



**XAVIER**  
UNIVERSITY of LOUISIANA

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### **Xavier University of Louisiana Student Named Goldwater Scholar for First Time in School's History**

New Orleans LA – Lauren Thornton, a junior biology major from [Xavier University of Louisiana](#) (XULA), is one of only two college students from Louisiana to be named a 2018 Goldwater Scholar by the [Barry Goldwater Scholarship and Excellence in Education Foundation](#).

A total of 1,280 students from 455 institutions nationwide were nominated for this year's Goldwater scholarship class. Only [211](#) were selected, with Thornton, a native of Arlington TX (Mansfield Timberview High School), being the one of the two students selected from Louisiana.

The Goldwater Scholarship Program, one of the oldest and most prestigious national scholarships in the natural sciences, engineering and mathematics in the United States, seeks to identify and support college sophomores and juniors who show exceptional promise of becoming this nation's next generation of research leaders in these fields.

The first XULA recipient of the scholarship, Thornton will receive \$7,500 to cover costs associated with tuition, mandatory fees, books, and room and board for her senior year. She plans on pursuing a Ph.D. in neuroscience or molecular biology after earning her undergraduate degree on her path to a career in higher education and independent research.

"I have always been interested in research, because it forces you to experiment, to think out of the box," said Thornton. "There is something truly exciting about building on the knowledge that others have previously acquired and then discovering new things yourself."

A [BUILD/McNair](#) scholar at Xavier, Thornton has compiled a 3.98 grade point average. Outside of the classroom, she has been extensively involved in a research study of a human neurodegenerative disease called Hereditary Spastic Paraplegia (HSP) under the mentorship of XULA biology professor Dr. Thomas Huckaba for the past two years.

According to Huckaba, HSP can be caused by mutations in a protein called kinesin, which is responsible for transporting cargoes from one place to another in cells. He said Thornton, who has been performing biochemical and biophysical assays to test their hypothesis that certain HSP-causing mutations would decrease the ability of kinesin to bind to the transport track, has also pioneered a set of computational studies to analyze potential structural changes in kinesin. He said her data points toward a mechanism at the heart of this neurodegenerative disease that could ultimately translate into a therapeutic target.

Although she is thoroughly immersed in the study of neurodegenerative diseases, Thornton, who was invited to participate in the University of California-San Diego's prestigious STARS program this summer via the UCSD/XULA Graduate Pathways Partnership, is keeping her options open going forward.

"Lauren is a gifted young scientist; she already has many of the skills that are necessary for a productive career in scientific research," said Huckaba. "I have no doubt that she will succeed admirably in the next levels of her training. I have been fortunate to have had Lauren in the lab and look forward to having her as a colleague in the future."

### **About Xavier University of Louisiana**

XULA students *Leave Ready* to serve, lead, and care for their communities. For more information about Xavier University of Louisiana visit us online at [www.xula.edu](http://www.xula.edu) or follow us on Facebook, YouTube, or Twitter @XULA1925. Take a moment to learn more about how Xavier is preparing students for the future at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sD4mb-jYZC8>.

Once again, Xavier University of Louisiana received national accolades as one of the best universities in the country. Most notably, XULA is ranked as the best value among southern regional colleges and universities in the 2018 edition of "Best Colleges" by the U.S. News Media Group. Xavier also ranked No.1 in its grouping, heading the list of only 15 schools that qualified for the Southern Region category listed under "Great Schools, Great Prices."

To book interviews about our recent accomplishments and or to speak with our experts in the field of pharmacy, premed, public health, science, technology, math, business, English, communications and the arts, contact Diana Matero-Hernandez at (504) 520-5120) or [dhernan1@xula.edu](mailto:dhernan1@xula.edu).

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Lauren Thornton in the research lab at Xavier University of Louisiana