

# Undergraduate Research Conferences

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Engaging undergraduates in the research process has become an important component that integrates research, teaching, and scholarship within an undergraduate curriculum. The value and importance of including research in the undergraduate psychology curriculum cannot be overstated. The APA Task Force on Undergraduate Psychology Major Competencies reinforces this contention by stating that students should develop the ability to “understand and apply basic research methods in psychology, including research design, data analysis, and interpretation” (Halonen et al., 2002, p. 8). As psychology educators, we recognize that students benefit educationally and professionally when actively involved in the research process. However, “equally important to conducting research is the dissemination of research findings through active engagement in the professional community” (Mandernach, 2006, p. 18). The benefits of presenting research at an undergraduate conference are “tri-fold”: They serve the needs of the student, the instructor, and the profession as a whole.

Anyone who has supervised undergraduate research knows that students who follow a project through from its inception to conference presentation truly experience a multidimensional growth spurt that non-involved students do not reach. Students benefit from conference participation through professional development in the form of social networking; the chance to serve as role models to their peers (Tryon, 1985); the application of principles learned in the classroom (Landrum, 2002); exposure to current innovations; the positive influence on graduate school applications (Grover, 2006; Landrum, Jeglum, & Cashin, 2004; Levine, 2000); the opportunity for career exploration and development (Seymour, Hunter, Laursen, & DeAntoni, 2004); and the ability to “reality test” aspirations in the psychology fields (Darden, Nelson, & Parsons, 2005). Undergraduates who present their findings in a public forum also gain a variety of positive experiences that include improved communication skills (Bauer & Bennett, 2003; Kardash, 2000), as well as independence and self-confidence (Seymour et al., 2004; Stuber, 1986). In terms of critical thinking, feedback from

conference participation allows students to gain a broader perspective on their work (Muszynski, n.d.).

Perhaps most central to the purpose of the undergraduate convention is its ability to provide students with the opportunity to develop more sophisticated research skills. “By participating in conferences, students learn to communicate their work to others who are genuinely interested in it” (Carsrud, Palladino, Tanke, Aubrecht, & Huber, 1984, p. 143). Additionally, “by presenting and listing to others, students are introduced to formats used at regional and national conventions – a natural first step toward presenting at such a conference” (Stuber-McEwen, Rudmann, Hailstorks, & Nesmith, 1999, p. 2). These students are also more likely to graduate than their non-involved peers (Nagada, Gregerman, Jonides, von Hippel, & Lerner, 1998) and more likely to pursue a graduate degree (Hathaway, Negda, & Gregerman, 2002). Moreover, students who participate in collaborative undergraduate research with faculty early on report “significant gains in the ability to 1) think analytically and logically; 2) put ideas together and note similarities and differences between ideas; 3) learn on their own and find information they need to complete a task” (Ishiyama, 2002, p. 380). Ishiyama also contends that these effects are particularly evident in first-generation college students, whose participation in such research and subsequent one-on-one contact with faculty may negate the effect of less support from families who are not familiar with the collegiate experience (2002).

In terms of the benefits that faculty enjoy, the mentoring relationship that develops between student and instructor can be particularly fulfilling, increasing job satisfaction while helping to create more motivated and engaged students. Unfortunately, the personal role that faculty play in the development of eventual professionals is often minimized. However, Kuh, Nelson Laird, and Umbach (2004) found that the activities faculty participate in and encourage students to participate in, as well as faculty expectations of student performance, influence what students do during college and the benefits that students derive from the collegiate experience. In addition to personal fulfillment, networking among

instructors at conferences can create a valuable support network. "It is not uncommon for faculty members to find others with similar research and teaching interests and thus develop new collegial relationships" (Carsrud et al., 1984, p. 144). These relationships may spawn new research directions or professional opportunities for participating faculty.

The profession of psychology, as a whole, benefits through the exchange of ideas at all levels. The creation of incoming members who are acquainted with the peer review process and collaborative research design is a particular boon to the field. Likewise, professional psychology education profits through the reinvigoration of instructor productivity in the research areas. Networking among faculty at different institutions serves not only to broaden instructional horizons, but also to enhance continuity across curricula by maximizing faculty exposure to current research trends and topics.

### Conference Formats

The types of conventions currently available to undergraduate students are local, regional, national, and asynchronous. Each type has benefits and drawbacks, depending upon the skill level and goals of the student presenter and faculty sponsor.

Local conferences are typically small and involve colleges or universities in relatively close proximity to the host institution. This terminology can also refer to a conference that is intended only for the students enrolled at one particular college. Although local conferences may be smaller and more limited in scope, they do offer an excellent opportunity for fledgling researchers and neophyte faculty sponsors to gain experience, as well provide a vehicle for recruitment from local high schools. Hosting local conferences also gives planners the freedom to move programming away from the more traditional formats and add special events, such as "hands on" exhibits, films, campus tours, alumni presentations, creative or artistic poster competitions, and psychology quiz bowls (Anderson & Rosenfeld, 1983; Stuber et al., 1999).

