

Just Thinkin' About Tomorrow

By Beryline Temples

Have you ever thought this about some of your faculty: "I wish I could have worked with them earlier in their career before they had such a bad experience with a research grant?"

I have, and it led me to think about our students and wonder: Are they aware of all the opportunities on our campus for student research grants? What if we could work with students in the beginning of their adventure, find a way to tap into their energy, and gain inspiration from their enthusiasm? Wouldn't it be wonderful if we, as research administrators, could help shape our future faculty and help prepare them for the challenges of pursuing and obtaining support for their research goals?

At present, our university does not have a program that facilitates partnering faculty mentors with undergraduate student researchers. In some of our academic departments, however, we do have undergraduate research representatives. Unfortunately, most of our students don't even know that undergraduate research representatives exist or who the active faculty researchers are,

much less whom they should consult for more information. These representatives are usually faculty who are already overburdened, and it is very hard to catch up with them. This situation is not uncommon at universities, as evidenced by a talk Sara Rockwell (2008) gave to the NCURA Senior Research Leadership Summit. She stated that most faculty spend about 58% of their time on research and, of that 58%, 76% is spent on research and 24% is spent on mentoring students who perform research (Decker, 2008; Decker, et al., 2007). As a Predominately Undergraduate Institution (PUI), our university is more focused on teaching and publishing than on research. Over the past several years our administration has been making some small moves toward building an infrastructure to support more research for faculty and to encourage faculty/student mentorship collaborations.

The Mathematical Association of America (MAA), the largest mathematical society in the world, in its "Undergraduate Student" section on "Undergraduate Research" (2012) reports that there has been an explosion in the field of undergraduate research. MAA also states that student research is the ultimate in engaged learning and that this growth is attributed to capstone courses, senior theses, and sometimes results from an enthusiastic student approaching a professor and asking for help. This is true at our institution as well, in that it is left up to the student to pursue opportunities for research.

For many years, faculty researchers at most universities have included undergraduate students in their research to complete their projects more efficiently and quickly (Ryser & Halseth, 2009). At PUIs, it is extremely difficult to have the appropriate policies and infrastructure to support the pedagogical requirements to adequately train faculty and develop programs for students in research. Several researchers agree that, "Limited institutional support for students through mechanisms that include research assistantships contributes to an underdeveloped culture of seeking employment and training through university research projects" (Ryser & Halseth, 2009, p. 58; Panelli & Welch, 2005). Ryser and Halseth continue, "The constantly changing nature and demands of research activities, faculty teaching schedules, and student commitments impact the time available to create opportunities for training and mentoring the next generation of researchers" (2009, p. 60). Faculty at PUIs must do more with less, including assuming many research administrative duties because there are no departmental research administrators, and the support personnel in the departments aren't available or trained to help (Temples, Simons & Atkinson, 2012).

Clearly our students are playing a more important role in supporting research at our institution. Somehow, we must develop greater clarity and a broader range of opportunities as well as training to prepare our students to be the next generation of researchers. With limited resources and personnel, what can research administration do to help encourage more collaboration between faculty and student researchers? Some ideas are volunteering to work with student organizations by attending their meetings, conducting funding workshops for their student members, attending university student recruitment activities, and talking to current as well as prospective students about their research interests and expectations. I discovered from talking with our college and department representatives at recruitment fairs that they needed research administration personnel to talk to prospective students about research opportunities at these fairs so that they had more free time to talk to the students about courses of study.

After listening to and brainstorming with students in various venues, our office discovered there were a number of things research administration might be able to do to help nurture the spirit of our future researchers. Some examples follow:

- Create a database of student funding opportunities, grants, scholarships, fellowships, internships, and other types of opportunities.
- Coordinate workshops that bring faculty mentors together to talk with students about research, methodology, selecting a mentor, and various opportunities to present undergraduate research and funding opportunities.
- Develop a program to bring together experienced faculty researchers to mentor students

and open the doors to their future by keeping their enthusiasm and desire to succeed alive.

- Coordinate student development workshops to help them better understand funding programs, guidelines, and requirements, and advise them on how to get started.
- Attend student recruitment fairs to help departments and colleges recruit students by adding the value of research and research opportunities at our university and explaining how the advantage of an undergraduate student research experience can influence their academic careers and future.
- Create or obtain inexpensive development and recruitment tools such as brochures, slogan buttons, pens, pencils, rulers, high-lighters, and tote bags, all with our university and department's name, logo, and web address.
- Create a database of available mentors and their areas of research interests.
- Create a database of all department undergraduate research representatives.
- Create a database of faculty mentor and student research teams and match them with funding opportunities.

This is what we have managed to do so far:

- Develop a database of internal and external funding opportunities for students at all levels, undergraduate to post-doctoral, called STOPS (STudent OPPortunities @ stops.uca.edu), including a survey of students to determine the database's usefulness and to collect more ideas from students for improvements. This database is available to all students with an internet connection, from any type of computer, laptop,

tablet, or phone that has internet access; no special application is needed.

- Share the STOPS database description and URL with all high school advisors across the state.
- Coordinate a workshop with a panel of experienced faculty research mentors, student researchers with previous awards, and students interested in participating in research.
- Distribute recruitment tools and showcase the new STOPS database at five student recruitment events.

We plan to add tabs or screens to the STOPS database for available mentors with research interests, as well as another tab for department undergraduate research representatives. As we become aware of mentor and student research teams, we also plan to create another tab on the database to list the research teams and their special research interests so that we can begin to match available opportunities to specific research.

One of the comments we heard about the STOPS database at a recruitment event we attended was from an upper-classman who said, "I wish there had been a database like this when I started college so I wouldn't have had to take out so many student loans!" Let's hope that we can make a small difference that will help us crystalize this facet of our ever-growing and changing field of research administration.

Something else to think about and make us smile: Maybe we can make such a good impression that one or more of these students might choose to go into research administration. Who knows? ■

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