

# From Grass Roots to Ground Swell: Incorporation of a Symposium for Student Scholarship into Institutional Life

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## Introduction and methods



Figure 1  
Planning the Student Research Symposium: The Yearly Action Research Cycle

### Abstract

More than five years after its inception, the annual Student Research Symposium flourishes at a private (Quaker) Midwestern university. Begun by two professors (a department chair and a program chair) in order to celebrate student scholarship, the endeavor has grown from 13 undergraduate presentations and posters during its first year to 57 posters, an art show, and performing arts/music presentations by undergraduate and graduate students in its fifth year. With increasing faculty and student interest by its third year, the symposium had also garnered administrative support and funding. Survey data indicate that student participants' reactions have been positive. Recognizing the added-value of student scholarship as a pedagogical tool, a considerable number of faculty have begun integrating symposium participation into their courses (i.e., contingent upon a student's proposal acceptance). Growing benefits of the symposium include encouraging scholarship, fostering crosstalk between disciplines about varied methods of inquiry and expression, and fostering experiential learning. Initially a grass roots effort, the symposium is now a flourishing forum for myriad types of scholarship across disciplines as diverse as the visual and performing arts, the natural and social sciences, and business, education, and the health professions. Serving as a showcase for student scholarship, the symposium promotes integration of student work and faculty mentoring across the curriculum.

**Keywords:** student scholarship, undergraduate symposia, higher education research

### Background

Malone University is a private, non-profit institution that is affiliated with the Evangelical Friends Church-Eastern Region. The Friends (Quaker) tradition honors principles of simplicity, equality, peace, honesty, and transcendence (Barbour & Frost, 1988; Dandelion, 2008). After the mid-1600s, Friends also became more open to differing theological traditions (e.g., liturgical denominations; Dandelion, 2008). In addition, Friends traditions emphasize excellence in education (Hamm, 2003). Malone's institutional history is consistent with the foregoing principles, as is its current milieu. Many disciplines, professions, and theological traditions are represented among Malone faculty, staff, and students (Malone University *Factbook*, 2012). Thus, when an academic program chair and a department chair came together in 2008 in a grass roots effort to honor the scholarship of our undergraduate students, it made sense that the resulting effort would be inclusive—celebrating paradigms, orientations, and knowledge domains from the sciences, humanities, arts, and professions.

### A Trans-disciplinary Approach

Via the current analysis—which is trans-disciplinary and multi-method—we acknowledge the broad and inclusive approach to student scholarship found in the Malone University Student Research Symposium. Trans-disciplinary research is lauded as progressive, inclusive, and multi-method. All fields are welcomed, and their methods are, too. Even more than multi-disciplinary and interdisciplinary endeavors, trans-disciplinary ones are mutually collaborative and directed by research problems rather than domains of knowledge (Leavy, 2011). Members of research teams come together to solve problems with mutual respect for their differing methodologies and epistemologies. In traditional science (like chemistry, biology, physics, psychology, and related social sciences), collaborations are aimed at discerning absolute truth, and it is generally accepted that scientific activities—whether collecting qualitative or quantitative data—will progress human knowledge toward that truth (Popper, 1961). In disciplines that stress an action research orientation (like education, business, the arts, and some social sciences), authenticity is prized and there is a recognition that individuals' perspectives might lead them to varying understandings of the same situation (Bradbury-Huang, 2013; Coghlan & Brannick, 2010). A trans-disciplinary approach can bring together scholars across fields, from both traditional- and action-research orientations, to explore the world and build new knowledge. Given Malone University's background, a trans-disciplinary approach to the Student Research Symposium makes sense, and the founding members of the event planning committee have emphasized that the event is open to all approaches to scholarship—from visual methods in action to classical quantitative approaches and beyond. The current report is trans-disciplinary and multi-method, using qualitative and quantitative data collected from within a framework of traditional science and utilizing an action-research orientation to build authenticity across five years of planning a student research symposium. *In the words of one of the symposium founders, this is an event with a tradition of "not privileging one methodology or orientation over another" (D. Chambers, personal communication, August 15, 2013).*