If possible, students should be given the opportunity to experience larger, regional conferences. With this exposure, students' views, expectations, or perceptions of the field of psychology may be substantially broadened. Regional undergraduate conferences are larger than local conferences in attendance and scope of subjects. They offer an opportunity for students from multiple institutions to come together and exchange ideas and

information. This conference format usually offers a choice of oral presentations, posters, and symposia formats and may involve both graduate and undergraduate students. Regional undergraduate conferences, such as the 2-day Great Plains Students' Psychology Convention, involve participants from colleges and universities from several states, and have multiple sessions occurring simultaneously. Regional psychological organizations, such as the Midwestern Psychological Association (MPA), provide time and space in their programs for a "conference within a conference." An example of this would be the Psi Chi convention for the midwestern region, which is held annually at MPA. In the case of regional conventions, students may be required to have membership in a specific organization, such as Psi Chi or the hosting association, in order to be eligible to submit or present their research.

National conferences offer an even wider exposure of students to different schools and research methods. For example, the Psi Chi National Convention, held in conjunction with APS (Association for Psychological Science), offers tremendous opportunities to foster undergraduates' professional development. National conferences offer the same presentation formats as regional conferences, and also tend to add to the available options by planning workshops and panel discussions on varying topics, as well as receptions or hospitality suites where students can interact with students from other institutions, and even well-known researchers in the field. It should be noted that regional and national conventions include presentations from all levels of education, from undergraduate to practicing professionals. Generally, the review process for national conferences may be somewhat more rigorous than for local or regional conferences. Students who have papers or posters accepted at national conventions can be assured that their works adhere to the highest standards.

Asynchronous, or online conventions, such as *BEYOND eConferences*, are a relatively new type of conference that takes advantage of the power of the Internet to bring together researchers who are restricted by geographical, financial, or time limitations. Students submit manuscripts, or post multimedia presentations and downloadable handouts for viewing at the convenience of "attendees." Discussion boards are made available for attendees to post questions or comments. This format is especially beneficial for beginning presenters, as it allows them time to formulate comprehensive answers to questions, and also removes the performance pressure of a real-time event (Mandernach, 2006).

## Confronting Barriers

Faculty who realize the advantages that conference participation offers to themselves and their students may encounter institutional barriers to involvement in conference activities. A primary problem that interested faculty may come across is a campus culture that is not informed as to the benefits of conference participation. At colleges that are not overtly supportive of conference activities, individuals or small groups of interested faculty can arrange “mini conferences” or a “Psychology Day,” where students can present their research to peers in a safe and more familiar environment. Faculty from smaller psychology departments may also invite neighboring two- and four-year schools to combine their resources and host a “mini” conference, such as those involved in the Southern California Psychology Conference (Stuber-McEwen et al., 1999). This type of activity addresses both common barriers of limited institutional support and limited faculty experience by downsizing the effort and financial outlay of the institution, while providing a “training ground” for those students and faculty mentors interested in presenting at larger conferences.

Another barrier to conference involvement may include student reluctance, lack of motivation, or environmental factors that affect the students’ ability to participate (Stuber, 1986). These obstacles occur quite frequently, but can generally be overcome with open dialogue and utilization of institutional or organizational resources. Student reluctance may manifest because of an erroneous assumption that conference participation is unnecessary if the student plans to enter the work force after completion of the baccalaureate degree. It is very important to communicate with these students how conference presentations can translate into their careers through increased public speaking and organizational skills.

There are many ways to foster the desired motivation in reluctant students, such as creating a “conference course” for credit. Levine (2000) writes about a successful experience creating a specialized course to encourage conference participation by students. The course goals and objectives were: the acquisition of knowledge in a content area of psychology, demonstration of communication and observation skills, and the realization that professional development and learning are lifelong processes. The course requirements consisted of written assignments detailing the presentations attended and a final inclusive paper over the conference as a whole, as well as meetings and attendance points for pre- and post-convention processing. Class discussion was monitored to evaluate communication skills, with the final paper

being “the primary mechanism to evaluate the degree to which the course goals are met” (pp. 208-209).

The availability of extra credit points in established psychology courses for attendance or presentations may be especially useful when dealing with indifferent students, as it affords them the chance to make up missed class points or dismal test grades, while possibly finding an area of interest and engagement outside of the classroom.

Environmental factors, such as time limitations or cost of travel and lodging, can be addressed utilizing advance planning or financial assistance from campus entities. Preplanning and fundraising through Psi Chi and Psi Beta chapters, or Psychology Clubs may be necessary. Even undergraduates should have the “opportunity to gain at least some insight into and appreciation of the skills involved in psychological research” (Palladino, Carsrud, Hulicka, & Benjamin, 1982, p. 71).

## In Closing

In *Field of Dreams*, a young farmer justifies his transformation of a section of cornfield into baseball diamond with the words, “If you build it, they will come.” The dynamics of student engagement work the same way (Kuh et al., 2004). “That is, if faculty members systematically use effective educational practices, students will engage in them and benefit in desired ways” (p. 30). As faculty we are obligated to prepare students to meet the complex challenges that will one day face them, and to give them the research foundation that will prove “personally empowering, intellectually challenging, beneficial to civic society, and eminently useful” (AAC&U, 2002, as cited in Kuh, et al., 2004, p. 26). Encouraging students to attend and present at conferences is not only considered an effective educational practice, but from a practical standpoint is *as important* to professional development as the clinical field experience. The multifaceted benefits that conference participation offers to students, faculty, and the profession of psychology as a whole are inimitable through other undergraduate educational experiences, and truly serve the purpose of student and professional enrichment.

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