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# How to Develop and Promote an Undergraduate Research Day

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# How to Develop and Promote an Undergraduate Research Day

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## INTRODUCTION

Undergraduate research is becoming an ever larger focus for universities and colleges. Many institutions already sponsor undergraduate research forums, and there is a national council, the Council on Undergraduate Research ([www.cur.org](http://www.cur.org)), for the promotion of undergraduate research. As universities of all types become more intent on having their instructors and professors develop their own research, undergraduate students are being sought after to aid professors' established research projects where the work done in these areas can lead to later independent research. In some cases students are encouraged to develop their own research projects with the aid of a faculty member. Some states make monies available to assist students in doing research. Developing and promoting undergraduate research can generate relationships between undergraduates and their mentors or research advisors that can have many benefits.

Honors scholarship can also benefit from active involvement in promoting undergraduate research through events such as research days or forums as well. As many honors programs require a senior thesis or a capstone project, participation in a research day can provide a visible goal to motivate students to complete these projects. Research days also present a context in which students can gain experience at public speaking and presentation as practice for professional conferences, or they can simply be a chance for students to showcase their work at their university. Participation in events such as these can help honors grow in visibility on campus, attracting new students to become a part of honors. A research day can become a boon for an honors program.

There are other benefits a research day can have for honors. Honors students can develop a set of presentations that highlight specific work they do within their university. In this way, the work undertaken to complete their projects can be considered a model for the type of intra-honors community building through writing advocated by Reik (2005). Honors faculty and staff can use research day presentations as trial runs for student presentations to be showcased at the National Collegiate Honors Council or regional honors meetings.

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Participation in a research day might also provide ways of demonstrating to other departments how honors can aid students in fulfilling the research requirements of their disciplines. By demonstrating that honors is actively involved in research, faculty can encourage students to become part of honors. And finally, a research day that solely highlights the work of honors students can strengthen an honors community through joint work towards a specific goal. If honors students are encouraged to participate and this participation supported, honors students can become a more unified community, thereby helping their program become more active. In this way, the students can use their projects and successes to entice other students to join honors. In many ways, an undergraduate research day can work both with and for honors students and the program itself.

Aside from the benefits listed above, an undergraduate research day or forum can provide more general benefits to the university. It allows students in all disciplines to recognize and appreciate each other's work. It provides opportunities for students and faculty to interact and share ideas, perhaps encouraging new research projects for both faculty and students. It provides students encouragement to finish projects they have started, to interact with other students, and to become more aware of the work occurring across their university or college.

In what follows I will give a detailed look at the development and organization of an undergraduate research day. I explore its promotion across campus, recruitment of students and faculty, funding, program arrangement, and printing as well as other issues germane to the development and successful completion of an undergraduate research day. I begin by laying out timelines and the preparatory work involved in a research day. I take the reader on a journey from mid-summer to late spring when the undergraduate research day is held. I next turn to promotion, the difficult tasks of getting both students and professors involved, and the need for diversity. I close the piece with a look back, noting there is always need for improvement and providing some general remarks.<sup>1</sup>

### DEVELOPING AN UNDERGRADUATE RESEARCH DAY

At my university, the undergraduate research day is called Undergraduate Scholars Day (USD). USD is coming to the close of its first decade in existence and is becoming more and more popular with students and faculty. USD

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<sup>1</sup> In general, the Undergraduate Scholars Day at my university is run by me with the aid of my administrative assistant. I take care of the recruitment, arrangement, program work and direction of the day itself. This work could be done by a committee, but I would worry that this would cause more difficulties. Certainly if the number of presentations were such that you had four or more rooms running at one time, a committee might help disperse the work; as of now, one or two people could adequately make the arrangements for the size of our USD.

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represents a wonderful opportunity for students to become more active and involved, and it provides faculty with a recognizable goal to help students complete projects. For these reasons USD has become a staple on our campus. USD traditionally occurs in late spring during our Convocation of Scholars week. The Convocation of Scholars is a week devoted to the recognition of scholarship across the university. Honors societies host dinners and admit new students, and the president has a dinner for members of the university who are recognized for their accomplishments. Preparations for the event begin in late summer of the previous year.

