

NCUR: A Look Back as CUR and NCUR Join Forces

This article is a retrospective on the National Conferences on Undergraduate Research (NCUR), with a look ahead at the benefits to both the Council on Undergraduate Research (CUR) and NCUR as the two organizations join forces.

Although the emphasis of this article is retrospective, a necessary beginning is a comparison of the two organizations. Both were started decades ago, and both were intended to promote undergraduate research. Fast forward to 2010 and examine their mission statements; though worded differently, they are nearly identical. But the two organizations did not start out that way. CUR was founded in 1978 by chemists teaching at primarily undergraduate institutions (PUIs) who promoted undergraduate research as a way to enhance faculty research programs. NCUR began as, and still remains, a venue for students from all disciplines and all types of colleges and universities to present the results of their research and creative activities.

Gradually, CUR began to establish divisions representing such fields as physics, geology, and biology, but not without great debates at the annual meetings of its councilors. The latest three divisions adopted by CUR were the Undergraduate Research Program Directors (URPD) division, the Arts and Humanities division, and Health Sciences. CUR gradually began to accept institutions other than PUIs as members, and currently has all types of higher-education institutions as institutional members. The current mission statements state:

CUR: The mission of the Council on Undergraduate Research is to support and promote high-quality undergraduate student-faculty collaborative research and scholarship.

NCUR: The mission of the National Conferences on Undergraduate Research is to promote undergraduate research, scholarship and creative activity done in partnership with faculty or other mentors as a vital component of higher education.

NCUR began at the University of North Carolina, Asheville (UNCA), in 1987 with a conference that attracted 500 students and faculty members from 100 universities. Both those numbers doubled at the organization's second conference the next year, according to the Proceedings. The UNCA fac-

ulty members responsible for the vision and implementation of the fledgling organization were professors John Stevens, Michael Ruiz, Merritt Moseley, and UNCA Chancellor David Brown. They were joined by Michael Doyle, chemistry professor at Trinity University in San Antonio and editor of the CUR newsletter. One of the important benefits for both faculty and students from NCUR has been the opportunity to not only see presentations and posters in other disciplines, but also to engage in discussions that break down the barriers between disciplines. The following excerpt comes from the foreword to the Proceedings of the second NCUR meeting, which was held on the UNCA campus in April 1988: "Creative students in one field have a chance to listen to, and to meet, truly outstanding students in completely different fields and from other universities. One senior from Caltech said that participating in the conference, and meeting outstanding students in other disciplines, was the highlight of her undergraduate academic career."

Another important feature of NCUR has been the sessions of the faculty and administrator network (FAN), which usually start with a faculty member making a short presentation regarding best practices at his or her institution. This is often followed by audience discussions of practices for conducting undergraduate research at different institutions. One of the authors (Young) remembers his first NCUR meeting, in 1995 at Union College, where as a new director of undergraduate research he sat taking copious notes on a plethora of ideas that could be taken back to his campus. These FAN sessions were held at the lunch hour so as not to compete with student presentations.

Participation in NCUR steadily increased, with attendance at recent conferences approaching 2,500 student participants and 500 faculty mentors. Many of the students submit their full papers for editing and inclusion in the Proceedings, which were originally published in journal form. The Proceedings are now disseminated on CDs and a transition to Web site dissemination is under way. The Proceedings of NCUR over the years now make up an important digital archive, thanks to the work of Janet Stocks and her staff at Baldwin-Wallace College. In 2008, as she prepared to leave the chairmanship of the Board of Governors of NCUR, Stocks proposed that the

board set aside funds to create a digital archive of the 22 years of NCUR Proceedings, meeting minutes, financial statements, and other documents. This decision carried on the foresight of the founders of NCUR, who decided to publish conference Proceedings from the very beginning.

Reviewing, editing, and compiling the Proceedings has been a tremendous amount of work, currently in the capable hands of Robert Yearout, professor of industrial and engineering management at UNCA. It will serve as a rich database of student projects, and we have already had inquiries about tapping into it for information. For example, those CUR members involved with the new division of Arts & Humanities can find hundreds of examples of presentations in those disciplines.

