

Departmental Undergraduate Research Days

Diane K. Martichuski

University of Colorado – Boulder

A departmental Undergraduate Research Day (URD) is a great way to showcase undergraduate student research. Basically, an URD can be anything you choose - a mini-convention with oral papers and posters or a smaller venue with just papers or just posters. It can last from a few hours to an all-day event. I recommend a few hours, since it may be during school hours, and students may have to miss classes to attend. At the University of Colorado at Boulder, we hold our URD event during the second to last week of classes in the spring, on a Wednesday afternoon from 3 pm to 5 pm. It is solely a poster session. The last week of classes may allow more students to attend if they have afternoon labs that are not meeting anymore, but the last week is pretty busy for students who may not want to participate or attend that late in the semester. Professors at different schools will need to check with students, view their department schedules, and make decisions about timing.

At the time of this writing, there are some departments that hold an event each semester in the morning, and then end with lunch (e.g., Northeastern Illinois University (Linda Rueckert, personal communication, October 9, 2007)). Some departments invite family and friends (e.g., Fairleigh Dickinson University in Teaneck, NJ (Gretchen Johnson, personal communication, October 9, 2007); Northeastern Illinois University). At Stanford University, the department holds an all day event, with poster sessions and oral sessions, and an invited speaker. They hold their “conference” on a Saturday, with registration for the conference, which includes lunch in small groups with a professor or graduate student who is actively conducting research on campus (Stanford University Department of Psychology, 2007). Western Connecticut State University has an all day event, which is held during the week on a reading day (no classes held). They have a guest speaker, food, poster presentations, and limited oral presentations for outstanding posters (Western Connecticut State University, 2007). Barry University in Miami, Florida has oral presentations, posters, lunch, an invited speaker, and academic games. They also have a scholarship presentation during their event. In cases where friends and family are invited to attend, schools may want to impose a small registration fee to cover some expenses. Some departments have awards, and an award ceremony for

the best poster and oral presentations, although these are more common at university-wide research forums (e.g., Purdue University, 2007; University of Maryland, 2007).

Why Is An URD Event Helpful?

First and foremost, undergraduate students can display their research and get accolades from faculty, peers, and perhaps administrators. Especially at schools where there is a graduate program, undergraduates often feel like their research is not important compared to graduate students’ or other professionals’ research. This URD event focuses all attention on undergraduates’ work or research projects by showcasing *their* honors papers, independent projects, and group projects. In my experience, students beam when a professor or dean shows special interest in their work.

In addition to high praise, students can also experience what it might be like to present at a research conference. The URD event is a safe and more comfortable environment for these students to try out their professional skills. They may be presenting the same poster at a professional conference and can get practice answering questions and feeling comfortable with their ability to answer the questions. Other students who attend to support their friends may actually be inspired to do their own research in the future.

Finally, the URD event takes time out of a busy semester to celebrate the accomplishments of the undergraduates who are working to complete research. Often, faculty are too busy to properly commend students for outstanding work. This event gives faculty the time to show how proud they are of students, and students can feel their own pride for a job well done.

Organizing Timeline

Obviously, an URD event can be as small or as large as is manageable. Logistics to consider include:

- where the event is held;
- whether or not refreshments will be served;
- who and with what type of research is invited to present;

- who will be invited (or required or given extra credit) to attend; and
- what type(s) of presentations there will be.

If the event is held at the student center, to reserve a space as early as September or October for a spring event may be necessary. Poster display boards may also need to be created a few months in advance (see below for poster display ideas). In preparation for our URD, we tell honors students in the fall about the possibility of presenting in the spring, and we follow up with them during the school year via email and through their advisors to encourage them to participate. About two months before the event, we put out a Call for Abstracts. We hang signs around the department inviting students to submit their names in order to participate. We also send personal invitations to honors students, independent study students, and labs. We have also found it helpful to set up a webpage for materials, information, and deadlines (see our webpage at: <http://psych.colorado.edu/urd/home.html>). We have the initial deadline for intent to participate about five weeks before the event. Students must send their names, advisors' names, and email addresses to our program chair, who starts a spreadsheet and email list. We use the email list later to remind students of deadlines for getting their abstracts in and getting their posters printed.

Larger departments may want to utilize graduate student help, and smaller departments may want to utilize psychology clubs, Psi Chi clubs, or if the presenters are all seniors, have juniors help each year. For instance, maybe particular classes (e.g., statistics, research design, psychometrics, etc.) may help organize and review projects for the event each year. Helpers may be used to post the Call for Abstracts, to post the signs on the day of the event reminding people of the event, to take pictures at the event, to help setup and tear down, and to help generally during the event. Helpers also can help format the booklet of abstracts and/or help to staple the final booklets together.

About ten days before the event, students must get their abstracts sent via email to our program chair, who makes the book of abstracts. Students must include a title, the author(s), faculty advisor, and a brief (80-150 word) abstract. They must format them according to specific instructions on the webpage (including font, type size, type style), although we still have to reformat many of them. We

put all abstracts into a booklet that is the size of 8.5" x 11" paper, folded in half, with one abstract on each "page." We put a colored cover on the front with the event information on the outside.

Other options to consider are:

- whether to have a reception of some kind (we have a fruit, cheese, chips, and cookies spread during the event);
- whether to send invitations to all faculty in the psychology department and maybe to other faculty and college administrators as well;
- whether to have a special way to denote honors theses (we have a bright pink four inch sign with HONORS written on it for those posters); and
- whether to create name tags for presenters and faculty and certificates of participation for presenters.

We also have graduate students help with poster development and formatting (and the webpage also has a poster template that students can download and change to suit their needs).

Poster Display Options

Displaying posters can be a challenge. At the University of Colorado at Boulder, we use part of the ballroom of the student center. A large room is often needed to accommodate posters, depending on the number of posters. Push pins may be used to hang posters if the facilities available will accommodate it. More likely, free-standing bulletin boards, easels with tri-fold display boards on them, tables with tri-fold display boards on them, or home-made poster stands will be used. Some of these options require an initial investment, but the materials should last a long time. At the University of Colorado, we had some inexpensive poster stands made. They look like an upside-down T with a slot for a 4' x 4' foam board – the T shape gives you two sides on which to display posters.

Overcoming logistical and organizational problems can be time consuming, but a successful undergraduate research day makes it all worthwhile. Students hear about it early in their career, attend a few times before their senior year, and then hopefully present their own research during their senior year. It gives them confidence and experience in case they want to go to graduate school and/or present research at a professional conference later.

References

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