The first order of business is to secure the proper rooms and space for the event. Emails are sent to the building manager during the summer requesting these spaces for the bulk of the day, and technology requests (projectors, audio, etc.) are made at that time. The choice of venue is critically important as the location can have serious effects on student attendance at the panels and presentations. A central location with high visibility is preferable. In general, one would want to hold the research day in an area that can support presentations of artwork, traditional "talk" presentations, and small concerts. Any project or work produced by the university can be a source of presentation. Restricting the type of presentations one could have seems to create unnecessary obstacles to a diverse and representative program. For the past two years the USD has been held in the newly built student union. This space has meeting rooms; a large, open, and naturally lit space ideal for the displaying of student projects in the visual arts; and a large auditorium.

Space requirements for the program are determined from the previous year's presentations with allowance for a larger program. The event runs from 9am to 6pm with an hour and a half lunch break scheduled at noon. Securing the proper space is a rather simple chore but, if undertaken too late, can lead to a less than desirable space since premium spaces on campus, those in a central location that can accommodate a variety of needs, fill up early. Once the room and technology requests are complete, the real work of USD begins: the recruitment of faculty and students to participate.

Initial requests for presentations are aimed at professors and sent out in the middle of the fall term; requests and mailers sent out earlier are too easily ignored. Reminders are sent via an electronic campus newsletter that comes daily to every faculty, staff and student's email. The following is an example of an email notification.

To All Faculty

We need your assistance in identifying student work for this year's Undergraduate Scholars Day (USD). Your course work and/or position indicate that you are in a position to readily identify the students that could participate in USD.

USD is a program that allows students to present their research, collaborative or otherwise, in a professional setting. USD provides a unique opportunity for students to present in a

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friendly and supportive atmosphere. Such a presentation also gives experience that looks good on the CV or resume. USD is a great opportunity for students to learn of other research occurring in the university.

For General Information Contact . . .

Contact information is provided and faculty are encouraged to identify students who have a project suitable for presentation or who need of a specific goal to help them complete a project. Sometimes this helps faculty urge a student to continue to work and develop projects with which they are involved.

In promoting and developing interest for an undergraduate research forum, it is helpful to work from both the top down and bottom up within the university. Notifications and personal meetings with deans and department chairs can be useful aids in reminding faculty to encourage students to become involved with USD. The bottom-up strategy is also helpful, but meeting with a large number of faculty individually poses serious logistical difficulties. However, efforts should be made to work through personal contacts and encourage them to identify and recruit students and to help spread the word about USD to other faculty. Another method of recruitment is an email sent directly to faculty who are currently teaching or have recently taught research methods classes in their departments. These faculty can be a strong source of student presentations as their courses are directly involved in research. In all, autumn reminders are there to plant a seed in the minds of faculty about the upcoming research day. Other sources of student presentations might be student organizations that sponsor essay contests. At Arkansas State University, the philosophy club sponsors an undergraduate essay contest, and the top three essayists are offered a chance to present at USD. Certain university scholarship and study programs can also provide and encourage students to participate in USD. There are a number of avenues to find students; the difficulty is making those groups aware of and interested in presenting at the research day.

The real preparatory work for USD begins early in the spring term. Email reminders are sent out a couple of times a week in the daily newsletter. Specific faculty and programs that have expressed interest are contacted in order to begin to get a sense of early numbers. By the middle of January, deadlines are posted for submissions, making it seem that they are firm. In all honesty, the deadlines are soft; they allow for late entries or delays that always arise in an event of this sort. However, due dates for submissions should be such that students and professors work hard to meet an early deadline so that tardy entries do not threaten program publication and distribution.

Submissions for USD require a title, author, faculty mentor, and abstract of 150–250 words. Students must have a faculty mentor who has aided them in the submission process. Presenters should expect to present for 10–15 minutes. Editing of the content and quality of submissions is left to the faculty mentors, but there is some general editing of the entire program to ensure consistency of entries and to double check that there are no obvious mistakes in the submissions.

