

Celebrating Student Research: Campus-wide Student Research Events

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The impact of undergraduate research experiences across the disciplines is an area that has been receiving a great deal of interest among educators and university administrators. This increased interest may be partly related to a greater emphasis on the role of active learning in the curricula, as well as the demand from the regional accreditation groups for assessment of student learning outcomes. Undergraduate research, in the broadest sense of the term, provides an outlet to address both of these issues. In addition, undergraduate research may be viewed as a way of celebrating many of the components of a successful undergraduate education—the accomplishments of students, faculty, and the university at large (Chapman, 2003).

The benefits of undergraduate research experiences are just now being documented empirically. Researchers have demonstrated that undergraduate research experiences can benefit students by improving their analytic and communication skills, providing opportunities for independent learning, and promoting skills involved in professional and personal development (Elgren & Hensel, 2006; Ishiyama, 2002; Lopatto, 2006). Students benefit from close interaction with faculty members and, through the process of conducting and communicating their research, become more engaged in the academic world and acquire skills that will prepare them for almost any type of career (Chapman, 2003). Undergraduate research experiences seem to be especially helpful in the engagement and retention of first generation, minority, and low income students who are often seen as “at risk” in the academic process (Chapman, 2003; Ishiyama, 2002).

Organizations, such as the Council on Undergraduate Research (CUR) and the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AACU), have made all or part of their missions the promotion and support of undergraduate research in the broadest sense of the term (Elgren & Hensel, 2006; www.aacu.org). In addition to providing workshops and dialogues on various aspects of undergraduate

research programs and sponsoring conferences on the topic, CUR and AACU also serve as clearinghouses for information regarding ways in which undergraduate research can be shared with the academic community and beyond, through publications like the *CUR Quarterly* and *Peer Review*, as well as events such as Posters on the Hill.

One way in which institutions can share the benefits of undergraduate research experiences is through campus-wide exhibitions of student work. While it has been relatively common for students in psychology and the natural and physical sciences to participate in undergraduate research endeavors and present the results of their work through a variety of venues, this may have not been the case for many other disciplines in the social sciences, humanities, or business. Often these areas take the relatively narrow view that research is defined only as employing the experimental method and do not see themselves as being “research” based (Ishiyama, 2002). There may also be a misperception in the academic community that students can only learn about research skills from others in their own area of study rather than recognizing the benefit of being exposed to the research/creative endeavors of students from widely diverse disciplines. Indeed, if the purpose of an undergraduate education is to prepare students for a variety of future careers, what more appropriate venue to demonstrate the similarities in skills characteristic of an educated person than to have our students be full participants in a multi-disciplinary campus-wide event.

Characteristics of Campus-wide Events

An extremely helpful source of information for creating a successful campus-wide event is the CUR web site. This site provides brief summaries of the different types of celebrations of student research that occur at over 100 of its member institutions (http://www.cur.org/Publications/celebrationdays.asp#cali_slo). The institutions represented run the gamut from small private liberal arts colleges (e.g., Doane

College) to large public research universities (e.g., University of Missouri, Columbia).

Most of the institutions represented on the CUR site hold their events in the spring, usually in March or April. Events usually are a half day to a day in length, although there are examples of institutions that have week long research events (e.g., Murray State University). Some institutions, such as Albion College, actually cancel all classes on campus on the day of the event so that as many students as possible can participate and attend the presentations. A few of the institutions combine their events with honors convocations or family weekends as another way to increase the number of participants and extend attendance to members of the local community.

The most frequently used method of research presentation is the poster session. This is especially true for those institutions where the majority of presentations are from the sciences, mathematics, and psychology. Those institutions that are able to attract student participation from a wider variety of disciplines also include demonstrations, oral presentations, artistic performances/exhibitions, and debates. The number of student presentations varies greatly from a few dozen to several hundred. The number of presentations is often influenced by whether or not students are required to conduct and present research as part of their major requirements, are nominated by faculty, or if the students simply desire to present projects that they have worked on as part of a class assignment or independent study. Several schools also produce booklets containing the abstracts for the presentations and/or a list of the participants.

