

2018 Undergraduate Award for Excellence in Chemistry by a First-Generation Student

Zoua Pa Vang
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Zoua Pa Vang, is first generation college student who is a child of refugees to the US. She states that would have never imagined becoming a chemistry major with the hopes of becoming a researcher, but she has discovered that she can realize a dream of making a major contribution to the world through research. Chris Schaller, her research advisor, describes Zoua Pa's research efforts with an aluminum complex that acts as a Lewis acid catalyst for the polymerization of cyclic esters via ring-opening transesterification where she extended initial studies with caprolactone polymerization to another monomer, lactide. She explored the degree of control over polymer molecular weight afforded by this method. In addition, she has been very eager to explore adapting the ligand to a new Lewis acid, titanium. During her junior year, Zoua Pa took a semester to study abroad, where she chose to not go with a group of St. Benedict students, but instead chose to study independently in Korea, a courageous act for a first-generation student who has no connections to Korea. Zoua Pa's academic advisor, Alicia Peterson, writes that Zoua Pa is a well-rounded student who is a very committed individual with exceptional time management skills. This is evident by the fact that she finds time to not only excel in academics and do laboratory research during the academic year, but also is involved in other extracurricular activities and maintains a job.