The deadlines for submission are on or about the first week of March. Due to printing deadlines, formatting, editing, and the fact that spring break falls in middle of March, the entire program needs to be to the printing department by the third week of March in order to have proofs done in a time that allows for substantial changes (which there will be). While it is helpful to have all submissions in by the advertised deadline, events rarely seem to work out that way.

In years past, submissions were sent via email to the event coordinator. This proved both a blessing and a curse. It made the assembly of the catalog easy as it was simply a matter of arranging the submissions and working them into the proper order. However, source formatting for the individual entries often differed in ways that provided difficulties when the catalog was transferred to the software package used in the printing press. For instance, titles that had superscripts and subscripts often did not translate easily into the printing software, leading to interesting difficulties in maintaining a consistent format. In order to alleviate these formatting issues, this year's entries can be submitted only via an online form. The form removes all formatting tags and puts them in a uniform format. We hope this will remove some of the problems that were time consuming to correct.

Once a general idea of the numbers involved has been ascertained, a rough schedule is made. The sessions are arranged thematically. Students with presentations in the same major or department are kept together, and if there are enough students focusing on the same theme or working under the same faculty advisor or collaborating on the same research project, they are given a session devoted to that topic. Time slots are allotted on a first-come-first-serve basis. The midday slots are given to those students who had their submissions in early. As submissions come in beyond the deadline, the remaining slots are filled. Sometimes there is a need to shift arrangements as a certain theme will arise that was not present in the initial development of the program. Once the program is completed and edited, it is sent to the printers.

A typical USD presentation session runs roughly one hour. It is expected that three persons can present in each hour. Presenters are told to plan for a 10–15 minute presentation with time for questions. Each session is chaired by a volunteer faculty member. Faculty who have acted as mentors are the first choice for session chairs as they are more intimately related to the work and can provide support to the students presenting. If there are still available slots, faculty with experience in the topics are contacted. Usually, however, mentors are sufficient to fill the slots for session chairs.

Students, mentors, and chairs are all informed of their respective sessions well in advance. They are then encouraged to invite anyone they think appropriate to their sessions. Students have asked if family members can come, and the response is that anyone is welcome who has an interest. Faculty are also encouraged to generate student attendance as well. Some faculty have given extra credit to students who attend. The larger the program and the more "buzz" created, the better.

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The program is a critical aspect of USD at Arkansas State University. The program is more than simply a schedule; it is also a tool to promote various parts of the university. For example, the front and back covers of the program feature art work from a faculty-designated student in the art department. The student is featured and given credit both on the back cover and in the interior. The program also includes a thank-you page written by the event coordinator personally thanking all the faculty mentors and session chairs. There is also a separate cover letter from the event coordinator thanking all those involved, explaining the purpose of the USD and inviting persons who are interested to think about USD for next year and to think also about joining honors (this last plug for honors is in the program simply because the event coordinator happens to be an honors administrator).

The program can also be a vehicle to bring in funds. Advertising space can be sold, and special thanks can be given to groups or businesses that underwrite the production of the USD and its catalog. The program is also a keepsake that students and mentors can keep to remind them of the experience. Finally, and certainly not least important, the program can be sent to administrators and others to show what has been accomplished and to recruit more involvement the following year. The program, if done well, can be a useful tool for recruitment for the honors program.

Once the day of the event arrives, programs must be set out and rooms checked to make sure all the equipment is available. The event coordinator must act as the master of ceremonies for the entire day and be ready to handle any occurrence. This is not always easy. This past year's USD was held in a section of our student union near a construction site that was producing a noxious odor. Some of the rooms were thus quite unpleasant, but there was nothing to be done except continue on. Letters of complaint were sent, but ultimately the very best programs are never without some troubles. Nevertheless, the program was a success, and we had substantially more presenters than in prior years. Notes were taken, suggestions sought and listened to. My personal copy of the program is littered with marginalia and notes of corrections, errors and suggestions for future programs. It is a valuable source of information in the development of the upcoming USD.

### TIMELINE

In this section I give a schematic representation of the timeline that is used for the promotion and development of the USD at Arkansas State University. Some of this information can be found in the prior section, but this format of presentation has the added benefit of a timeline that can be easily adapted to the specifics of your university.

