

A Grassroots, Faculty-Driven Initiative to Institutionalize Undergraduate Research: The Ins and Outs of Cultivating Administrative Support

Over a four-year period, inspired by a CUR workshop, we have created a vibrant and growing undergraduate research program at Western Oregon University, a mid-sized, primarily undergraduate, public university. The strategies that we have employed to cultivate faculty and administrative support for institutionalizing undergraduate research, scholarship, and creative activities at Western Oregon may prove useful at other institutions (see Table 1 for details). A general discussion of strategies for institutionalizing such research has been well addressed previously by Hakim (2000). In our work, we tapped into existing programs and steadily won administrative support through a variety of ideas and effective practices related to articulating and shaping the vision of an undergraduate research program.

Generating Campus-Wide Interest and Excitement

Presentations to the Faculty. Developing a formal plan to create a campus-wide undergraduate research program was spurred, in part, by successful workshops offered by the Council on Undergraduate Research (Malachowski, Nelson, 1999). Upon returning from our institution's first attendance at a CUR workshop in 2004, we were energized about sharing our interest and excitement concerning the possibilities for institutionalizing research with undergraduates on our campus. We asked to give presentations at ongoing events (e.g., faculty seminars). We shared the mission, enthusiasm, and goals developed at the CUR workshop. In all of these presentations, we focused on the benefits of a high quality undergraduate research program for students, faculty, and the university.

Threaded throughout these outreach activities was a consistent and optimistic message about how we could build upon and improve undergraduate research experiences for students and faculty members. Through this process, we identified existing programs and efforts on campus that we could tap into to create broader institutional support. For example, we forged a productive working relationship with faculty members involved with the campus chapter of The Honor Society of Phi Kappa Phi, which had a long-standing history of organizing an annual event at which students presented their scholarly work.

Another key outcome of these meetings was our interactions with faculty members who already were actively engaged



Geology students conducting petrologic research at Western Oregon University. Student in the foreground is Ryan Stanley, a senior majoring in Earth Science. In the background is Heather Hintz, who graduated with a BS in Earth Science in 2009 and is currently working as an intern with the GeoCorps America program at Oregon Caves National Monument.

in undergraduate research and scholarship. In this way, we identified motivated faculty members who were interested in working to facilitate greater institutionalization of such activities at WOU. Many of the interested faculty members were invited to be on our initial task force, described in greater detail below. We also heard from potential detractors, who shared their reservations about this initiative. One of the lessons we learned from these interactions with faculty members was to consistently use an all-encompassing phrase such as “research, scholarship, and creative activities.” This can help garner support from disciplines that don't typically consider themselves engaged in “research.”

Meetings with Administrators. Early in the process, we recognized that administrative support was going to be critical to achieving our goal. After refining our message drawing on our numerous meetings with faculty members, we were ready to share our ideas and vision with administrators. We met with college-level deans and vice presidents (e.g., admissions, institutional advancement, and student life), the provost, and the president. In addition, we met with the director of the Honors Program to discuss ways we could work together, and with union officials as some of our ideas involved minor changes in workloads (e.g., banking credits for doing independent research



Top: Cynthia Valet (student) working with Bryan Dutton (Biology Professor) on plant identifications for an ongoing floristic project.

Bottom: Boe Burrus (student) and Tom Kelly (Health and Physical Education Professor) collect biometric data.

projects with students, which could be used in the future for a course release).

In these meetings, we shared the same type of information with administrators that we did with faculty members, but we customized our presentation and the discussion of the benefits for each meeting. For example, when we met with the vice president for institutional advancement (who oversees our institution's foundation), we discussed how an undergraduate research program could be used to target donors and how some of our planned initiatives (e.g., the annual day-long student research conference) would make great stories for their quarterly foundation publication. We met with staff members of our public relations office, and they immediately saw the potential benefits of institutionalizing undergraduate research and bringing greater attention to the many success stories that usually go unnoticed and unreported.