### Using Multiple Methods

The composition of our trans-disciplinary, mixed methodology is the following—that all approaches to scholarship from all disciplines and professions can be included. There is no better reflection of this principle than the diverse composition of our event planning committee from year-to-year. Among our event planners are academicians from theology, mathematics, language & literature, psychology and neuroscience, nursing, education, business, chemistry, and social work. In addition, we actively sought input from the arts and aesthetics.

Our research about the effectiveness of our Student Research Symposium involves:

- 1) An Action Research Orientation in our event planning from year-to-year (Figure 1; Table 1); and
- 2) Traditional Research (gathering both quantitative and qualitative data) in surveys of student participants and faculty (Table 1; hand-out).

## three studies and analyses

### Planning a Student Research Symposium

During the 2008-2009 academic year at Malone University, David Hahn (Dept. Chair, Math & Computer Science) and Diane Chambers (Director, MU Honors Program) came together to plan a celebration of undergraduate scholarship at Malone University. Their preparation during Fall, 2008, became "MUURSAFOSA" (the Malone University Undergraduate Research Symposium: A Festival of Student Achievement). Held on an afternoon during Spring Semester, 2009, the first MUURSAFOSA was open to all undergraduates, and they had options to submit a presentation, poster, or performance (e.g., creative writing readings). Through a process involving planning meetings, open and collaborative dialogue, and democratic decision-making, the event builders were able to receive submissions, vet them, and construct the program for the symposium. Through a cyclical process of meeting, planning, acting, and evaluating, the event team worked from year-to-year in order to improve the symposium. In all years, except one, event planners also met after the symposium in order to debrief about the challenges and successes during that year. Figure 1 illustrates the highly collaborative and cyclical processes associated with symposium planning, action, and evaluation. Table 1 displays relative similarities and differences in the symposium across five years.

### Analysis #1: Action Orientation in Event Planning

Among symposium strengths identified in event planner debriefings and survey data (as below) was increasing participation—in absolute numbers of student presenters and with respect to faculty/department commitments. Praise also includes: affinity for diverse fields represented in the event; having performances; adding graduate students (2013); efforts to coordinate the event with other similar activities (e.g., Staff & Faculty Excellence Chapel; MU film festival); catering (especially 2011+); the printed program; and changing the name to be inclusive (i.e., of graduate students in 2013). Among challenges is the absence of someone from the arts on the event planning team. Other challenges included students' (and some mentors') feeling that they are not well-prepared to design a poster/presentation, their work, outgrowing venues, noise levels during the event (especially in 2011 & 2012), insufficient food and/or beverage (2009, 2010, 2013), publicity (2009 & 2010), and timing (a recurring issue). The name of the symposium (now Student Research Symposium) might still be problematic, as it might communicate that the event is grounded in traditional, positivist methodologies. Some open-ended survey comments indicate as much.

### Analysis #2: Student Participant Surveys

Student participants were invited to complete the survey near the close of each year's symposium in 2011, 2012, and 2013. Our anonymous questionnaire is four open-ended queries, and our method of analysis is qualitative. The open-ended responses were transcribed and summarized by the first author (DC in 2011 & 2012) or by the fourth author's administrative assistant in 2013). When responses were transcribed a bullet list of all respondents' remarks was constructed. Afterward, transcriptions were submitted to narrative analysis (e.g., Gee, 1986, 1991). The goal was to use repetitive readings to uncover the fundamental narrative units in responses to each survey item. **Overall, responses were positive. One key issue is that respondents across years wanted additional assistance with preparation of posters and talking points.** Refer to our hand-out for a table of data.