#### July

- Initial requests for rooms made
- Response expected late July

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### **August**

- Room requests followed up
- Initial technology requests made
- Contacts made with professors and instructors of courses likely to produce student presentations (research methods courses, advanced courses, special topics, seminars)
- Lists of current chairs and faculty made ready for later contact
- Representatives of research day and Honors program sent to college and chair meetings to explain the roles and goals of honors and the research day—representatives entertain questions and distribute one-page handout

### **September**

- Email request-for-students and faculty notifications edited relative to the dates and times of the coming USD event

### **October** (middle or late)

- Message posted on campus email
- Deans and Chairs contacted and asked to remind faculty of research day

### **November** (middle to late)

- Notification emails sent out via campus newsletter and set to run every other day until the close of the semester
- Professors in the art department contacted to generate student artwork for the cover of the USD catalog—one artist featured for the covers of the program

### **December**

- Testing of website entry page

### **January**

- Notifications sent directly to chairs and deans reminding them about USD
- Electronic campus newsletter notifications begun, running once a week
- Advertisement of the early March deadline for submissions
- Professors active in prior USD contacted
- Interested faculty contacted and inquiries made as to student progress
- Blank schedule made in Excel for session times

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### February

- Interested faculty contacted
- Deadline reminders sent via electronic campus newsletter and to interested faculty
- Print shop contacted and initial plans for the catalog drawn up

### March

- Initial arrangement of catalog and schedule begun
- Editing of abstracts begun
- Catalog completed including schedule and times sent to the printers (by the end of March)
- Student presenters, faculty, and mentors sent information on the program

### April

- Finished catalogs distributed to college and departmental offices for publicity
- Updated technology requests sent to facilities management for the event
- Students sent, via mentors, times and dates for their presentations
- Session chairs reminded of their times
- Interviews arranged with the campus paper and campus radio station on the upcoming research day
- Mid-April—The Day finally arrives
- Post-conference meeting with the main organizers to discuss the successes and problems of the recent USD

### May

- Extra programs with an attached letter describing the success of the USD distributed to various administrators on campus (Vice Presidents, Provosts, Deans, Chairs, President of the university, and marketing)

## CONCLUSION

The work of the prior sections has, I hope, given the reader a sense of not only what is involved in developing an undergraduate research day but also some of the benefits such a forum can have. The process is long and involved. However, with the proper approach the work can be reduced to easily accomplished tasks.

Getting students and faculty interested in becoming part of the program is perhaps the most important activity of a research day organizer. As I learned in

graduate school, pleasant persistence is usually the most effective way to proceed. Faculty will avoid you if you are difficult to deal with, and this serves no other end than harming the program and perhaps the coordinator's later social life on campus. While it is sometimes frustrating to get people to respond to requests and meet deadlines, if the deadlines are set in order to expect such eventualities, then there is ample room for flexibility and less stress.

In addition to the benefits that a research day might have for the university in general, there is one final benefit that undergraduate research can have specifically for honors. An undergraduate research day can help bridge disciplines and approaches by exposing students to the wide variety of research occurring at the university. Often, when we are asked what honors is, we stress that honors allows students to unify and blend various disciplinary approaches. Interdisciplinary seminars, arranged thematically and taught by a variety of instructors from across campus, encourage students to see the continuity of research rather than viewing programs and departments as autonomous islands within the university. If students are continually given the opportunity to see what types of research are occurring at the university, they might be encouraged to seek out areas of education of which they would otherwise be ignorant. Thus, a research day can help the students meet the goals of breadth and depth of education so often promoted in honors.

I have two final points. Research day organizers should strive to make the program as inclusive as possible, working with programs and departments to make sure their research models are represented and finding creative ways to bring in multiple perspectives. And my last point is that organizers should always be looking for new ideas. One of the changes in our upcoming coming program, for instance, is the invitation of potential scholarship students to visit and attend some of the presentations at USD, thus allowing us to recruit students to our university and into our honors program as well as providing information to recruiters on what our university has to offer. The benefits of an undergraduate research day are as limitless as the imagination of its organizer.

## REFERENCE

Reik, E., (2005). Building Community and Fostering Excellence through the Writing Process. *Honors in Practice, Vol 1*, 103–109.

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