

A Multifaceted Approach to Communicating About Undergraduate Research

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This article will discuss several strategies related to marketing undergraduate research, describing how an increase in faculty activity led the administration and faculty at California Lutheran University to work together to organize undergraduate research activities on campus. While this was happening, the admissions office took note and started gathering information on these activities. Structural changes in admissions and marketing occurred, which created new strategies for developing and sharing marketing messages about undergraduate research. As a result, we can offer preliminary results of the effectiveness of our messaging about this research. This marketing process and feedback can assist other institutions, especially smaller universities, in coordinating their messaging about undergraduate research in a more effective manner.

California Lutheran University (CLU) is a relatively young institution, having been established in 1959 as California Lutheran College. The predominantly residential institution, with a total enrollment of 3,931 (including 2,545 undergraduates) has deep roots in the liberal arts and offers 36 undergraduate majors and 31 minors, plus an accelerated degree program in the evening for adults. It has granted master's degrees since 1972 and doctorates since 2006. The average class size is 22 students.

The primary role of the faculty at CLU is teaching, although faculty interests in, and the institutional expectations for, scholarship have increased recently. With these increases has come an increase in mentored undergraduate research and creative activity and a more deliberate approach to educating faculty regarding such undergraduate work.

Faculty and Administration Initiatives

In the summer of 2006, CLU sent a team of faculty to the CUR National Conference. This team came back to campus excited about the concept of a campus-wide celebration of student and faculty scholarly and creative work, and in the spring of 2007, the university hosted its first Festival of Scholars. In February 2008, a different team of faculty attended the CUR workshop Institutionalizing Undergraduate Research. As part of the action plan developed during the workshop, the team proposed the establishment of an office for undergraduate

research. The office opened in July 2008 and moved into a permanent space in April 2010. The office hosts the Festival of Scholars, along with a fall celebration of summer research, the Student Research Symposium. It also oversees new grant programs (for summer research and professional travel grants) and hosts other events related to undergraduate research for both students and faculty. Even the university's branding message "Experience Success" has been given a new spin and made into "Experience Research" by our Office of Creative Media, for use by the undergraduate research office and other constituents (see Figure 1). The university's relative youth has enabled these changes to occur more quickly than at a university with greater investment in the status quo. CLU encourages entrepreneurial activities and is supportive of change, when warranted.

Figure 1: Original and Altered Branding Logo to Highlight Research at CLU



The increase in the campus's undergraduate research activities can be quantified in a number of ways. The most striking is the number of departments and students participating in the Festival of Scholars. When it was created, the first event featured 22 sessions with 84 student presenters from a small subset of disciplines. The 2011 event hosted 41 sessions involving 312 students from nearly every discipline on campus. The event now involves an online process for submitting abstracts and granting approval to presenters, to give students a realistic experience of a professional conference. Additionally, the university now offers four (with a fifth starting in summer 2012) different full-time summer research programs, with funding for up to 30 students.

Experiential learning, especially undergraduate research, is an integral part of our university's teaching and learning culture. Unfortunately, the message about undergraduate research initially was not spreading outside of those directly involved in the research activities. Most people outside the university still thought of it as a "teaching college" and did



During the 2010 Festival of Scholars, California Lutheran President Chris Kimball listens as Elizabeth Calkins explains her project, "Cross-cultural Differences in the Age of Earliest Memories in the Swahili and Maasai of Kenya."

not realize that the university was making an important transition into becoming much more active in research.

The admissions office had a process for gathering general information from all departments, but it did not focus on gathering data concerning students' involvement in undergraduate research. Then at some meetings with faculty from key majors (exercise science and bioengineering, most prominently) admissions representatives started to hear more and more exciting things about undergraduates doing serious academic research. After that (2004-2005), the admissions office began asking all disciplines about what research and experiential learning activities they were sponsoring. Excited by the potential the stories about research had to help the institution more effectively recruit top students, the admissions office began talking about research with departments that might not have articulated their experiential learning activities as "research." As our Office for Undergraduate Research took shape, it worked with admissions to more effectively collect data and help support the generation of more undergraduate research.

Structural Changes

Prior to 2009, the undergraduate admission office was led by a dean, while graduate admission was run by a loose network of faculty and administrators. CLU's marketing office and the Creative Media office were separate from each other and from offices charged with marketing CLU to the single most important and sizable constituency—prospective students and their families.

