

THE NATIONAL CONFERENCES ON UNDERGRADUATE RESEARCH

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The National Conferences on Undergraduate Research (NCUR®) is the largest professional organization devoted to fostering undergraduate research, scholarship, and creative accomplishments in all academic disciplines. Now in its fifteenth year, NCUR® began as a project of the National Science Foundation, the National Collegiate Honors Council, and a group of individuals at the University of North Carolina-Asheville who yearned for a mechanism for undergraduates to measure their intellectual research efforts against peers from across the country. Funding from the Camille and Henry Dreyfus Foundation, the National Science Foundation, the Council for Undergraduate Research and the Petroleum Research Fund were critical to NCUR® in its first decade. A second, equally important, precept for NCUR® from its infancy has been its conscious attempt to promote diversity among those who practice undergraduate research, seen most visibly in concrete efforts to increase the number of minority and under-represented groups of students doing such research and making presentations of their work at NCUR® or at national meetings of the professions. NCUR is a 501(c3) non-profit corporation chartered in North Carolina and governed by a twenty-four member board of governors that meets twice annually at the national conference and at a fall board meeting at the site of the upcoming conference.

Each year NCUR® sponsors an annual conference where more than 1,600 undergraduates from over 400 colleges and universities present their research in at least fifty-six academic disciplines. Four fields have historically represented more than half of those presentations-biology, chemistry, psychology, and physics. The term "research experience for undergraduates (REU)," now a standard phrase in the vocabulary of undergraduate research, came to us, too, from the National Science Foundation and programs in the sciences. Yet the sciences and social sciences each year cede a bit more of their dominant ground in undergraduate research to other areas, including the fine arts and humanities, so that the most recent conferences have had only a slim majority of presentations in the sciences.

Humanities departments have been the slowest to participate, despite the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH)'s pioneering support for undergraduate research in its innovative Younger Scholars Program. An unwillingness to acknowledge the deep collaborative enterprise that was part of today's faculty's own choices of Ph.D. dissertation sponsors, for example, often presents itself in more traditional humanities departments as resistance to embrace undergraduate research. The Younger Scholars Program, like too many functions of NEH, fell prey to the 1994 Congressional budget cuts and has not as yet been restored. Such a program, through its commitment to student inquiry, would do much to clarify the reasons for the importance of the humanities to the lives of a new generation. John Knecht and Robert McVaugh of Colgate University, Robert Dunning of the University of North Carolina-Asheville, and John Swift of Occidental College deserve mention for their leadership for increased participation of the fine arts and humanities in undergraduate research.

The Undergraduate Research Network is also part of each NCUR® conference, with sessions focusing on establishing and funding of programs, interdisciplinary approaches to undergraduate research, and the role of faculty mentors in the research process. This program, whose emphasis is on the mentor in the undergraduate research process, has done much to forge networks of practitioners in the specific disciplines, to share their experiences and discoveries of ways to stimulate student involvement in the research process.

A recent and exciting development of the organization is a joint project with the Alice and Leslie E. Lancy

Foundation--the NCUR®/Lancy grants to institutions for advancement and spread of interdisciplinary undergraduate research programs at colleges and universities. To date, this project has brought \$900,000 in grants to a variety of research, comprehensive, and liberal arts institutions of all sizes and in all regions of the United States.

The promotion of undergraduate research creates a campus-wide interdisciplinary discussion about how students learn and how research is conducted among and across the disciplines. In the arts and sciences and in the professional schools, students do theoretical and applied research, both as methods of learning along the way and as capstone experiences in their specific majors. Undergraduate research is a very effective assessment vehicle, for it requires application of knowledge to actual situations on the part of each practitioner. Annual on-campus undergraduate research conferences recognize outstanding examples of undergraduate research and nurture a community of scholarly exchange among students and faculty members. Participation in NCUR® or in one or more regional or national professional association meetings validates these student research efforts and creates a network for faculty, both within a discipline and across disciplines from across the country, who are interested in promoting undergraduate research.

This year's NCUR® conference takes place April 24-27, 2002, at the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater. Visit the website at <http://www.uww.edu/ncur2002/> to see exactly what is part of the conference, including four exciting plenary speakers and oral and poster presentations in at least 56 disciplines. The March 2003 conference will follow the Winter Olympics at the University of Utah. For more information about NCUR® and the NCUR®-Lancy initiative, please visit our website at <http://www.ncur.org/>.
