

Developing a Showcase for Undergraduate Research: A Georgia Southern Version of Posters on the Hill

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In the mid 1980's, our university's foundation, local governments, and chamber of commerce initiated an event during the state legislative session to showcase the university and local area. The Legislative Wild Game Supper has become an anticipated event for the legislators, governor, and board of regents each January. We saw an opportunity for our own version of "Posters on the Hill" and lobbied our administration for permission to initiate an undergraduate research poster session at the Wild Game Supper, which was granted with support of the provost.

A committee of faculty with strong commitments to undergraduate research and representing each of our five colleges designed a call for posters and solicited interest from students and faculty mentors. The call for posters simply requested basic contact information, the title of the presentation, and a 150-word abstract. Each faculty mentor was asked to submit a brief statement addressing the student's ability to present the work and to represent the university in a professional manner.

The call for posters was posted on a faculty listserv. We were disappointed to receive only thirteen submissions for the ten available spots. Our initial disappointment heightened our determination to make this event successful, so we went to work reviewing the abstracts.

The review process was loosely defined. We wanted projects from each of the five colleges, but agreed not to sacrifice quality for representation. Each committee member independently reviewed each abstract, judging on the quality of the research described, with extra "points" for projects that might be of special interest to legislators. (We felt our biggest initial impact would come from showcasing projects of interest to our intended audience.) The diverse interests of the committee members helped us maintain a broad view of undergraduate research and facilitated the selection process when questions about the "suitability" of a given project arose. After individual and group review of each abstract, nine were selected for presentation.

The committee provided the selected student researchers with tips for effective poster presentations from the CUR-L listserv (Landolt, 1997). Space limitations at the site restricted poster size to 36" x 48."

Before holiday break, the students were notified that a dress rehearsal of the poster session would be held about two weeks before the event. The rationale for this "practice" was threefold. First, we wanted to discourage procrastination. Second, the committee wanted to see the posters in order to make suggestions for improvement. Finally, realizing that the greatest fear of undergraduates at these types of events is being questioned about their projects, each committee member asked questions and helped the students learn to give clear, concise answers targeted at a lay audience.

On the day of the event, a problem arose. The Wild Game Supper is an unstructured event with no formal program, intended to foster social interactions. Unfortunately, the posters were located out of the "traffic pattern," and most of the attendees bypassed the session. To remedy this, committee members wandered among the crowd and invited guests to stop by the poster session. This worked well as we happened upon the governor, invited him to come by, and he subsequently spent time talking with each of the students about his/her research. Despite this glitch, the first poster session was deemed a success.

After the poster session, a debriefing of faculty and student participants resulted in suggestions for improvements. As a result of the meeting, the second year saw improvements such as a doubling of submissions. Although the focus of the poster session was on student research, a side benefit was the assembling of faculty members with a common interest in undergraduate research who might not otherwise work toward enhancing undergraduate research on campus.

The poster session is now a regular part of the Wild Game Supper, and benefits to the university and students are numerous. The poster session gives us a unique opportunity to recognize the efforts of outstanding undergraduate researchers and provides a venue for showcasing to the leaders of our state projects ranging from determining the chemical composition of onions to studying the economic impact of a cycling event. Perhaps most importantly, the poster session fosters an appreciation of the importance of undergraduate research in the education and preparation of our students.

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