New project aims to engage youth in neuroscience

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By Karene Booker
Deana Blansky leading a session for young adolescents on health and fitness – Mark Vorreuter

Last year Deanna Blansky ’16 jumped into a new initiative to translate faculty research into hands-on activities for teaching middle-school youth about the brain, health, and science. The initiative aims to develop a six-hour 4-H STEM curriculum on health and the brain and is led by Valerie Reyna, professor and director of the Human Neuroscience Institute in the Department of Human Development, and co-director of the Cornell MRI Facility.

To start, Blansky, a Human Biology, Health, and Society major, developed two modules, one on nutrition and fitness and another on breast cancer genetics, based on Reyna’s ongoing research. She piloted these modules with middle school campers at Bristol Hills 4-H Camp in Canandaigua, New York as part of her summer Cornell Cooperative Extension internship. Both modules combined aspects of health and neuroscience, while providing an interactive learning experience for the campers.

The campers particularly liked the hands-on lessons, such as competing in the nutritional breakfast cook-off and creating model brains they could keep, Blansky said. They had fun comparing breakfast ideas and seemed surprised by how easy it was to create their own healthy meals. They were eager to take their ideas back home, she said.

The combination of outreach through teaching at summer camp and empirical neuroscience research was really rewarding, Blansky concluded. What she learned about the research process, curriculum development and lesson planning for different age groups will come in handy – she is planning on entering the field of medicine and public health, and hopes to incorporate community health into her future career.

This year, Noah Rubin ’16 will be refining the two modules and developing new segments. Rubin is majoring in Policy Analysis and Management and minoring in Computer Science and Math. He joined Reyna’s Laboratory of Rational Decision Making propelled by an interest in human behavior and the
neuroscience behind it. An interest, he says, that was sparked in high school after reading a story about a man who had developed software that predicted investing behavior based on reactions to current events.

The new and revised modules will be piloted with youth this summer, with the plan of eventually making them more broadly available.

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