Student Perceptions of Undergraduate Research: Opportunity, Sacrifice, or Fun?

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Introduction

An online survey of undergraduate students from multiple colleges and departments at the University of South Florida was conducted about their perceptions of the existence and availability of research opportunities, the benefits of participation, and the relevance of their future careers. Two hundred and thirty-two students representing more than 40 different majors completed the relatively short survey, primarily juniors or seniors.

Student responses to the survey indicate that most were aware of undergraduate research opportunities, and thought that having this kind of experience would help them with their future employment. Forty percent have been involved in research projects, while eighty percent of the respondents indicated they plan to go on to graduate school.

Why Not Do Undergraduate Research?

Significant differences were noted in the awareness of and participation in undergraduate research at USF based on student class, not surprisingly with seniors the most involved. At all class levels, a much higher percentage of students in the honors college program were involved in research. There is little difference between full- and part-time students.

Why Do Undergraduate Research?

Most of the students responding to this survey saw multiple advantages in doing research, including having this experience when seeking employment, learning about specific methods and instruments, and how to analyze and interpret the data produced. Students also saw having a mentor as useful for helping them build skills, as an experience to mention on their resumes, and as a resource for letters of recommendation.

Not as important were the specific research questions being addressed, presenting at a conference, and publishing the results. The diverse range of participation among students is notable, however, with the vast majority getting course credit or being paid for their involvement in research. Only 19% were not getting course credit. No difference was observed between full-time and part-time students.

In The Future

Our survey data will be used to develop additional research opportunities and increase awareness of the benefits of participation in undergraduate research. A number of publications are now available about undergraduate research, STEM education, and integrating learning and research (see list below). Based on our survey, we hope to improve the opportunities and benefits for students at the University of South Florida.