Another interesting and important aspect of NCUR has been the Lancy Foundation grants program. Beginning in 1999, NCUR began to award grants to “support the development of interdisciplinary undergraduate research programs. The program’s focus was on helping to build communities of student and faculty scholars spanning the academic disciplines but working on a unifying theme,” according to Janet Stocks and Sandra Gregerman, both of whom are former NCUR chairs. An assessment of this successful program written by Sandra Gregerman and Janet Stocks was published in the Winter 2009 issue of the *CUR Quarterly*.

The NCUR annual conference can function as an important means for a student to try out a presentation before submitting it to a more critical audience at a disciplinary-specific national meeting. Even in the poster sessions, students will be asked all kinds of questions about their research by both students and faculty, and the ability to field those questions, especially questions from people outside their discipline, is a skill well worth developing. The annual conference is also a venue for students whose disciplines do not offer opportunities for undergraduates to present research and offers an important way to expose those students to professional meetings.

Hosting a conference of this magnitude is an undertaking that involves the entire campus and the local community. A list of the institutions that have hosted and/or will host NCUR is available in the Supplemental Materials in the Fall 2010 edition of *CURQ on the Web*.

Through the initiative of Ronald Dotterer, past NCUR host and former Dean of Arts & Sciences at Salisbury University in Maryland, a *Joint Statement of Principles in Support of*

Undergraduate Research, Scholarship and Creative Activities was endorsed by the NCUR Board in April 2005 and by the CUR Executive Board in June 2005. The first paragraph of this document states: “We believe that undergraduate research is the pedagogy for the 21st century. As an increasing body of evidence makes clear, inquiry-based learning, scholarship, and creative accomplishments can and do foster effective, high levels of student learning at a variety of public and private postsecondary locations, including doctoral and research institutions, comprehensive universities, and liberal arts colleges.” The complete text of this joint statement can be found on both the NCUR and CUR websites (<http://www.ncur.org/ugresearch.htm> and <http://www.cur.org/SummitPosition.html>).

Many CUR members, as well as NCUR participants, have experienced firsthand the confusion that others voice in trying to decipher the difference between the two organizations. In fact, in response to a question on a recent survey of CUR members about the benefits of CUR, many cited NCUR as one of the “best things” about CUR.

In response to this confusion and to deal with other issues of overlap, David Lancy, director of the Alice and Leslie E. Lancy Foundation, proposed funding a study to evaluate the effects of combining the two organizations into a single national unit. Lancy thought that the national undergraduate research enterprise would benefit from a single, strengthened national organization; however, he also wanted a comprehensive study to evaluate this thesis. As a result of his generous funding, a group of 10 people was formed (G10), with four board members appointed from CUR and four from NCUR, along with the CUR Executive Officer and a liaison to the Lancy Foundation, Michael Nelson, who had extensive history with both organizations.

The group met several times over a two-year period for intensive discussions in Dallas, Denver, and Cleveland, and prepared documents for their respective boards. As an interesting side note, at the initial meeting representatives from each group were wary of the intentions of the other, and the discussions almost ended in failure. However, by the second day of that meeting, members had begun to think about what would be best for the total undergraduate research experience. With this in mind, the G10 began, in earnest, to exhibit a cooperative decision-making process. Being a member of the G10 provided many insights into negotiation and decision-making based on consensus.

Undergraduate research has been spreading rapidly throughout the country and is becoming a mainstream pedagogical and scholarly experience. In order to provide the greatest positive impact and benefit to all stakeholders of higher education, the two boards ultimately agreed to combine the organizations, on October 1, 2010. The perceived benefits are:

- Providing the opportunity to strengthen external advocacy and to offer expanded services, more resources, and focused awareness of the importance of undergraduate research. This will help provide national leadership for the enterprise of undergraduate research;
- Providing a holistic focus on undergraduate research and its value to students, faculty, institutions, and the public;
- Opening doors for additional opportunities;
- Eliminating confusion for constituents;
- Truly becoming a national resource on undergraduate research—the preeminent site for all stakeholders;
- Providing a national unified voice for undergraduate research;
- Providing a stronger voice concerning faculty-workload issues, including in reappointment, tenure, and promotion decisions;
- Increasing the range of constituents served.

The group reached consensus on the following goals and strategies:

- To have a powerful voice for UR, so that it can become a mainstream pedagogy
 - Publications, Web site, advocacy, funding
- To make it easier for faculty and students to get involved in UR
 - Working with institutions to broaden UR on campuses
 - Professional development for faculty and students
 - Serve as a clearinghouse for information on UR
- To effectively assess UR and disseminate the results of such assessment
 - Facilitate longitudinal studies to produce useful data
- To publicize student/faculty discoveries
 - Communicate success stories for others to replicate

The following table was created by the Group of Ten to examine specific functions of the two organizations and to look at possibilities for expanding the fulfillment of their common mission.

