

CUR Focus

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A Presidents' Association Partnership Organizes a Statewide Undergraduate Research Conference in Texas

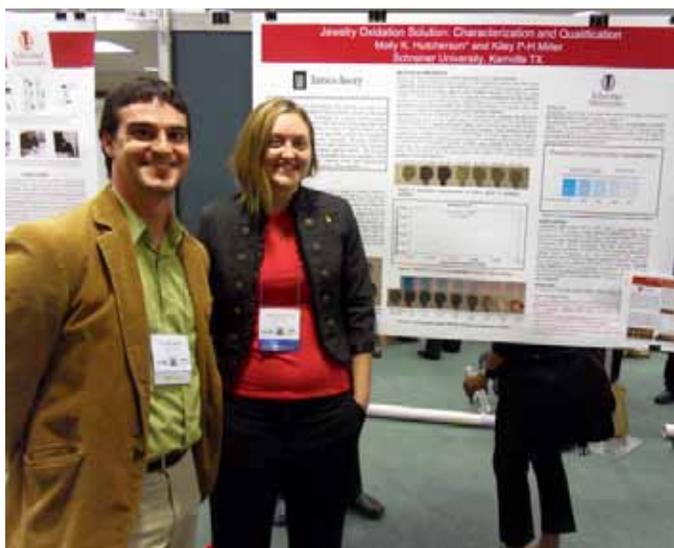
For the last several years, higher education has felt besieged on a variety of fronts. Recent publications suggest that college students learn little at our institutions and that we are models of inefficiency (see, for example, Arum and Roksa 2011; Cota, Jayaram, and Laboissière 2011). In many of these attacks—such as those concerning the cost of higher education (see, for example, Haurwitz 2011) and faculty productivity (Berrett 2011)—Texas has been at the forefront of the controversy. There is an intangible quality to learning, and what outsiders want higher education to provide is explicit, compelling evidence that the college and university experience matters. A partnership between the Council of Public University Presidents and Chancellors (CPUPC), the Independent Colleges and Universities of Texas, Inc. (ICUT), and some 51 public and private colleges and universities throughout the state chose the more difficult—but ultimately more successful—approach: illustrating the value and worth of higher education in Texas rather than just promising that it matters. In particular, this partnership highlighted

the contributions of undergraduate research projects to student learning and to the various organizations and individuals across the state impacted by these projects.

The breadth of the partnership is illustrated by the fact that CPUPC (<http://www.cpupc.org>) is comprised of Texas's 53 public universities, two Lamar State Colleges, the Lamar Institute of Technology, system offices, and health-related institutions, while ICUT represents 40 private colleges and universities (<http://www.icut.org>). The Texas CPUPC and ICUT research partnership began with a commitment by the two associations to jointly sponsor an undergraduate research event at the Texas Capitol in Austin. While the idea initially was proposed by faculty and administrators, it gained traction and momentum when CPUPC and ICUT became involved and agreed to have their staffs coordinate the event. Representing public and private institutions—large and small, wealthy and lean—a planning group of five administrators and faculty members and a representative from both the CPUPC and ICUT staffs met in Austin in the summer of 2010 to discuss how to launch such an event. (The campuses represented at this initial meeting included Schreiner University, Southern Methodist University, Stephen F. Austin State University, the Texas A&M University System, and Texas State University-San Marcos.

Members of this planning group all shared an interest in undergraduate research and enthusiasm for organizing a statewide event. At the planning meeting, participants determined several goals. Certainly, the event should impact each campus by raising the profile of undergraduate research as a powerful learning experience on the home campuses and by identifying a significant venue—the Texas Capitol—honor and recognize some of our highest-achieving students. Another goal was to communicate the value of higher education in Texas and to articulate this value to the citizens of the state and, particularly, to Texas legislators.

Planning called for an undergraduate research event at the Capitol that coincided with the start of the 82nd legisla-



Kiley Miller, assistant professor of chemistry, and Molly Hutcherson, senior biochemistry major, both of Schreiner University, Kerrville, Texas. Photo courtesy of Schreiner University.

tive session in January 2011. The Texas Legislature meets every two years, developing policy, passing legislation, and allocating funds. At any legislative session, then, the stakes are high, and the state lives with decisions made by elected officials for a biennium. Decisions made in one legislative session will not be quickly reversed or amended.

