

Posters-at-the-Capitol – Showcasing Undergraduate Achievement for Eight Years

Director John Mateja and Program Specialist Jody Cofer
Office of Undergraduate Research and Scholarly Activity (URSA)
Murray State University

Now in its eighth year, ***Posters-at-the-Capitol*** has celebrated the research and scholarly achievements of undergraduates from across the Commonwealth. Initially funded through a grant from the Howard Hughes Medical Institute to Murray State University, the program has grown from 85 undergraduates in 2001 from Eastern Kentucky University, Kentucky State University, Morehead State University, Murray State University, Northern Kentucky University, and Western Kentucky University to over 200 participants in 2009 from the six comprehensive public universities, the University of Kentucky, the University of Louisville, and the Kentucky Community and Technical College System.

In a recent publication titled *High-Impact Education Practices*, the Association of American Colleges and Universities said that the goal of undergraduate research is to “involve students with actively contested questions, empirical observation, cutting-edge technologies, and the sense of excitement that comes from working to answer important questions.” ***Posters-at-the-Capitol*** is a forum to help showcase the kinds of cutting-edge work Kentucky undergraduates are capable of doing – work that routinely results in presentations at professional society meetings and publications in professional journals – when they have the resources and when faculty step outside the “traditional” classroom to work with their students. Each year ***Posters-at-the-Capitol*** enables the Governor and members of the General Assembly, individuals responsible for higher education funding in the Commonwealth, to engage directly with students who have had this important educational opportunity.

Examples of high-quality student work abound. In the sciences, Yoon Heyon Hu worked with Dr. George Antonious, Professor of Plant and Soil Science at Kentucky State University (KSU), on research pertaining to the genotypes of hot peppers. That experience concluded with Hu co-authoring a peer reviewed article in the *Journal of Environmental Science and Health*, which helped her get into medical school in South Korea after graduating from KSU.

While once the domain of the sciences, undergraduates engaged in research and scholarly work can be found in every disciplinary area. Walter Early IV, a graduate from the University of Kentucky’s College of Fine Arts, worked over a four year period on casting iron. After presenting his project “Cast Iron Sculpture Workshops at the Ironbridge Open Air Museum of Steel Sculpture and Relation ‘Iron Works’ Exhibition” in ***Posters-at-the-Capitol***, he went on to present at other conferences during 2007 better preparing him to continue to follow his passion. He is currently attending graduate school at Notre Dame.

In the humanities, Brittany Fiscus, senior history major at Murray State University (MSU), worked with Dr. Terry Strieter, Professor of History, on research involving media fabrication of the pre-revolutionary image of Queen Marie Antoinette. This

research led to additional presentation opportunities including the Ohio Valley History Conference in 2008. She is currently completing her undergraduate education at MSU and will be attending graduate school.

It is clear that when undergraduates engage in research and scholarly activity, the educational benefits have never been greater. “I am continually amazed at what I see coming from young scholars today. The effort put into undergraduate research is laudable and certainly something that I would like to see continue to grow in the future.” said Speaker Jody Richards, Kentucky House of Representatives.

Posters-at-the-Capitol is a way undergraduate students can show those responsible for funding higher education across the Commonwealth that our future hinges on not simply providing access to college, but the quality of that education. “Having worked both in and outside the education sector, I can attest to the importance of providing the best undergraduate experience possible.” said Secretary Helen Mountjoy, Kentucky Education and Workforce Development Cabinet. “Answering the tough questions and forming new ones that have yet to even be imagined should be part of the excitement tied to the collegiate experience. ***Posters-at-the-Capitol*** is a great way for members of the Legislature to see first hand what our students are capable of and should be doing.”

The recently-released report *Measuring Up 2008*, the national report card on higher education compiled by the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, while showing some improvement, still presents a very troubling picture for Kentucky (Preparation - C, Participation - C, Affordability - F, Completion – B, and Benefits - D+). These grades clearly say that more needs to be done. Last year, the ***Posters-at-the-Capitol*** Organizing Committee put forward a proposal to the Council on Postsecondary Education to develop a statewide undergraduate research internship program. As the House and Senate grappled with serious budget challenges, the initiative stalled in the Legislature. This year the Commonwealth again faces serious budget shortfalls. Again, the Legislature has the opportunity to fund a statewide undergraduate research initiative that will help Kentucky develop the kind of workforce it needs to be nationally and globally competitive. For those responsible for preparing Kentucky’s future workforce, the question is not “can we afford to fund such an initiative”; the question is “can we afford not to fund this initiative.”

The public is invited to attend ***Posters-at-the-Capitol*** and Kentuckians across the state are encouraged to join together in celebrating “Undergraduate Research Day” on February 5, 2009 proclaimed by Governor Steve Beshear. More information regarding ***Posters-at-the-Capitol*** can be found online at <http://campus.murraystate.edu/services/URSA/index.html>.