economy. Guided by our mission—*Valuing the individual, educating and serving the community*—Triton serves nearly 17,000 students annually on its 110-acre campus in River Grove, Illinois. Our dedicated faculty and staff provide high-quality, accessible and affordable educational opportunities that empower students and strengthens the communities we serve. Triton College is accredited by the Higher Learning Commission and a member of The Illinois Community College Board. Illinois is home to 45 colleges in 39 community college districts. Learn more at triton.edu.

