



# Cultivating a Student Research Community at a PUI

By Emily Devereux and Rebekah Craig

Many primarily undergraduate institutions (PUIs) are struggling to expand and institutionalize undergraduate research while lacking the resources necessary to staff a dedicated student research office. In response to student desire for broader representation in the university research enterprise, Arkansas State University (A-State) is piloting a new model to actively engage students in expanding and institutionalizing undergraduate research in a resource-limited environment.

## The Student Voice

*“Your opinion matters”*

During the summer of 2014, a common theme emerged as students from PUIs across Arkansas met during a state-wide symposium for a federally-funded research consortium. Students voiced a strong desire for more influence and leadership in research on their campuses, but did not have a pathway to engage in the process. Their desire for empowerment with regard to university programs and administration connects well with academic literature on “student voice.”

A 2012 report by Toshalis and Nakkula describes the spectrum of student voice activities – from merely articulating their perspective, to participating in meetings, to becoming co-leaders who are integrally involved in decision making, guiding group processes and conducting activities. They cite a

considerable body of research that points to sustainable gains in student participation, improved competencies in skills such as critical thinking and problem-solving, and a strengthened sense of organizational commitment when students are engaged as co-leaders. However, Dana Mitra, a leader in research on student voice, reports that the majority of student government organizations focus their energies primarily on social activities and are rarely engaged in formal problem solving that relates to broader academic issues or institutional culture.

While most of these studies focused on primary and secondary school reform, A-State research administrators believe that the same sustained, positive outcomes may result as students are engaged in co-leadership at the higher education level. At the 2014 PUI consortium meeting, research administrators listened to students’ expressed desires for more meaningful involvement in the university research enterprise and felt compelled to provide such a pathway of engagement. In collaboration with the A-State Research and Technology Transfer office, students, both undergraduate and graduate, have been instrumental in envisioning and piloting the A-State Student Research Council (A-State SRC), a student-led, registered campus organization. Over sixty students have participated this year in the launch of the Council, with outstanding participation from students across all academic disciplines.

## The Student Vision

*“You define the dream”*

While developing the model and functions of the A-State SRC, students identified key functions to be fulfilled by the Council. They will co-lead:

- University research symposium and related events.
- Professional development initiatives.
- Faculty/student mentoring workshops.
- A peer-reviewed student research publication.
- Activities to broaden participation in research within the university and at regional primary and secondary schools.
- Evaluation and assessment of A-State SRC program and initiatives.
- Design of dynamic communication models and data tracking systems to engage current students and maintain communication after graduation.

Council members formed a governance structure with undergraduate and graduate co-chairs and sub-committees for professional development, special events, communications, and fundraising. The Council is formally advised by the university's research administration office, and the staff is working closely with SRC members to develop, strengthen, expand and institutionalize student research on campus.

## The Student Impact

*“You make a difference”*

A matter of primary importance to the SRC members was reform of the university's annual symposium of student research and scholarship, **Create@STATE**, now in its fifth year. A sub-committee was initiated to immediately address their concerns. This committee had tremendous impact upon not only the event planning itself, but also on the faculty's perception of the event. SRC members articulated their own vision of the event and how it could be more impactful for their research and scholarly endeavors.

The students provided an existing faculty advisory committee with suggestions such as juried selections of abstracts, reorganization of presentation categories and modification of the award structure to increase the quality and intellectual rigor of the event and provide more equality across academic disciplines. An additional committee was formed, made up of both students and faculty, to work together in defining judging rubrics and providing a juried selection of abstract submissions. Surprisingly, as student engagement increased, a noticeable boost in faculty enthusiasm and participation in the event was observed.

### Follow the A-State Student Research Council:

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Beyond co-leadership of the **Create@STATE** event, the SRC executive committee meets regularly with research administration staff, keeping abreast of upcoming funding opportunities and professional development events and contributing the student perspective on the university research environment. As their engagement with research administration has gained precedence, space in the A-State Research and Technology Transfer office suite has been set aside for student integration and working space.

## The Student Assessment

*“Your voice is powerful”*

Students in the A-State's Master of Public Administration (MPA) program are providing an ongoing assessment and evaluation for the SRC initiative. The program has incorporated the evaluation process into two graduate analysis course sections, providing invaluable “real-world” research training in the classroom, and helping to establish the idea that “research is teaching” in university culture. Students will design the evaluation activities, obtain Institutional Review Board approval, collect baseline data during the initial year and assess student and faculty perceptions of the university research culture. Over time, the students will evaluate changes in both quantity and quality of undergraduate research and identify any association with the SRC presence and activities.