Similarly, we shared ideas about how this initiative would provide data for an upcoming accreditation and the stories the administrators need to tell legislators, the public, and prospective students and their families. As was the case in our faculty

meetings, we learned a great deal from administrators regarding the level of support each appeared to be willing to give and regarding other initiatives that we could tap into or should at least be aware of. In retrospect, we found that we shared many of the same objectives and concerns as administrators did, a situation apparently not uncommon on other campuses (Harris, 2007).

A Campus-Wide Task Force. After meeting with as many faculty members and administrators as possible, we convened a campus-wide task force to develop a proposal to the administration. Faculty members who appeared to be energetic proponents of undergraduate research were asked to join this 13-member group. We tried to include faculty members from each academic unit so they could function as information conduits, sharing the task force's ideas and plans with their colleagues. Moreover, the task force received valuable information about existing discipline-specific initiatives and perspectives from the task force members. This structure facilitated communication and ensured that we were aware of ongoing efforts and activities related to undergraduate research. We were also able to identify possible pitfalls or sensitivities in the campus culture of which we were unaware.

The Proposal for the Administration

The primary outcome of the task force was completion of a proposal that sought to institutionalize undergraduate research. It articulated short- and long-term goals; described the benefits of supporting undergraduate research, scholarship, and creative activities at WOU; and included a tiered-budget model with descriptions about how the various iterations of the budget could be phased in over time. The entire task force, rather than a small group of individuals, decided how the various initiatives were prioritized in this proposal. In recognition that not all of our goals would be realized in one budget cycle, our tiered-budget model had three levels of implementation, based on increasingly larger amounts of support. This approach allowed us to illustrate our full vision and the costs required to implement it, but it also implicitly showed that we were not adopting an all-or-nothing approach.

We explicitly connected the proposal to our university's self-study documents and our recently completed strategic plan. In preparing a proposal of this nature for administrators, we highly recommend making explicit connections between the proposal

Best practices and what not to do

Best Practices

- Get as many faculty members involved as possible
- Talk with as many administrators as possible
- Give administrators and faculty a consistent and positive message
- Be sensitive to your campus culture
- If the faculty are unionized, consider discussing workload issues with campus union officials, as improvements to undergraduate research can take place via a new collective bargaining agreement (e.g., course releases, summer stipends for research supervision, or credit banking)
- Be patient and don't get discouraged
- Be consistent in communication and timing of events
- Try to tie undergraduate research initiatives to institutional mission statements and any recent strategic planning documents and proposals
- Meet with candidates for administrative positions and then again if they are hired
- Work with public relations to share successes
- Send faculty members from disciplines that don't typically do independent research and scholarship with students to a CUR workshop
- When possible, track numbers and levels of student participation to aid accreditation efforts and provide evidence of the program's effectiveness and impact
- Meet with as many groups as possible to help avoid duplicating programs and efforts
- Take advantage of university enrollment policies for providing students with academic credit for faculty-mentored "research" engagement
- Don't expect large budgets initially: be willing to start small and demonstrate success

What Not to Do

- Don't let the entire program rest on too few shoulders
- Don't define research too narrowly
- Don't make ultimatums in proposals
- Don't assume or mandate universal participation in annual conferences or other efforts
- Don't insist on uniformity across fields of study

and existing institutional documents, such as mission statements and strategic planning materials. Another helpful feature of our proposal is that it now operates as a guiding document for future decisions we need to make about the direction of our undergraduate research program.

After submitting the proposal, it took several months to receive a response from the administration. Our first reaction to the eventual response was disappointment in how little funding we received (\$5,000, only about 10 percent of the least expensive budget model we had presented). We were especially surprised given the interest in our ideas expressed by administrators during our meetings with them. We decided to move forward despite the paucity of funding and were determined to create the biggest impact we could with these limited resources. In essence, we used it as seed money to demonstrate the value of the university's investment in undergraduate research.

Based on this experience, we would suggest that faculty members at other institutions hope for the best but be prepared for much less. In addition, we recommend that faculty members be

patient, tenacious, and work to keep the lines of communication open between the faculty and administration; this can lead to stronger administrative support in the future.