As summer turned to fall in 2010, the state began anticipating significant shortfalls in revenue that the legislative session would have to address. All at once, every individual, organization, and institution that received state funds attempted to verify its worth to lawmakers. For the higher education community, highlighting undergraduate research became a tremendous opportunity for widely different institutions to show that higher education mattered to students and to the communities, organizations, and collective bodies of knowledge that were impacted by their undergraduates' research projects.

The overriding goal, therefore, was refined to showcase Texas students and the contributions they made to the state through their undergraduate research. In fact, the formal name of the event, Texas Undergraduate Research Day at the Capitol, developed the tagline: Transforming Texas through Undergraduate Research. With the goals set, a planning committee in place, and urgency identified, attention turned to the framework of the activity.

Design of the Event

As planning began, a cascade of issues shaped the primary logistics of the event. Three questions guided the planning: where, when, and how.

Where? The targeted audience consisted mainly of legislators, their staffs, and other state agency officials. The compressed nature of the 140-day legislative session made it essential that the event be held within the State Capitol so the intended audience would be readily available. Several nearby facilities could have held a larger number of students, but without an eager and appropriate audience, the increased number of participants would be for naught.

After deciding where to hold the event, a new set of challenges involving space availability presented themselves. Within the Texas Capitol, there are several spaces used for exhibits and events, but only a few of those spaces would

allow participants to stand near their displays, due to narrow corridors. Having some manned and some unmanned posters was considered, but it was decided ultimately that, to remain true to the intent of the event, students needed to be near their posters in order to interact with legislators and other participants. This obviously narrowed the number of options available and made the next question exceedingly difficult to answer.

When? From the outset, CPUPC and ICUT staff argued that the event had to be held within the opening four to six weeks of the legislative session. During this time, the rules governing the body allow some flexibility in members' time. However, the time issue was complicated further by our desire to balance the needs of the students with the needs of the audience. For students, especially in a state geographically as large as Texas, holding the event on a Monday or Friday would be ideal because less class time would be missed due to travel to the event. From the intended audience's perspective, it is better to hold the event on a Tuesday, Wednesday, or Thursday because many legislators attend to district business early and late in the week. In the end (and even though planning for the event began six months prior to the start of the session and a mere two weeks after the calendar opened for reservations), only one date emerged as a true possibility: Monday, February 14, 2011.

Hurdles also were encountered when determining the schedule for the day because it was impossible to predict when either chamber of the legislature would meet or if they would be scheduled to meet at all. Given the target audience, this was a significant issue. Ultimately, start and end times for the day were established, but the specific scheduling of events remained fluid until approximately one week before the event.

How? Although other state models informed the design of this event, the geography of Texas presented a special set of planning issues related to event expenses and physical logistics. Members of CPUPC funded the event within the organization's operating budget, and ICUT opted to assess participating institutions a registration fee of \$75 for each student. For the event itself, light refreshments were provided in the morning (coffee, juice, donuts, fruit) and snack bars were available in the afternoon. Each registered participant received a nametag and a gift bag filled with recruitment



Event organizers for the Texas Undergraduate Research Day at the Capitol include (left to right) Levi Johnson, coordinator with the Center for Undergraduate Research at Texas Tech University; Jeannie Diaz, director of the Center for Undergraduate Research at Texas Tech; Rissa Potter, executive director of the Council of Public University Presidents and Chancellors (CPUPC); and Elizabeth Puthoff, director of research and policy analysis at Independent Colleges and Universities of Texas, Inc., (ICUT). Photo courtesy of CPUPC and ICUT.



Texas legislators, staff, and faculty view student posters. Photo courtesy of the Council of Public University Presidents and Chancellors.

materials provided by graduate schools across the state, as well as literature on restaurants, local Austin attractions, and maps. A one-color book of students' research abstracts was provided to all attendees and included a greeting from the state's governor, the higher-education committee chairmen in the Senate and House of Representatives, and a joint letter from the chairs of CPUPC and ICUT. Expenses related to conducting the event are summarized in Table 1.

In terms of direct participant expenses, each institution determined how the students and faculty advisors would pay for the costs of travel, overnight accommodations, meals, parking reimbursement, and so forth.

