

DU's Annual Research Showcase Celebrates Undergraduate Original Scholarship and Creative Endeavors

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1 OVERVIEW

The University of Denver hosts an annual research poster symposium in spring quarter for undergraduate students seeking to present their scholarly findings and creative works. One of the core tenets of the University is a commitment to improving human welfare through original research and DU undergraduate students have ample opportunity to help address socially relevant problems and complex issues facing populations throughout their time at DU. The posters and creative works presented at the symposium often represent the culmination of months of hard work for many students as they aim to show off the important impact of their research on society. Here the Editorial Board discusses the importance of the annual DU Undergraduate Showcase: Research, Scholarship, and Creative Works symposium and its implications for undergraduate students and the community.

2 WHAT IS THE SHOWCASE?

The annual showcase features students from across all academic fields and disciplines, as they assemble together to present their individual research or creative work to the DU community in the form of a poster or a three-minute oral presentation. The Undergraduate Research Center (URC), which hosts the annual event, helps facilitate opportunities for students to develop their research skills and intellectual inquiry by helping undergraduates find faculty mentors and providing grant support for their research projects. Daniel Linseman, Ph.D., Professor in the Department of Biological Sciences and Faculty Director of the URC stated, "The DU Research and Scholarship Showcase is a great opportunity for students to display and present their research and creative works to the DU community." Students who receive funding from the URC or need to fulfill thesis requirements are often required to present as Linseman notes that "undergraduate students who have received support from the Undergraduate Research Center in the form of either Partners in Scholarship (PINS) or Summer Research Grant funding are

expected to present their work in either oral or poster format. Other undergraduate students who have produced research or creative work towards their honors thesis or thesis for distinction in their major are also invited to present."

There is a large academic diversity of student backgrounds at the annual showcase. As Grace Warner, Program Coordinator of the URC, mentioned, "We get all students from all across the campus that choose to participate in the Showcase. That's what makes it such an interesting and exciting event! We have students from the Undergraduate Research Center, the Center for Community Engagement to advance Scholarship and Learning, the University Honors Program, the Pioneer Leadership Program (PLP), Living and Learning Communities, and various departments that engage with the event." While the number of students presenting has dropped off in recent years due to the COVID-19 pandemic, this year the 2022 event will be back in-person and is estimated to have approximately seventy participants, including students who will either be presenting research posters or providing a three-minute presentation. Overall, Linseman noted that the "annual showcase is an opportunity for undergraduate students to present their research and creative works to their peers and faculty at DU. It provides them with a learning experience of interacting with others, explaining their projects, and answering questions regarding their research."

Katherine Tennis, Ph.D., Director of the Center for Undergraduate Scholarship and Honors and Faculty Director of the Honors Program, lauded the importance of the event stating, "the DU Undergraduate Showcase of Research, Scholarship, and Creative Activity is an opportunity for students to showcase their projects and to learn about the research presentation process – including making academic posters and talking about their work in a professional setting. It is also an opportunity for students who are interested in getting involved in this work in the future to come and see what is possible and talk to their peers about the process."



Figure 1. University of Denver undergraduate students inside The Cable Center presenting their research projects at the annual showcase, May 2019

3 HOW STUDENTS CAN GET SUPPORT AS THEY PREPARE FOR THE ANNUAL SHOWCASE

Students are expected to learn a new set of public communication prowess as they prepare for the showcase. Linseman stated that “students will acquire the skills needed to create posters or PowerPoint presentations to present their work. They will also develop skills in communicating their research projects to an audience and fielding questions pertaining to their work.” DU’s Writing Center, located in Anderson Academic Commons, holds workshops and provides resources to help undergraduate students prepare their research abstracts, create an effective and visually appealing poster, and give concise academic presentations aimed at a lay audience. When asked what skills the Writing Center is hoping to teach students as they prepare for the annual showcase, Brad Benz, Ph.D., Teaching Professor in the University Writing Program and the primary faculty member administering these workshops, mentioned, “In the poster workshop, we focus on the rhetoric and design of good research posters. Since posters are a visual medium, we discuss reducing the amount of text on a poster, and we emphasize the importance of using strong images, visuals, tables, and figures in posters. We also have stu-

dents work on providing a very concise oral summary of their research - to be able to summarize it in one or two sentences to the people who stop and look at their posters.” The Writing Center often plays an important part in every step of the research experience at DU as Benz noted that the Writing Center helps students at “every stage of the research process, from conceptualizing their ideas to creating research questions to drafting PINS grants to getting ideas down in rough drafts to refining and revising final writing projects.” Students interested in receiving help in writing project proposals, or in preparing for academic presentations, should contact the Writing Center at wrc@du.edu.