Connecting with Existing Programs

After learning about our operating budget, the task force wrestled with how to make the most from the limited funds. The initial funding served as the catalyst for making the task force into a new organization called the Program for Undergraduate Research Experiences (PURE). Many members of the task force became part of the PURE Executive Committee, and this group decided to focus its efforts on one high-profile initiative. The executive committee decided to partner with The Honor Society of Phi Kappa Phi to reinvigorate an existing academic-excellence event that was sparsely attended. In doing so, we took advantage of the excitement and momentum that had been generated from the meetings and presentations to numerous faculty members and administrators across campus. The alliance between PURE and Phi Kappa Phi led to a daylong

Table 1. Timeline illustrating the development and growth of the Program for Undergraduate Research Experiences at Western Oregon University.

Date	Event/Action	Description
Prior to October 2004	Faculty mentored undergraduate research	Undergraduate research, scholarship, and creative activities conducted across campus but lacked organization and institutional infrastructure to support these endeavors.
October 2004	CUR Workshop	Two faculty members represented WOU at CUR workshop focusing on Institutionalizing UGR.
October 2004 – January 2005	Campus-wide dissemination	Multiple presentations made to academic units at seminars and division meetings and meetings with administrators.
October 2004 – January 2005	Formation of Task Force	Representatives from across campus form a task force charged with facilitating campus-wide dissemination and developing a proposal describing the need and objectives for institutionalizing undergraduate research.
March 2005	Proposal to Administration	Proposal describing the need for institutionalizing undergraduate research and strategic initiatives prepared by the task force and delivered to campus administrators.
Summer 2005	Administration support	Administration provides \$5,000 in support of UGR.
Summer 2005	PURE	The Program for Undergraduate Research Experiences (PURE) was created. The program is designed to serve as a vehicle for institutionalizing undergraduate research at WOU. Many members of the task force chose to serve on the Executive Committee.
2005 – 2006	Identification of existing programs	Task force members identified programs and activities that involved undergraduates in research/scholarly activities (e.g., The Honor Society of Phi Kappa Phi's Academic Excellence Event and the WOU Honors Program).
Spring 2006	Academic Excellence Showcase	The reinvigorated Academic Excellence Showcase was conducted for the first time.
Summer 2006	Administration support/PURE coordinator	Continuation and increase in support of undergraduate research objectives (\$7,500 + 0.25 FTE reassignment for a PURE faculty coordinator).
Fall 2006	CUR Workshop	A second CUR workshop on institutionalizing undergraduate research was attended by three WOU faculty members.
Spring 2007	Academic Excellence Showcase	The Academic Excellence Showcase was conducted for the second time and rapidly became a campus tradition.
Summer 2007	Administration support	Continuation and increase in support of undergraduate research objectives (\$8,000 + 0.25 FTE reassignment for a PURE faculty coordinator).
Spring 2008	Academic Excellence Showcase	The Academic Excellence Showcase was conducted for the third time and is now considered an annual campus-wide event.
Fall 2008	Undergraduate Research Journal proposal	This initiative, identified as an important vehicle for successfully institutionalizing undergraduate research at other institutions, was articulated in a proposal presented to campus administrators. The benefits and limitations of online versus print are being discussed.

event that celebrates scholarship, research, and creative activities, called the Academic Excellence Showcase.

The showcase, first presented in 2006, provides a venue for students to present their scholarly work in oral presentations, poster displays, performances, and creative arts exhibits. In developing the showcase, we worked with our faculty senate to encourage faculty members to cancel regularly scheduled classes so students could attend the daylong event, and we developed a model that encourages turnout by distributing attendance slips at presentations. The Academic Excellence Showcase has been a huge success! In the first year there were approximately 300 student presenters (about 15 per cent of the undergraduate population) and approximately 4,000 attendees (approximately 90 per cent of the undergraduate population). One key to the success of the Academic Excellence Showcase is that each discipline takes ownership of its own sessions in terms of proposing, organizing, and running the sessions.