Table 1. Combined Organizational Structure

STUDENTS	FACULTY	INSTITUTIONS	ADVOCACY
Conferences/Meetings <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • NCUR • Posters on the Hill Publications <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • NCUR Proceedings Development Services and Opportunities <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Graduate School Registry • Presentation Tips 	Conferences/Meetings <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • National Conference • Dialogues • Institutes and Workshops • Sessions (FAN) at NCUR • Business meeting • Summits Publications <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>CUR Quarterly</i> • "How to" book series • Scholarly volumes • White Papers Other Communication <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • E-news • Listservs Development Services and Opportunities <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Disciplinary and Interest Group affiliation • Mentor network • Proposal preview service • Speakers' Bureau • Peer reviewers registry • Consultant opportunities • Facilitator opportunities Awards <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CUR Fellows Awards 	Conferences/Meetings <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • NCUR • Posters on the Hill • National Conference • Dialogues • Institutes and Workshops • Sessions (FAN) at NCUR Publications <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>CUR Quarterly</i> • "How to" book series • Scholarly volumes • White Papers Other Communication <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • E-news • Listservs Consultant Services <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Academic program reviews • Speakers' Bureau Student recruitment <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Grad school registry 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Government & External Relations Committee • External Advocacy firm • Advocacy webpage • Posters on the Hill • White Papers • Affiliation with partner organizations
Expansion Possibilities for the Future			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improved/expanded Web site • Scholarly journal • Student Awards • Podcasts and videos • Student grant opportunities • Improved/expanded student development services 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improved/expanded Web site • Network of topical meetings • Grant opportunities • More and diverse books • Expanded <i>Quarterly</i> issues • Faculty Awards • Broaden range of faculty served • Podcasts and videos • Leadership Fellowships 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improved/expanded Web site • Network of topical meetings • Institutional change seminars • More and diverse books • Expanded <i>Quarterly</i> issues • Institutional Awards • Institutional grant opportunities • Leadership Fellowships • Broaden range -institutions served 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improved/expanded Web site • Expanded advocacy at the federal and state levels

The memorandum of understanding, signed in June 2009 after positive votes from both boards, defines a framework for unifying NCUR and CUR by October 1, 2010 and covers transitional and implementation activities. This unification represents the single most progressive step for both organizations in many years—and many undergraduate-research mentors hold out great hope for its success.

References

Stocks, Janet, and Sandy Gregerman. 2009. Interdisciplinary research projects supported by the NCUR/Lancy program. *CUR Quarterly* 30: 21-25.

National Conferences on Undergraduate Research. Undergraduate Research. <http://www.ncur.org/ugresearch.htm>.

Sulock, Joseph M., and Donna L. Seymour. 1988. *Proceedings of the second national conference on undergraduate research, April 21-23, 1988*. University of North Carolina at Asheville.

Gregory Young

Vice Provost for Undergraduate Education
212 Montana Hall
Montana State University
Bozeman MT 59717
gyoung@montana.edu

Gregory Young oversees University College at Montana State University, where he is vice provost for undergraduate education. He was the founding director of the Undergraduate Scholars Program there and supervised the implementation of a new core curriculum that was one of the first at a public university to require undergraduate research/creativity. He has served as assistant dean of the College of Arts & Architecture and headed the Department of Music. Young has published several articles with undergraduates as co-authors and has given invited talks in Italy, Spain, and the United States on correlations between music and architecture. Former treasurer and chair of the NCUR Board of Governors, he is a councilor for the Council on Undergraduate Research and helped form the new Arts & Humanities Division.

Michael Nelson, now based in Colorado Springs after retiring from a 36-year career as a professor and administrator at Truman State University and the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse, has embarked on a second career of camping, hiking, writing, fishing, and traveling. He is two-thirds of the way to his personal goal of summiting 15 of Colorado's 14ers. He has served both NCUR (Board of Governors and director of the Lancy Program) and CUR (President). He lives by the advice of a childhood hero, Satchel Paige, Don't look back. Something might be gaining on you.