Table 1. Expenses Related to the 2011 Texas Undergraduate Research Day at the Capitol

Promotional/Gift Bags for Students	\$205
Food/Beverages	\$405
Nametags/Supplies	\$375
Signage/Easels/Equipment	\$290
Printing Abstract Books	\$540
Poster Stand Rental	\$265
Gift Certificates (Student Assistants)	\$145
Total (Shared Between CPUPC and ICUT)	\$2,225

In addition to budgetary considerations, physical logistics needed to be addressed. Students who can drive to such an event can provide their own easels and arrive with their posters ready to display. However, many of the student participants in Texas opted to fly to the event, making large mounted posters impossible. The original thought was to rent billboard-type displays where students could simply tack their posters up as they arrived. This option was not ideal due to several factors, including the timing of the board delivery, the size of the boards in relation to the available space and number of posters, and the cost of renting the boards. Fortunately, a local university provided its metal display frames for posters, saving rental costs and providing frames better suited to the available space.

The types of displays and size of the room ultimately dictated the number of student participants accepted. Invitations were sent to 38 public and 38 private four-year institutions in the state asking them to submit a maximum of two student projects. Each campus was instructed to use its own process for selecting projects, and these processes varied greatly. Institutions that already had a campus-wide undergraduate research program in place had an easier task. For instance, the 11 universities of the Texas A&M University System participate in an annual undergraduate research day on their campuses, with a system-wide event conducted in the fall, so each of these universities invited their representatives, the top two students from each campus, to attend the event at the Capitol. In other instances, the president invited the provost or a dean (often of the honor's college) to select the student participants; in one instance, a university's faculty association determined the participants. The steering committee did determine that participants needed to be cur-

Table 2. Summary of Research Projects by Code and Institutional Sector (CIP) for the 2011 Capitol Event

CIP	Instructional Program Classification (CIP)	CPUPC	ICUT
1	Agriculture/Ag Related	2	0
3	Natural Resources/Conservation	3	0
10	Communication Technology	0	1
11	Computer and Information Sciences	3	2
14	Engineering	8	1
26	Biological and Biomedical Sciences	18	6
27	Mathematics and Statistics	5	0
31	Parks, Recreation	0	1
38	Philosophy/Religious Studies	0	1
40	Physical Sciences	6	8
42	Psychology	2	6
43	Security and Protective Services	1	0
44	Public Administration and Social Services	1	0
45	Social Sciences	4	3
51	Health Professions	1	0
52	Business, Management, Marketing	1	1
54	History	1	0
	Total	56	30

rently enrolled or to have completed their research or graduated within the past seven months (to include May 2010 graduates). Ultimately, 86 projects were displayed (Table 2).

Beyond answering the major questions loomed all the tiny details that go into planning an event of this nature. Decisions were made about scheduling a host hotel, catering, gift bags for the participants, nametags for distinguished guests, the program for the welcoming convocation, wording for a photo release, volunteers to assist with registration, tours of the Capitol, and a seemingly unending list of other decisions. In the end, the event went smoothly and was very successful from all perspectives. Although we did not keep a tally of legislative offices in attendance the participation

from public and private institutions across the state was comprehensive and moving from poster to poster was often a challenge. The event will be held again during the next legislative session, and increased participation and interest are anticipated. The lessons learned during this first attempt will be invaluable to future planning.

Lessons Learned

Reviewing the event, it is clear that conducting a statewide undergraduate research conference through a partnership representing primarily presidents and chancellors will become easier over time. Of foremost importance is frequent and effective communication at all levels. As in any partnership and special event, there were bumps along the road. Key lessons from the first Texas Capitol event include:

- Time the event according to legislators' schedules, as well as those of students and faculty. The closer to the beginning of the legislative session, the greater the potential for legislators and their staff members to attend—before committees are formed and debate is in full swing on the floors of the chambers. While Monday or Friday may be best for students and faculty to travel, these are also the days that many legislators spend at home with constituents and thus may not be at the Capitol.
- Make expectations as clear as possible. For example, the overarching goal of the event was to promote undergraduate research projects to legislative leaders, but one administrator was under the impression that the purpose of the event was to include student participants from as many institutions as possible. Working on this assumption, the administrator extended deadlines in order to confirm student participants or their designated alternates. This interrupted determination of the floor plan, the number of poster stands needed, and assignment of students to the stands; this in turn affected layout of the event's program. In the future, this will be addressed with improved communication about deadlines between association staff members as well as in information distributed to the campuses. As difficult as it is to deny a student researcher the ability to participate after a deadline passes, deadlines must be respected for the event to come together smoothly.