In 2009, a new cabinet-level position, a vice president for enrollment management and marketing, was created. This position supervises the undergraduate and graduate admission operations, in addition to the marketing and media departments. A systematic approach to gathering information about undergraduate research was then adopted. Functionally, this means that information gathered about undergraduate research in each discipline can be communicated to all internal and external audiences with greater accuracy and consistency. These changes effectively merged the intellectual pursuits of the faculty and the information-gathering efforts of the admissions office with the efforts of the marketing and media teams.

Collecting information about undergraduate research activities has evolved over time. For a few years, admissions attempted to gather information from every major. Some of this was done by inviting department chairs or deans to a meeting with admissions staff; sometimes data was collected via email exchanges. One year, each admissions staff member worked with an academic division, gathering information over the phone, in person, or via email about departmental activities, including undergraduate research, in the various majors. Over time, information was obtained on a rotating system in which a professor from each major would meet with the admissions staff once every two to three years. More attention was given to departments that demonstrated a clear commitment to research and an interest in sharing that information with admissions. These units included exercise science, bioengineering, biology, chemistry, environmental science, and global studies. The overarching philosophy was that every department at the institution was charged with providing recruitment and marketing messages to the administration.

One of the most significant or visible outputs from this data collection is the annual Key Messages document, which typically is about 30 pages long and provides talking points for nearly every facet of academic and student life at CLU. It always includes details about undergraduate research projects and opportunities both separately and within the summary of each major. There is also an abbreviated version of the messages document.

Who Gets the Messaging?

The audiences reach far beyond the expected groups, with the messages about undergraduate research targeted at both external and internal audiences through use of the Key Messages document. The external audiences are mostly traditional: prospective undergraduates currently in high school, as well as transfer students. However, the need to communicate more deliberately with prospective students' parents and with high school counselors has been recognized. Messages about research, professional, or graduate school outcomes have been shaped to fit these other audiences as well.

The internal audiences include the Offices of Parent and Alumni Relations, University Advancement, Church Relations, and Athletics, as well as the Board of Regents. Alumni who volunteer to help recruit new students often attend college fairs outside of the immediate area, and, by providing the messages document to them as well as other training materials, the institution has helped ensure that a current and correct message about the university is being shared, regardless of when the individual graduated from CLU. Further, alumni knowledge of the institution is enhanced by our primary fall research event, the Student Research Symposium, which takes place on homecoming weekend.

Now that the Office of University Advancement is kept up to date on the interests and activities in undergraduate research, its representatives are better able to educate prospective donors about our needs. This has led to the receipt of large private grants to purchase key equipment and fund summer undergraduate research programs at CLU. The ability to "tell the story" about CLU in its current form is invaluable.

The Regents receive the key points and often meet with student researchers. At the spring 2011 Regents meeting, the Board attended a special undergraduate research poster session and later had dinner with the student researchers. This first-hand, personal knowledge on the part of the Board is invaluable, and some members have provided financial support for undergraduate research. In particular, one member has funded the Swenson Summer Research Fellowship Program (which now supports 15 full-time summer researchers) for five years.

With the addition of several new athletic facilities, renewed emphasis has been placed on recruiting student athletes

who are more competitive on the field, as well as in the classroom. Since nearly a third of our current students participate in varsity athletics, it is imperative that coaches convey the same messages about student research to share with families.

Communicating the Message

The message about undergraduate research at CLU is communicated in both traditional and unusual ways. Some of the methods we use are feasible at all institutions, while others are possible only at smaller institutions.

Traditional Recruiting Events

Most admissions offices engage in off-campus events to recruit prospective students, such as college fairs hosted by cities, school districts, or specific schools. At such events, the CLU's admissions office offers prospective students one-on-one discussions with admissions counselors, alumni, faculty, and/or current students. These interactions have been found to be more effective and better present a typical student's experience than standard speeches. Because we provide a message about specific examples of undergraduate research, potential students receive a better explanation of what current students are engaged in and what possibilities exist for future students. The existence of the undergraduate research office draws attention to the institution's commitment to such activities.

At traditional on-campus recruiting events, the faculty-student relationships so important for successful undergraduate research are highlighted. Along with meeting with an admissions counselor, prospective students frequently sit in on a class in their desired major and meet a faculty member in that department. This authentic experience helps the student determine if the university is a good fit, and it can be the beginning of that all-important mentoring relationship.