4 THE STUDENT EXPERIENCE

Students often appreciate the opportunity the showcase provides them in presenting their work to the DU community. Andres Pulido, a senior majoring in Finance and International Studies, along with a team of students and faculty, conducted a two-year DU Grand Challenges-supported project analyzing and strengthening local policy and collaboration on homelessness in the Colorado cities of Englewood, Littleton, and Sheridan. Their goal was to provide an understanding of community attitudes and service provider resource re-

ferral practices, hopefully giving policymakers and service providers a deep analysis of factors affecting homelessness in those three cities. In reflecting on presenting at the showcase, Pulido came to the realization that to “drive community improvement and knowledge on complex topics, one must be able to explain it at both technical and nontechnical levels, spark intrigue in it, and speak to its implications. What helped in our case is that our project was intimately connected to the community through relationships and understanding present needs. This allowed, for instance, our ‘Covid-19 Best Practices Policy Report across the U.S.’ to inform rapid response efforts, and for our face mask drive to distribute thousands of face masks to those unhoused.” Pulido and his co-presenter, Avery Becklenberg, prepared to present a keynote presentation at the showcase by having “great discussions” with their faculty mentor, Linda Olson, Ph.D., PLP Director and Teaching Professor in Leadership Studies, those at the URC, including then-Director Tennis, and their team as a whole. “Through practice and careful thought,” Pulido noted that they “synthesized [their] project into a precise and story-driven presentation that illustrated the value of the project on a community and personal level.”

Rosie Contino, a senior majoring in Economics and International Studies, has spent years engaging in research focused on the sustainability of slum upgrading projects in the developing world, specifically the case of the Kenya Slum Upgrading Program (KENSUP). To prepare for the showcase, Contino “condensed” her research paper into a poster board, practiced presenting her research, and created handouts for those who were interested in further exploration of the topic. Reflecting on the skills she developed in preparation for presenting, Contino said, “Presenting at the research showcase over the years provided me with important experience in public speaking, synthesizing complex topics for a general audience, and an opportunity to share what I am passionate about with the DU community.”

5 IMPLICATIONS OF THE SHOWCASE

The annual showcase has become a staple of the research journey for many DU students and is an important event for the DU research community. “The Research Showcase is important for getting the message of URC funding availability out to the students and faculty,” Linseman noted, “It also creates a sense of community and highlights the amazing research and creativity of our students and their faculty partners.” Students echo the sentiments. For Pulido, the showcase was a “rewarding experience as a researcher” to reflect on his team’s hard work and connect with others in the DU community. “It truly gave us an outlet to express our appreciation to many at DU and our partners, for believing in five first-years, with a crazy

community-informed idea and a fire to create sustainable initiatives.” Contino found the event momentous in her research journey as it gave her the “chance to share my passions and work with the DU community.” In addition, “receiving constructive feedback from experienced DU faculty” and “getting to see what my peers have been researching was valuable.” Tennis stressed the significance of the showcase as “an opportunity to celebrate the hard work and achievements of our undergraduate researchers who contribute so much to the intellectual life and vitality of our campus. We invite all faculty, staff, students, and community partners to join us in celebrating this their exciting work and accomplishments.” Overall, to the DU community, Pulido noted that the research showcase is “a remarkable celebration of curiosity, tenacity, and impact, from collaboration and across all fields.”

6 CONCLUSION

The pinnacle of many undergraduate students’ research experiences at DU is the annual symposium, often providing an important opportunity to develop academic communication skills and meaningfully engage with other members of the research community. It is, for many students, the final stage of the scientific process that their research mentors have guided them through. Mary Clark, J.D., Provost Executive Vice Chancellor of the University of Denver, noted that “as an institution, our goal for research and scholarship is to solve the challenging problems of our time while allowing our students to gain valuable experience.” Clark stated that the high-quality research projects presented at the showcase are a testament to the powerful, “dynamic faculty-student partnerships” present on campus that seek to “make discoveries that have the potential to change the world.”

Throughout this article, we have highlighted the crucial importance and value of the annual DU Undergraduate Showcase: Research, Scholarship, and Creative Works symposium held for the DU research community. We encourage students to work with their faculty mentors to craft a poster or oral presentation, take advantage of all the University resources available to them, and engage with the academic community through this significant event.