- Establish a clear process for responding to the call for submissions, to help institutions to identify student participants and faculty advisors and submit their projects to the conference. Event organizers found there were many approaches to identifying student and faculty participants after the invitation to participate was sent to university presidents. The presidents forwarded the information to provosts, directors of honors programs, graduate deans, undergraduate deans, the faculty senate, etc. Due to the variety of communication channels, miscommunications occurred, including the registration of multiple students from the same institution (which led to the unfortunate need to dis-invite eager students), and representatives of one campus arrived the day of the event without registering. Further, some faculty members may attend the event who did not actually mentor student presenters, but only the faculty mentors of student presenters need to be listed in the program. Solutions may be to require nominations for student presentations through the campus president's office, to develop a password-limited online registration process, and to clearly define expectations and key terms on the application form.
- Staff should plan to respond to a multitude of questions from students and faculty who have varying levels of experience in participating in poster presentations. Institutions with limited experience in sending students to poster presentations required additional assistance concerning appropriate poster size and format, driving directions to the host hotel, appropriate attire for the students, etc. Potential participants were excited about the opportunity and interested in sending multiple students (and some parents) and faculty members to the event—in addition to the actual student researchers and their respective advisors. Responding to these questions in advance with informational flyers, postings on the event webpage, and email communications to participants will reduce, but will not eliminate, these inquiries.
- Establish a meaningful program. Remember that this may be the first trip to the Capitol for many of the students (and faculty and parents), so allow time for

tours and adequate parking and access to the poster exhibit area. Provide information on local attractions and restaurants near the Capitol. Distinguished legislators and guests should be provided with suggested remarks and encouraged to be brief; ideally, the speakers will be able to convey their enthusiasm for research and its contributions to the community in a way that resonates with the students.

Effective communication is clearly the key to conducting a successful event from start to finish. In addition to the areas highlighted above, event organizers may wish to:

- Assess the desired level of participation of legislators and staffers in the event, developing a process in advance.
- Evaluate the impact of the event on legislators, developing a means to measure this in advance of the event so that an assessment instrument is ready at the conclusion of the event.
- Consider additional, related activities to further emphasize undergraduate research (beyond the poster exhibit): for instance, encouraging the participating universities to prepare a local press release regarding their student participants.
- Ask if limitations should be incorporated regarding disciplines or research topics (in other words, somehow target or define the type of research to be presented).
- Consider the potential for community-college participation (in Texas, this involves our presidential colleagues in the Texas Association of Community Colleges).
- Consider inviting undergraduate nursing/allied health students to participate (these students are enrolled at health-related institutions; this year's event included only four-year campuses).
- Address the frequency of the event. The Texas Legislature only meets biennially, but other states might wish to develop an annual event.
- Explore whether to provide information about graduate schools to participating students.

- Determine in advance if any post-event communication will occur (participant surveys/evaluations, final/corrected event program, posting of photographs on association webpages).

Conclusion

It is hard to determine the extent of the impact of the Texas Undergraduate Research Day at the Capitol in shaping lawmakers' perceptions of higher education in the state. Certainly, the event mattered a great deal to the students, faculty, and administrators who attended. Abundant anecdotal information from all of our campuses verifies this. All of us—higher education and legislative personnel—who talked to the students at the Capitol heard and saw the tremendous learning opportunities that undergraduate research offers and the impact these college and university students would have and are having on Texas as a result of their higher education.

As importantly, students saw that their efforts mattered. The research experience itself had been important, but the opportunity to present this work in a venue (the state Capitol) to an audience of elected officials with real power—and also to an audience of other high-achieving students from around the state—gave the work these students had accomplished an entirely new level of significance and value. Their projects developed a legitimacy that would not likely have developed otherwise. We believe that other consortiums, regions, and states should be encouraged to put together their own undergraduate research event. The long-term payoffs will be eclipsed only by the short-term delight of all those who participate.

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Rissa Potter, PhD, has served as executive director of the Council of Public University Presidents and Chancellors since 2005. Her primary responsibilities include communicating with the council's 53 presidents and system chancellors regarding a variety of higher-education initiatives, including actions of the Texas Legislature and the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board. She has prepared reports on student transfer and capital facility financing, and she is currently coordinating statewide efforts addressing military service members/veterans, student transfer, and opportunities for increased efficiency in responding to state-required programs and reports.

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