Annual Admitted Student Day

During this event, between 700 and 1000 visitors come to campus for a full day of activities. Students and their families attend sessions on what first-year and transfer students can expect and also can attend an optional session on financial aid information. The primary event, titled "Experience CLU," includes an open house staffed by representatives of academic departments and an Involvement Fair where prospective students can learn about extracurricular activities

on campus. The former includes faculty and current students at tables sharing information about their majors. Departments are encouraged to include visual examples of scholarly work by students (e.g., poster presentations), which serve as an excellent way to showcase the exciting work being done by current students. The Office of Undergraduate Research also has a table at this event, which includes a student researcher as well as representative student work. The packet of materials that prospective students receive at check-in for the event includes an informational flyer about the possible research and creative activities.

Honors Visit Day

This event provides an opportunity for the highest-achieving admitted students to visit campus, learn about the honors program, and compete for full-tuition scholarships. Interwoven throughout the event are one-on-one student discussions with professors from students' chosen majors, mock classes, and an informational session about the honors program and undergraduate research featuring the director of the research office and current students and their activities. Attendees receive the booklet of abstracts from our most recent Festival of Scholars (which includes approximately 250 student abstracts from all disciplines across campus). New to the program in 2011 was a poster session during the last hour of the day's activities during which several current students presented their research projects to the admitted students. The high school seniors got to experience what it is like to attend a conference and interact with researchers, while the current students are able to practice speaking about their research with an engaged audience. The goal was to help establish undergraduate research as the norm. When the potential honors students see students who are just a few years older presenting original research, they understand what is possible at CLU and that the university provides the skills, tools, faculty mentoring, and resources to help them do similar work.

CLU 101: High School Counselor Event

Many universities have some type of program at which they host high school counselors. Sometimes it is just a lunch; other events host counselors for a few hours as part of a multi-college tour. On our campus, a group of 20 to 30 counselors is hosted for three days each year in January so that their undivided attention is on CLU and what it

can offer their students. This event, CLU 101, provides the counselors with access to faculty and students in both formal and informal venues. The counselors attend a formal session in which faculty involved in the honors program and in mentoring undergraduate researchers, along with the director of the undergraduate research office, discuss the intellectual and academic atmosphere at CLU. Each year, a session lasting 30 to 40 minutes is held in our Biomechanics and Exercise Physiology Laboratories, where current students showcase the equipment. The students demonstrate for the counselors their ability to use the motion capture system or the metabolic carts or the visitors are involved as subjects in a mock data collection.

Each year, the counselors comment about how impressive the facilities for research are, as well as how unique it is for a smaller university to have such a strong emphasis on research. They recognize the value placed on the faculty-student collaborative model. Information shared with high school counselors is a long-term investment. They share this information with colleagues at their high school but also with counselors from other high schools at professional conferences. Since the institution is often thought of as a teaching-only university, having the counselors able to spread our messaging is invaluable to the mission.

Callu Admissions Magazine

Beginning in 2007, the admissions office worked with external marketing consultants to change our "view book"—the primary printed recruitment publication—into a much more visually appealing version, with the text focused on the stories of students and faculty. A different edition is published each semester and includes several pages devoted to undergraduate research in various disciplines. These pages include visuals of current students working with cutting-edge lab equipment or dressed in professional attire presenting their research to audiences. The graphics and corresponding text make for a compelling message about how serious CLU is about undergraduate research. The magazine can be viewed online at <http://blogs.callutheran.edu/callu/> and includes some video pieces along with the images and text.

The Results and Future Plans

CLU has experienced unprecedented growth in the number of student inquiries and applications, which have more

than doubled over the past two years. Internal and external market forces have contributed to this growth, as have enhanced recruitment and marketing practices. The use of undergraduate research in our recruitment and marketing has been important in this outcome. For example, all new students (entering freshmen and transfer students) take part in our orientation for new students, which includes both required and optional sessions. More than 100 students each of the last two academic years attended an optional session at which information was shared about the possibilities of undergraduate research, and current research students discussed their projects. From these events, a list of interested students was obtained, and the students' names and contact information was shared with department chairs.

