

Report on Undergraduate Research and Creative Activity Symposium 2008

The Rhodes Undergraduate Research and Creative Activity Symposium (URCAS) was held on Friday, April 25, 2008. Twelve semi-concurrent oral sessions occurred between 1 and 4pm at various locations on campus. These were followed by one general poster session and reception from 4:30-6:30pm. There were nine oral presentations in the fine arts, including a theater performance. Oral sessions also included twenty-three presentations in the humanities, twenty in the social sciences, and twenty-seven in the natural sciences. These presentations showcased student work in Rhodes programs such as the Summer Plus program with St. Jude Children's Research Hospital, the Rhodes Institute for Regional Studies, and the Buckman scholarship program. Many of the presentations summarized work being completed for honors, senior seminar, and independent research projects. The poster session showcased eighty-three posters mostly from the natural sciences and social sciences. Over one third of the poster session presented student work in the Memphis community, in a special section entitled "Rhodes Community Connections".

A survey was sent to faculty and staff mainly to assess the logistics and implementation of the event. 65 people responded, of which 43 were faculty and 22 were staff. Attendance by students has been a problem, and the survey sought to investigate ways to improve student attendance. URCAS has traditionally been held on the very last day of classes, and 67% of the respondents feel that this is the ideal time. 18% suggest moving URCAS to a date near the end of the spring term, but not on the last day. Write-in responses on this topic were very much against having it on the last day of the academic year, citing student and faculty fatigue and a plethora of competing events (Memphis in May, athletic competitions, etc.).

The responses suggest that the majority of faculty and staff believe URCAS is an extremely important and valuable experience, and that students benefit by both presenting and attending talks or posters. However, the majority of faculty member respondents do not require attendance or participation of their students. When asked if they would consider requiring students to attend and incorporate their experience into a class, 62% of the faculty responded positively. The most common write-in comment when asked how to increase attendance was to "make it mandatory for students", with several suggesting this especially for first-year students. Other responses commented on a lack of faculty attendance, and suggested encouraging faculty to incorporate URCAS presentations into their course curriculums. One comment on this topic questioned how mentoring students for URCAS presentations is valued in terms of promotion and tenure, and commented that junior faculty may be reluctant to participate if the activity is not relevant to evaluations and promotion.

The majority of respondents feel that URCAS should be a venue for work done both in (for class credit) and out (for experience or payment) of the classroom, and a majority would like to see juried sessions return to the event. A common criticism is that there are too many concurrent oral sessions and this prevents people from being able to attend as many as they would like. Several write-in comments suggested that the URCAS committee choose only a select number from each discipline for oral presentations, and that others present their work as a poster presentation. Some detailed write-in comments suggested that URCAS be a venue for only in-depth projects

requiring serious time commitments outside the classroom, and not for work already being done as part of a class.

A new feature of URCAS 2008 was one general poster session in a large venue in the late afternoon. Only half of the respondents attended the poster session, with many citing that the time of the event was too late in the day. Of those who attended, there was unanimous positive feedback, citing the ease of seeing work in many disciplines at once, the ability to view presentations they would not have sought out, and the feeling of a professional conference conveyed by the large number of people being intellectually engaged in the same space.

On the name of the event, the responses were quite mixed. Many feel that the name URCAS is OK and has some history and tradition at this point, but there are some strong criticisms of the acronym (“urcas sounds like stomach disorder”, and “I still don’t know what urcas stands for”). One suggestion is to name the symposium after someone, perhaps a donor who can fund the event.

Based on these results, several changes should be implemented in future events. To encourage a higher level of participation, earlier and more frequent notification to students and faculty soliciting abstracts and encouragement to incorporate student presentations into a class should be pursued. It might even be helpful to offer examples of how students can use the URCAS experience to supplement their in-class learning (essay topics, etc.). Search/Life courses could be targeted to increase attendance by first-year students, and senior seminars could be asked to require seniors to attend a certain number of presentations- for example one in their discipline, one in a related discipline, and at least one outside their division. Students should be involved in the planning and implementation of URCAS, giving them ownership of the event. Resources should be created to assist students in preparing outstanding presentations, perhaps in the form of online presentation and poster preparation guides. It would also be beneficial to offer students a practice talk session were faculty, staff, and other students are available to critique and suggest changes. The event schedule can be modified to avoid conflicts with family and other after-hour obligations.

In the larger perspective, the goal of URCAS is not clear to the majority of our community. Some feel it is only a faculty/college-run event for interested faculty to elect some of their students for participation. Many would like it to be a learning experience that helps students transition from student to professional. The goal and nature of URCAS should be clearly stated to define it as both a student conference to showcase student work to the campus community as well as a process giving students professional experience in communicating work that defines them. A few ideas to make this goal tangible in the event are: having one student in each division selected by a discerning group of faculty, staff, and students for a special showcase of excellent work that exemplifies the mission statement of Rhodes, a plenary lecturer chosen by students, student-chosen themes for URCAS sessions announced at the beginning of the academic year.