Specific Examples

Xavier University, a historically black institution in New Orleans, has held a two day "Festival of Scholars" on its campus in April (Crowe, 2006). Approximately 200 students representing disciplines across the university participated in the 2004-2005 event. One of the goals of the event is to increase the number of African-American students who go on to pursue graduate work. The event also serves to reinforce Xavier's movement toward becoming a teacher-scholar campus. The event is sponsored by Xavier's Center for Undergraduate Research, which is dedicated to the support and promotion of undergraduate research, creative endeavors, and other types of scholarly experiences for their students. Funding for the Center comes from a wide variety of sources and the staff works with faculty and students from all areas of the university to find financial backing for undergraduate research projects as a way of making sure that every student who expresses an

interest in doing research receives some level of support. Unfortunately, the continued success of this event has been temporarily interrupted by the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, but the dedication to continuing the effort continues on.

Bellevue University, near Omaha, NE, has an enrollment of approximately 6800 students, with around 50 percent of our students enrolled in online or satellite programs. First generation students make up the majority of our enrollment and we also have a significant number of minority students attending our institution. The use of active learning techniques, as well as the goal of promoting Real Mastery®, makes Bellevue University an ideal place for the promotion of undergraduate research experiences.

Recently, Bellevue University has held two events focused on student research. The events were designed to address two of Bellevue University's assessment objectives; analysis of information, and making informed judgments and effective communication. In 2006, the first College of Arts and Sciences Research Day was held in late April. I organized the event as the campus representative for CUR. Faculty members throughout the college encouraged their students to submit poster proposals based on course projects. Twenty posters, all from psychology and sociology, were displayed in the Durham Student Center from 11:00 am until 3:00 pm. Students stood by their posters during the lunch hour to answer any questions. In addition to the posters, the students in the Advanced Studies in Psychology course held a public presentation of their multi-media group projects which involved communicating the results of scientific research in a publicly accessible way. While the initial turnout was good, the fact that only two disciplines were represented was disappointing. I believe this was partly due to a relatively short start up time, as well as the fact that many of the faculty in the humanities were unsure how to prepare their students for a poster presentation.

During the past year, a writing initiative was implemented on our campus. Beginning in July, 2006, a group of 30 faculty members from throughout the university met on a monthly basis to discuss how to encourage and improve writing in our programs. The initiative was funded by a grant from the Armstrong McDonald Foundation. The culmination of this initiative was the "Celebration of Student Writing" which was held on April 26, 2007 in the Criss Auditorium. The event was advertised campus-wide and to the immediate Bellevue, NE community. Faculty nominated student papers for recognition of excellent writing. Empirical research papers, creative writing, case studies, and samples which "defied categorization" were represented.

Select students from each of our four colleges (Arts and Sciences, Business, Computer Information Technology, and Professional Studies) gave brief readings of their papers. Sean Doolittle, a local author, was the keynote speaker. Eighty-nine students were then presented with certificates recognizing their writing at a luncheon held on campus (P. Artz, personal communication, April 27, 2007). This was the first time that a truly campus-wide event was held recognizing students' scholarly endeavors.

Our future plans involve merging the poster session, multi-media presentations, and recognition of student writing, along with the senior thesis show in art and senior thesis presentations in natural sciences, into one, more cohesive celebration of student scholarship scheduled for April, 2008. We intend to have workshops early in the academic year to support the idea that undergraduate scholarly work in all of its expressions is important to the success of our students and to help faculty members in disciplines which are not necessarily viewed as research oriented to understand their role in the process. We are seeking additional support both from internal sources, as well as external funding agencies.

Challenges

There are many challenges in organizing campus-wide undergraduate research events. To be truly successful, the entire university community must embrace and support the importance and benefits of undergraduate research at all levels and thus provide the foundation for student presentations. Faculty need to communicate to students that it is the skill set one acquires as part of the research experience as well as the content of their major that will serve them well in their future careers. Moreover, that that skill set includes communicating their research to the public. It can be difficult and potentially threatening for faculty in areas that are not usually recognized as research focused to "think outside of the box" and view their scholarly activities

as "research" in the broadest sense. Students also need to be convinced that they can learn from others in widely disparate disciplines and that being part of a community of scholars is not equivalent to being a "geek" (Zimmer, 2005) or that it keeps them from more practical types of careers.

In addition to the conceptual issues, the time and effort which go into organizing and holding a campus-wide event are enormous. Few institutions have offices devoted solely to the support of undergraduate research so the brunt of the work often falls on individual faculty members who are already overbooked with other assignments and who may or may not receive any type of compensation for this type of endeavor. There are also financial considerations to be taken into account when organizing such events. Yet, once these challenges are faced, the benefits of promoting undergraduate research are definitely worth the effort.

References

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