The planning committee for the showcase outlines a loose structure that enables disciplines to create a session that works best for them. Many disciplines have incorporated previous capstone activities done at the department level that were rarely seen or known by the larger campus community. At one point, we were asked by administrators to impose greater academic rigor on certain discipline-specific sessions, but we declined to do so because one of our guiding principles throughout this process has been to allow ideas to come up from the faculty rather than down from the administration. This strategy has worked well, and the disciplines that might have been perceived as allowing less rigorous work into the showcase have, for the most part, since upgraded their offerings. The strategy of giving faculty members the freedom to create their own sessions can also prevent problems among disciplines that might not want to be grouped together by an administrative body.

The Academic Excellence Showcase continues to be a tremendous annual success with hundreds of students presenting each year, thousands of attendees, and scores of faculty members mentoring students and chairing sessions. Such broad attendance and participation enables lower-division students to observe the types of scholarship they can do as they progress through their undergraduate careers. We also are seeing an increase in off-campus attendees, including students' families, community members, and retired professors.

The conference proceedings from the showcase are published annually, and this publication is a prized keepsake for the student researchers. The proceedings are also a valuable marketing tool for the admissions office and other administrators who want access to a comprehensive list of the type of undergraduate research done at WOU. In addition, the proceedings are used to advertise what the undergraduate research program offers, as well as new initiatives and opportunities. They include commentaries by the president, provost, and academic deans.

Conclusion

One of the keys to our success has been our strategy to make connections with existing programs on campus. Along with the strategies that have worked for us, there are certain things to avoid doing, so in the accompanying sidebar, we offer additional suggestions about what to do and what not to do. Basically, however, by meeting with as many academic units and administrators as possible, we believe that advocates for undergraduate research can identify existing efforts and programs to build upon and enhance their institution's undergraduate research culture, which clearly benefits the students, the faculty, and the institution. The bottom line: It is possible to create a vibrant, institutionalized program that supports undergraduate research, scholarship, and creative activities in only a few years.

References

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Robert G. Winningham, Ph.D.

Associate Professor of Psychology
Psychology Division
Western Oregon University
345 N. Monmouth Avenue
Monmouth, OR 97361
winninr@wou.edu

Robert G. Winningham is an Associate Professor of Psychology and the Chair of the Psychology Division at Western Oregon University. He is a member of the Program for Undergraduate Research Experiences (PURE) Executive Committee, President-elect of the WOU chapter of The Honor Society of Phi Kappa Phi, and a member of the Academic Excellence Showcase Planning Committee. He has published papers and made numerous regional and national presentations with undergraduate students.

Jeffrey H. Templeton, Ph.D.

Associate Professor of Geology
Department of Earth and Physical Sciences
Western Oregon University
345 N. Monmouth Avenue
Monmouth, OR 97361
templej@wou.edu

Jeffrey Templeton is an Associate Professor of Geology at Western Oregon University and Chair of the Earth and Physical Sciences Department. He is currently serving as the Coordinator for the Program for Undergraduate Research Experiences at WOU and is Chair of the Academic Excellence Showcase Planning Committee. He actively involves undergraduate students in the study of volcanic rocks and landforms.

Bryan E. Dutton, Ph.D.

Associate Professor of Biology
Department of Biology
Western Oregon University
345 N. Monmouth Avenue
Monmouth OR 97361
duttonb@wou.edu

Bryan Dutton is Associate Professor of Biology at Western Oregon University. He is a member of the Program for Undergraduate Research Experiences (PURE) Executive Committee, the President of the WOU chapter of The Honor Society of Phi Kappa Phi, and a member of the Academic Excellence Showcase Planning Committee. He has collaborated with students on a number of research projects, several of which have culminated in presentations at WOU Academic Excellence Showcases.

Stephen H. Scheck, Ph.D.

Professor of Biology and Dean of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences
College of Liberal Arts and Sciences
Western Oregon University
345 N. Monmouth Avenue
Monmouth, OR 97361
schecks@wou.edu

Steve Scheck is Professor of Biology and Dean of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences at Western Oregon University. Prior to joining Western Oregon University in 2006, Dr. Scheck was Professor of Biology and Associate Dean in the Frank R. Seaver College of Science and Engineering at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles. He received his B.S. and M.S. from Fort Hays State University (Kansas) and his Ph.D. from Iowa State University (Ames). Dr. Scheck has directed over 100 undergraduate students in animal physiology-related research.