

From Washington Partners

Undergraduate Research Advocates Should Visit Capitol Hill

The most visible advocacy event that CUR hosts in Washington, D.C., every year is Posters on the Hill (http://www.cur.org/conferences_and_events/student_events/posters_on_the_hill/). This event brings student researchers and their faculty mentors to Capitol Hill each spring, and it is generally the hallmark of CUR's advocacy efforts. This year, however, the spring event will be quickly followed by another opportunity to send hundreds of advocates to the Hill. From June 28 to July 1 CUR will be hosting its 16th National Conference, titled, "Creating the Citizens of Tomorrow: Undergraduate Research for All," in the nation's capital. As an organization that encourages its members to actively advocate for undergraduate research, CUR urges its members to take advantage of proximity to their Senators and Representatives whenever possible.

The location is a fitting one for the National Conference's theme of democratizing undergraduate research. The gathering will highlight cross-disciplinary connections and collaborations among higher education, government agencies, and non-profit organizations. It will also give attendees the opportunity to drop by the offices of their elected representatives.

Members planning to attend can avail themselves of various resources to support their advocacy on the website (<http://www.cur.org/advocacy/>), including an Advocacy Toolkit and tips for setting up meetings with their Senators and Representatives. There are also talking points on undergraduate research and its place in federal policy debates that members can use while on the Hill. These tools will give advocates the basics regarding setting up a meeting and the mechanics of a would-be conversation with a Senator, Representative, or staff member. While this information is crucial to a successful meeting, it is the stories of discovery and innovation that resonate with policymakers. One saying in advocacy circles regarding elected officials is, basically, "Data makes you credible, stories make you memorable." Members of Congress want to hear how young people unsure of their educational aspirations discovered a passion for science through conducting undergraduate research. They want to hear how a persistent young artist discovered something new about his or her favorite painter. Or they are interested in how a faculty mentor rediscovered his or her talent for teaching by guiding young people through their research efforts. It is the stories and faces that connect policymakers to an issue. Then it is the policymakers' job to connect that issue to an initiative or program.

In case anyone hasn't been subjected to endless campaign commercials so far this year, here's a reminder—CUR's members will be in Washington for their conference during an election year. Every member of the House is up for reelection in 2014, as is a third of the Senate. In addition, there are 36 gubernatorial races this year. That's a lot of people running for office. Visitors to the Hill who come from Congressional districts with contentious campaign battles under way may get some extra attention from their elected officials this year, even though lawmakers may put off making any difficult choices until after voters render their verdicts.

Even so, many incumbents will be reelected, so Hill visits before the election still have an impact. And regardless of the timing, lawmakers—both incumbents and newcomers—will eventually have to deal with a number of policy issues that will affect undergraduate researchers, faculty, institutions of higher education, and the overall research enterprise. The America COMPETES Act, which invests in federal STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) education programs and research agencies, will be a timely topic of debate on the Hill. The same is true for the Higher Education Act, which includes countless provisions and programs important to colleges of every shape and size.

Even if the summer of 2014 marks the first conversation between an undergraduate research advocate and a Congressional office, there will likely be many additional opportunities to share stories and expertise that could affect policy debates before new laws are signed. If CUR members have attended any advocacy workshops or presentations, they know that effective advocacy is based on relationships. They have the opportunity to establish one or make one stronger each time they visit D.C.

The overall goals of CUR's National Conference always are to encourage broad participation in undergraduate research and to make visible the benefits it affords to students, faculty, colleges and universities, and communities. A trip up to Capitol Hill certainly supports that aspiration.

Washington Partners, LLC

Washington Partners is a full-service, government-relations firm in Washington, D.C., that works with CUR to promote the interests of undergraduate research with legislators and other key policy leaders.

