

Beginning the Research Process Early: The Research Scholar Program

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A recent report from the Carnegie Foundation, “Reinventing Undergraduate Education”, calls on the nation's research universities to improve undergraduate education through a variety of initiatives related to the research focus of those institutions. The authors of the report challenge us to emphasize "inquiry based" instruction and provide opportunities for greater proportions of our students to participate in substantive research activities related to their fields of study and their career interests. At about the time this report was published, the University of South Florida (USF) was designate as a “Research I” university by the Florida Board of Regents. This was the top designation in a new tiered system, awarded to 3 of the 10 schools in the State University System.

As a Research I institution committed to offering undergraduates a fine education, USF believes that motivated undergraduate students should have greater opportunities to understand and participate in the research activities of USF professors. Consequently, the Office of Undergraduate Research (OUR) was established within the USF Honors Program In the fall of 1997.

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During the 1997-98 academic year, the OUR developed what we believe is a unique program for highly select first year students to attempt to stimulate student interest in becoming active participants in the research process. The program, known as the USF Undergraduate Research Scholars Program, seeks to teach new university “freshpeople” about the process of research and give them some sense of the kinds of research that faculty engage in and the reasons why professors are interested in doing research. Equally important is our interest in showing students how research is carried out in a variety of fields; many students might have some idea of what chemists do but would be unaware of how scholars in literature or accounting, for example, pursue research agendas.

National Merit, National Achievement and National Hispanic Scholars are automatically be invited to participate in the USF Undergraduate Research Scholar Program.

Invitations to other students are based upon high school academic record and test scores. Generally speaking, invited students have SATI scores in the range of 1400 and weighted high school GPAs of 4.0 or higher. Special scholarship support is available to students while they are active in the program. Students who accept the invitation are known as USF Undergraduate Research Scholars.

During their first semester at USF, Undergraduate Research Scholars enroll in a specially designed course entitled “Discovery: People, Processes and Problems”. “Discovery” is taught by some of the University’s most prestigious researchers. These are faculty designated by the Board of Regents as “Distinguished University Professor” based upon their research histories.

“Discovery” begins by broadly defining research as the systematic investigation of a phenomenon or problem. Faculty from all academic backgrounds, including the Natural and Social Sciences, Humanities and Fine Arts, Engineering, Education and Business, then share their own “stories”. Students hear how they became interested in research and learn about the problems and phenomenon they have examined. The culminating “Discovery” experience is the development of a research proposal that defines a problem or question and constructs a strategy for examining that question. This research proposal is developed within a collaborative group setting that includes both students and research faculty. Based upon the availability of resources, students may be able to pursue the research in subsequent semesters.

In the semester following “Discovery”, Research Scholars are given the opportunity to work with USF researchers as these Professors investigate issues that excite and interest them. The commitment to the student is that he/she may remain in the program for the duration of the undergraduate experience. Students may change research placements if that is appropriate. The student is provided with scholarship support each semester of program participation. Periodic receptions are held to bring students together to discuss topics of mutual interest and to learn from and interact with research faculty.

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