Throughout the program assessment and evaluation, mechanisms will be developed and implemented to collect feedback from both students and faculty on their satisfaction with the functions and program activities of the Council for program effectiveness and strategic planning. Data will be collected on the number of students, demographics, level of participation within the Council, participation in research opportunities, and outcomes of their research activity such as presentations, publications, conference attendance and awards. As students graduate, data will be collected to track educational and career accomplishments.

One practical expected outcome from the evaluation is opportunities for students in the MPA program to publish findings in academic journals and present outcomes at national conferences. An expected outcome of the evaluation is to provide evidence for the creation of student research councils as a model for broadening participation in and institutionalizing undergraduate student research in resource-limited environments.

## The Student Innovation

*“You are Unique”*

While a few leading research institutions in the U.S. do have student research councils, there are two significant differences with the A-State SRC model. In the spectrum of student voice from expressing perspectives to co-leading, other formalized research councils that we have identified seem to engage students either at the level of expression or in the middle level of participation. In many instances, administratively staffed offices of undergraduate research invite student perspective and participation in activities of the administrative office. For many PUIs however, there are no existing budgetary resources to staff such an office, particularly for less research intensive institutions in the process of seeking to grow their research capacity.

The A-State SRC is a student-led model developed with little or no administrative resources. Using the enthusiasm and dynamism of students engaging other students, we hope to see growth in student participation in research. We also believe the model is promising in terms of sustainability because it is driven not from existing budgetary resources, but by the creativity and

energy of the student community. This model has the potential to be easily replicated at other PUIs and may provide an opportunity to develop regional and national networks of student-led research councils. As the A-State SRC grows and matures, we hope to show evidence of this practical model as a high-impact, cost-effective practice for sustainable growth of undergraduate student research at a PUIs.

## Voices of Our Students

Founding members of the A-State SRC have the following to say about the impact of the Council just a few months into the launch of this initiative:

“I envision SRC as an excellent conduit to reach students and let them know that they **can** do research; it’s not some far-off, unattainable pipe-dream.” –undergraduate student, Jacob Steele

“My time with the Council has shown me that a group of motivated individuals can bring about change. By encouraging research in the University, we can continue to grow SRC until it is a major institution on campus and a driving force behind the research of A-State.” –undergraduate student, Christopher Elms

“The SRC has allowed me to meet other undergraduate researchers from different fields. It will one day be an effective tool students can use to acquire internships and serve as a student voice to the faculty.” –undergraduate student, Aaron Tollett

“SRC has given me real perspective to countless opportunities of involvement in research on campus and insight on how important research is at A-State. I’m not only considering a future career in medical practice, but also leaning towards medical research where I can be part of the improvement and discoveries that first empower the field. I hope this Council highlights that the research side of every subject is a vital role in any organization as a whole.” –undergraduate student, Morgan Tripod

## References

Mitra, Dana. 2009. Student voice and student roles in education policy reform. In D.Plank, G. Sykes, & B. Schneider eds. AERA Handbook on Education Policy Research. London, UK: Routledge.

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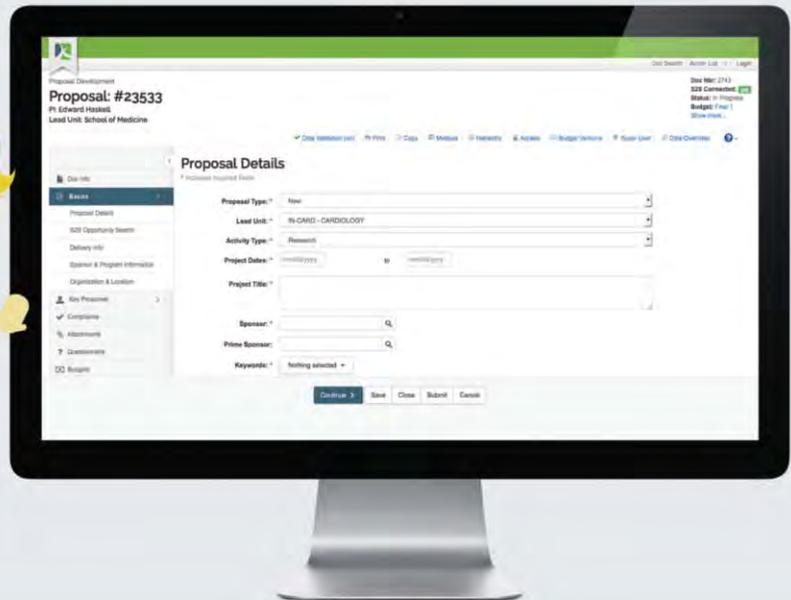
She is an active member of NCURA and serves on the program committee for Region III. She envisioned the A-State Student Research Council and currently serves as the advisor. She can be reached at [edevereux@astate.edu](mailto:edevereux@astate.edu)



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