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perspectives on involving undergraduates in research and publication

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By Deanna Cox

I was speaking with my friend Stuti via Skype last year when she told me something about her undergraduate education in Chennai, India, that took me by surprise.

Stuti explained to me that her university does not offer research opportunities to undergraduate students – such opportunities are usually only offered to students at the graduate level. This is seemingly a trend across other Indian Universities.¹ To correct for the lack of undergraduate involvement in research at her university, Stuti applied to be an affiliate editor for JUR Press, where we both now work.

JUR Press is a publishing entity headquartered at **Colorado State University** whose flagship publication is the **Journal of Undergraduate Research and Scholarly Excellence** (JUR). The Journal is recognized by the Library of Congress, serves an international audience, and accepts work from undergraduates in any discipline from any accredited institution of higher learning. It is entirely run by undergraduate students, supporting a staff of about 30 international editors.

As the editor in chief for JUR Press and an undergraduate research assistant myself, Stuti’s situation was not one with which I was familiar. A number of my peers are involved in research here at CSU, and I cross paths with many others in some capacity via JUR. Since JUR is interdisciplinary, international, and run exclusively by undergraduates, we interact with undergraduate researchers,

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writers, and artists daily and we' are committed to expanding undergraduates' academic opportunities. Some of our editors are undergraduate research assistants from the **Honors Undergraduate Research and Scholars Program** (HURS), and JUR Press also publishes abstracts from **Celebrating Undergraduate Research and Creativity** (CURC), an undergraduate research symposium that we host annually at CSU through the **Office of Undergraduate Research and Artistry** (OURA). Through these numerous research avenues, undergraduates contribute to a strong network so woven throughout our education here that I forget this is not always the case elsewhere.

We are fortunate to be situated at one of the top research universities in the country, where JUR, HURS, CURC, and OURA are much more than acronyms as they carry opportunity and impact for undergraduates. It matters that programs like this exist, and it matters that we make an effort to include undergraduates in research and publication. Here's why:

Thinking critically and communicating complex ideas

Working in a research lab taught me how to think critically in a way I could never learn from a lecture in a classroom. Having the autonomy to design my own experiments, write manuscripts, and create poster presentations was crucial to my research projects, but I also learned that research is a collaborative process, and I was fortunate to work under sharp graduate students, postdocs, and a faculty mentor. I also learned how to communicate my ideas effectively through presenting my projects annually at CURC. Being able to share complex ideas with a non-scientific audience is a skill all scientists need, and practicing that early and often as an undergraduate will better equip future researchers to convey important findings without fear of being misinterpreted.

Easing into the publication process

Having work published as an undergraduate is not just a resume builder. It gives students an edge for their future career or graduate education by familiarizing them with the publication process in a low-pressure environment. Since publications are not yet necessary for winning grants or fulfilling research quotas at the undergraduate level, students can ease into the process alongside their peers. As a team at JUR, we really just want our peers to

succeed, and we do everything we can to help them improve their work.

Giving students a voice

This week alone I've written in four different modes. I used scientific writing for my thesis manuscript and journalistic writing for one of my jobs. I used that tricky kind of writing reserved only for admissions and scholarship essays for graduate school, and I've used other academic writing for my classes. I'm glad to have spent time honing skills to write for those different areas, but sometimes I forget my own voice through all of it.

That's why opportunities like publishing with JUR are so important. We allow students to present their work the way they want it, in their own voice. We help students with guidelines, edits, and finding reviewers for their work, but ultimately it's their ideas that we're interested in hearing. There are few limits to the kind of work that can be submitted; if it's undergraduate-produced, we'll look at it. Opening these doors to undergraduate publication is one way to make sure that our unique voices don't get buried or lost.



Members of the JUR Press team participate in a team-building activity at the YMCA of the Rockies in Estes Park, October 2014.

Collaboration and leadership

Beyond publishing opportunities, working for an organization like JUR as an editor also has immense benefits. In my classes, teachers explain that group projects are “what the real world is like,” and I suppose those projects are supposed to teach you how to collaborate, problem-solve, and learn to respect others with different opinions. I might have believed that if I had never worked at JUR. More than any class project, JUR has taught me those “real-world” skills. I sometimes describe JUR as the “group project students actually want to be a part of” because so much of what we do is a collective, team-based effort. Our process is made to encourage collaboration, global thinking, and leadership.

Building community

A few weeks ago JUR held a staff retreat in Estes Park. In addition to participating in team bonding activities, we sat in a circle one morning and had a group discussion for almost two hours about our organization. We talked about how we want to make a difference in the world, how JUR will help us reach our goals, how to improve the editing process, how to ramp up marketing strategies, and how to better reach our international audience. And we talked about why it’s important for undergraduate students to be involved in an organization like ours. Ultimately it’s the network our organization supports, and the sense of community it builds in the process. Looking around the room to see people who share my goals is incredibly rewarding and reminds me that there is more to an undergraduate education than quizzes, tests, and homework. I’ve been a part of other student clubs and organizations, but none have supplemented my academic experiences in the same way. I’m honestly excited to move forward in my career with the support of the kind of professional network that is unique to JUR.

With this in mind, I return to my example of a declining trend in research at some Indian universities. Our affiliate editor Stuti may not have the same research opportunities as an undergraduate that we have here, but she’s connected now to a network of like-minded students through JUR. She’s incredibly knowledgeable in her field and an absolute joy to work with. She brings a unique perspective to the team that we all highly respect and value.

Working together has allowed us to better serve the authors who entrust their work to us. I will probably never meet Stuti in person but because we both recognized the importance of undergrad research and publication, we formed not only a professional and mutually beneficial connection, but also a friendship.

I share this because it shows that what we are doing at JUR is working. It shows the importance of giving undergraduate students an opportunity to participate in research and share their ideas. And it shows that the connections we make as undergraduates have an impact on the work we do.

We may be young and only starting our careers, but we're ready for our voices to be heard – and that starts with undergraduate research and publication.

1. **Varghese, G. (2008)**, “Declining Trends in Science Education and Research in Indian Universities.” In: Teichler, U. and Vessuri, H. (eds.), *Universities as Centres of Research and Knowledge Creation: An Endangered Species?* Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, pp. 201-212



Deanna Cox is an senior undergraduate pursuing dual degrees in natural resources and journalism. She can most often be found playing with microscopic worms in Dr. Wall's Soil Biodiversity and Ecosystem Functioning Lab. In addition to her interests in undergraduate research and publication, she is also a big fan of Prince, marching bands, and her guinea pig Mugatu.

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by Deanna Cox on November 6, 2014

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