

PH.D. STUDENT PROFILE

EXTRAORDINARILY ORDINARY:

Timothy Austin

Timothy Austin became a doctoral student before he could legally enter a bar with his colleagues. He was splitting cells before he could vote.

The two things that surprise most people about Tim Austin, College of Medicine Ph.D. candidate in neuroscience, are – to his way of thinking – two of the most “ordinary” things about him. First, Austin began his undergraduate career at 13 and entered the College’s Ph.D. program at 17. While this unusual accomplishment is remarkable in its own right, what follows next is just as compelling and evocative of Austin’s character. Two years into his neuroscience program, he’s walking away from academia to begin two years of service-oriented mission work.

Austin entered Brigham Young University knowing he enjoyed

scientific research. He had always been interested in the sciences, but began to focus specifically on neuroscience when he read that nerve cells could not regenerate. This statement, perhaps glossed over by other students, prompted him to ask, “Well, why not?” From then on, he began focusing his intellectual pursuits on “the mystery of how the brain works,” as he describes it, eventually finding his niche in spinal cord injury. While doing online research for graduate programs strong in neuroscience, Austin found Drexel – a school with its own spinal cord injury program.

Austin arrived on campus for his interview and “was incredibly impressed” with the College of Medicine. “The resources and the amazing people – just the amount of collaboration that goes on at Drexel is



“The amount of collaboration that goes on at Drexel is amazing.”

– Timothy Austin



Austin (far right, in younger days) has five older brothers and sisters, who began attending college at ages ranging from 12 to 16.

Being an 18-year-old graduate student does not seem to bother Austin. He explains that even as an undergraduate, being younger “felt very natural, very easy. I got along with my 22-year-old peers. I got along just fine with my 16-year-old friends.” For someone as intellectually thirsty as Austin, the experience was actually a boon. “I like the experience I had,” he states. “I got to work with a lot more people than a lot of kids my age get to. I got to have better schooling than a lot of kids my age. Going earlier as opposed to later has been a fantastic experience.”

To Austin, this stunning academic accomplishment does not make him a unique outlier. He is quick to point out that his five older brothers and sisters also began attending college

amazing,” he says. He came to Philadelphia even though his family in Utah had never heard of the school.

Now a second-year student, Austin is currently working in the lab of Dr. Peter Baas, looking into ways to manipulate the microtubules in the cytoskeleton to help enhance axon regrowth. Specifically, his research involves the NAP peptide and nanoparticle technology. A standout academic, Austin received a prestigious National Science Foundation fellowship this year.

earlier than usual, at ages ranging from 12 to 16. For Austin, “this is all very much the natural way of doing things for me.”

He and his siblings were homeschooled by their parents outside of Salt Lake City, Utah. His mother, Robin, was their primary teacher, while his father, Michael, a history teacher by profession, focused on that subject, writing, and French. “It’s great working on an individual level with a teacher you know and that knows you,” Austin attests. “I’m very grateful for everything my parents have done to help move us along.” Humbly downplaying his extraordinary accomplishments, he claims that everyone is capable of such achievement, if this innate ability to learn were to be developed and nurtured. “As soon as you start communicating, you can start learning,” he says. “It’s amazing how quickly people can progress ... unlocking the potential that is there in everyone.”

This idea of drawing forth a person’s natural talents and abilities also speaks to Austin’s other seemingly divergent

direction. Two years into his Ph.D. program, he is taking a leave of absence to participate in his church’s mission program. In the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, also known as the Mormons, young men are highly encouraged to enter a two-year service commitment that could take them anywhere in the world. The mission is usually undertaken when the young men are 18 or 19 years old. Austin explains, “That’s when I’m going, but I just happen to be in grad school at the time.”

Austin will learn his specific assignment this spring. He says that once it begins, “I’m going to be completely devoted to the mission. Pretty much 24/7, you are teaching about Christ and providing service to those around you. [Missionaries] are always working, so I will have to leave the research behind for those two years.” He admits that he had initial concerns about undertaking the mission while in graduate school, but “it worked out surprisingly well.” The College of Medicine has been very supportive. “It really is one of the best times for me to go because I’m set up

After his college graduation, Timothy Austin poses by a statue of Brigham Young.

in grad school,” Austin explains. “By the time I leave, I will have finished my two years of coursework. It will just leave my thesis research and an unbroken career afterward.”

On the surface, it seems as if Austin has chosen a highly unconventional path: college at 13, graduate school at 17, two-year mission trip *during* his graduate program. But for him, this journey is very much about a path he chose a long time ago. Passionate about both his research and his faith, he insists that “science and religion do not have to be enemies like so many people make them out to be.” There is no single way to the truth; one can be engaged with the sacred and unseen world and live according to those principles just as one can be similarly engaged in scientific inquiry and the mysteries of the brain.



“My religious experience is incredibly enhanced by what I learn in science, and my science experience has been so much better from what I’ve learned of religion. I love working towards truth, and I love doing it by every route possible. I love that Drexel has been so willing to accommodate both those lines of interest, and willing to tolerate different lines of thinking and different religions,” Austin says. “I can’t imagine what else I’d be trying to do with my life right now. I’m exactly where I need to be.” ■

Read more about spinal cord research at the College of Medicine.