To assess the success of our overall messaging, a simple survey was given to 223 of the approximately 500 freshmen in the fall of 2011. The survey was administered in 10 sections of the First Year Experience class, as well as at the orientation meeting. The students sampled represented a good cross section of students from different majors. Students were asked, "Prior to becoming a student at CLU, have you heard about undergraduate students participating in research at CLU?" Results are given in Table 1.

Of those surveyed, 46 percent of the respondents had received the message about undergraduate research. Natural science majors (58 percent) were more likely to have heard about undergraduate research opportunities at CLU than undeclared majors (45 percent) and non-science majors (33 percent). Of those who had heard about research opportunities, 45 percent said it was a positive factor in the decision to attend CLU, although this varied depending on

their major. For natural science majors, it was a positive factor for 66 percent of the students surveyed, while for non-science and undeclared majors it was a positive factor for 26 percent and 20 percent, respectively. For the remaining students, it was not a factor. No student reported it as a negative factor in the decision-making process.

On average, prospective students received the message about undergraduate research from 2.6 different sources, with the most common sources being Admitted Student Day, a CLU student, the university's web site, or a CLU professor. The least common sources were high school counselors, college fairs, and athletics coaches. There was no difference in the number of sources based on major.

This survey information reveals some important issues in the messaging related to the students' major. Natural science students are hearing the message more frequently, and the message is more important in their decision-making process. Fewer non-science students are hearing the message, and they do not deem it to be as important a message as natural science students do. This difference is not unexpected and may be related to a lack of understanding of what is covered by the word "research." The survey also reveals that on-campus messaging is more effective than that off-campus. Again, this is not unexpected. The effectiveness of messaging from CLU students and faculty is likely linked to the great increase in student-faculty research that is taking place.

We have begun to use another survey instrument that collects data from students who choose not to attend. When students withdraw from our inquiry, applicant, or admitted-student pools at any time, they are contacted to gather as much information as possible about why they chose not to continue with CLU. This instrument can be modified from

year to year to target specific areas, including prospective students' perceptions of academic rigor and opportunities for research. On the flip side, we will be gathering data on the percentage of graduating seniors each year who engaged in mentored undergraduate research during their time at CLU.

Table 1: Results of Survey About Undergraduate Research Message, by Student Major

Student Major	Number of students	Received message	Did not receive message	Received message (%)	Positive factor in decision (%)	Number of sources
Natural Science	106	62	44	58%	66%	2.6
Non-science	104	34	70	33%	26%	2.6
Mixed double majors	2	1	1	50%	0%	4.0
Undecided	11	5	11	45%	20%	2.0
Total	223	102	126	46%	45%	2.6

Finally, the university is currently undergoing the development of its next strategic plan, and serious discussions are under way about having experiential learning (including research) adopted as a foundational element in the plan.

Translation for Other Campuses

What is unique to this scenario is the fact that parallel efforts were being made across the campus. You may frequently have an administration or a small faculty group wanting to increase undergraduate research, but not a collective effort and desire. Likewise, the admissions office noted this shift, even before it had become formalized, which enabled it to immediately infuse messages about undergraduate research activities into its recruiting activities. Restructuring and the creation of a vice presidential position to manage enrollment and marketing efforts enhanced the efforts being made by the admissions office to gather data on the extent of undergraduate research and disseminate the message. Having access to the upper administration and regents also may be unusual.

What is not unique to this scenario is the importance of a collaborative effort in messaging. Having the admissions office or the marketing office work to gather information is not going to be as effective or accurate as if both offices are involved and draw on data from faculty and student researchers themselves. This principle is highlighted in the Council for Advancement and Support of Education's Principles of Practice for Communications and Marketing Professionals at Educational Institutions (2004), which states that successful marketing occurs when you "involve internal constituencies across the organization."

The importance of being explicit about what is meant by the word "research" was also revealed in our survey data. The CLU campus has very active researchers across disciplines, and the Key Points document highlights many of these exciting activities, but that message was not effectively relayed to all students. While most campuses invest a great amount of resources in marketing materials, the power of messaging from casual conversations with current students and faculty should not be overlooked.

Reference

Council for Advancement and Support of Education. 2004. *Principles of Practice for Communications and Marketing Professionals at Educational Institutions*. Accessed October 20, 2011. http://www.case.org/Samples_Research_and_Tools/Principles_of_Practice/Principles_of_Practice_for_Communications_and_Marketing_Professionals_at_Educational_Institutions.html

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