### Analysis #3: Faculty Survey Data

Malone University currently has 112 full-time faculty (59 female) and 134 (74 female) part-time faculty. Of those faculty, 36 responded to our query to complete the questionnaire. Among survey respondents, only 3 were part-time (representing 2.2% of PT faculty), and 33 were full-time (representing 29.46% of FT faculty). So, the sample was 91.7% full-time faculty. Twenty-three (63.9%) participants were female and 13 (36.1%) were male. **The key finding among the survey data is that faculty were significantly more likely to report a plan to include the Student Research Symposium in their current/upcoming courses than they were to report having integrated it into previous courses, t(35) = -3.00, p < .01 (two-tailed).** In keeping with our key hypothesis, the result is consistent with growing interest in the symposium—especially among full-time faculty. See our hand-out for additional information.

### General Discussion

A trans-disciplinary, multi-method approach to event planning, data collection, and evaluation leads us to conclude that the Malone University Student Research Symposium has evolved from a grass roots effort by two faculty into a campus-wide event. Action research and traditional, positivist methodologies converge to indicate that the event is increasing in popularity and in the extents to which faculty include it as an activity in their courses.

Our moves to larger venues, to Saturday, and to include graduate students have been well-received. Challenges are buy-in by part-time, degree-completion, business, and education faculty; tension between traditional science and various other forms of scholarship (e.g., visual/performance methods in the arts, narrative traditions in the humanities); and whether to broaden the event beyond Malone University to other regional campuses and to the Greater Canton Area of Stark County, Ohio. Overall, we look forward to continuing success of the Malone University Student Research Symposium.

Additional information and references are available in our hand-out.

Year Symposium first staged	2008-2009 Spring semester	2009-2010 Spring semester	2010-2011 Spring semester	2011-2012 Spring semester	2012-2013 Spring semester
Eligibility	Undergraduate	Undergraduate	Undergraduate	Undergraduate	Undergraduates and Graduate Students
Content	All scholarship types accepted	All scholarship types accepted	All scholarship types accepted	All scholarship types accepted	All scholarship types accepted
Presentation styles	Presentations, Posters & Performances	Presentations Performances No posters	Posters & Performances Music acted No presentations	Posters & Performances No readings No presentations	Posters & Performances No presentations
Presentation quantities	7 presentations 3 posters 3 readings	13 presentations 6 readings	28 posters 2 readings 2 musical performances	28 posters 3 musical performances	57 posters presented (3 others withdrew) 3 musical performances Adding a visual arts exhibition
Co-sponsoring events		Planned with Excellence Chapel (each honors staff & faculty achievements)	Planned with Excellence Chapel (each honors staff & faculty achievements)	Planned with Excellence Chapel (each honors staff & faculty achievements)	Planned with the MU "Open House Fall Festival"
Participating Depts**	7 50%	3 22%	10 71%	8 64%	18 88%
Venue and Size (in feet)	Stewart Room at Randall Campus	Johnson Center Johnson Chapel (each 60' X 49')	Briefline Conference Center 66' X 31'	Briefline Conference Center 66' X 31'	Johnson Center Dining Room 72' X 41'
Additional Influences	Proposed, signed and approved by the event.	Chair of College of Theology, Arts, & Sciences given responsibility and budget for the event.	4 event planners' attendance at the AACAU conference on undergraduate research (see references). Continuing budget.	Continuing and growing awareness among faculty. Continuing budget.	Continuing budget.
Help Sessions for Poster Presenters?	No	No (individual meetings)	Yes	Yes	Yes
Catering?	No food.	Cookies only, water & food bar	Heated hors d'oeuvres, salsa chips, veggies/fruit, cookies, beverages	Heated hors d'oeuvres, salsa chips, veggies/fruit, cookies, beverages	Heated hors d'oeuvres, salsa chips, veggies/fruit, cookies, beverages No coffee or soda

Table 1  
Comparative Summary: Five Years of the Malone University Student Research Symposium  
\*Italics denote a change. \*\*Percentages computed as a function of eligible departments.