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Thumbs Up to Undergraduate Research at UMW

Jack Bales

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Editor: Anna Barron Billingsley
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On the cover: Judy Beckmen '59 exemplifies the entrepreneurial spirit exhibited by a number of UMW alumni. She and her husband operate Beckmen Vineyards near Santa Barbara, Calif. Read more about her on page 16.

Photo by Tim Halberg.



UNIVERSITY OF
MARY WASHINGTON
The Centennial Celebration

Thumbs Up to Undergraduate Research at UMW

By Jack Bales

With newly minted college graduates flooding the job market or graduate schools, each one is naturally searching for an edge to stand out among the competition. According to Mary Washington students, UMW's Undergraduate Research Program is earning high marks for helping provide that "edge." The program gives students opportunities to develop and conduct independent research projects under the guidance and supervision of sponsoring faculty members. Indeed, UMW's Mission Statement stresses that the University "especially encourages the participation of undergraduates in research."

Students apply for undergraduate research grants through the office of John Morello, associate vice president for academic affairs. During the 2006-2007 academic year, more than 200 students from 16 academic departments were awarded grants, enabling them to complete projects in diverse areas of study. Each recipient was sponsored by a faculty member who served as a guide, mentor, and resource.

These projects help students "clarify [their] academic interests and career goals; build skills in research, analysis, problem solving, writing, and presentation," Morello said. "They also help establish credentials for graduate or professional school applications, or for future employment."

Sean V. Droms '07 completed three mathematics projects during his years at Mary Washington. "Undergraduate research has completely defined my career in mathematics here at UMW," said Droms, who is now attending the mathematics graduate program at the University of Virginia. "Classes are great, but the real learning is when you are doing original research and are required to pool all the knowledge you have to solving a problem that no one else has thought about before."

Amanda Rutstein's long-term interest was also defined during her UMW years. "I was completely thrilled with my experience gained during my undergraduate research project," said the 2007 graduate. Rutstein completed an in-depth study of the poetry of Sylvia Plath under the guidance of English Professor Claudia Emerson, and with the assistance of Instructional Technology Specialist Jim Groom, who helped set up a blog for Rutstein's work.

"The project with Professor Emerson was truly the best course I took at Mary Washington," Rutstein said. "It allowed me to do what I think college is for, which is to focus on what you're passionate about. I just can't speak too highly about the experience."

Many students have gone to regional, state, and national conferences with their faculty sponsors to present their research. The psychology department has long been active in undergraduate research and at annual meetings of the Southeastern Psychological Association and the Virginia Psychological Association. Mary

Washington students frequently take home top honors.

At the April 2006 conference of the Virginia Psychological Association, for example, students **Alex M. Mejia '06**, **Karen Sturm '06**, **J. Ryan Phelps '06**, **Jennifer Moore '07**, and **Elizabeth Randall '06** won the Frederick B. Rowe Undergraduate Paper Award for "Internet vs. Face-to-Face Interaction: The Influence on Identity Formation."

According to the director of the project, Psychology Professor Debra Steckler, "The study the students did was terrific, and they did an absolutely wonderful presentation at VPA."

Samantha Krause '07, who has always wanted to be a paleontologist, was an anthropology and geology major at UMW. She attended conferences of both the Geological Society of America (with Dr. Neil Tibert) to discuss her studies on land use history at Stratford Hall Plantation and the Southern Anthropological Society (with Dr. Margaret Huber), at which she focused on kingship among the Olmec civilization. Both professors, Krause said, "were giving me the thumbs up the whole way. It was really fun."

As many students have observed, the success of Mary Washington's Undergraduate Research Program is due to the

Karen Pearfman





By dressing the part of a 1930s interviewer, Lauri Raffetto (left) lent authenticity to her project researching interviews conducted with former slaves during the Great Depression. Her faculty mentor was History Professor Jeff McClurken (right), who himself participated in research as an undergraduate at Mary Washington.

Photo below: Working with Claudia Emerson, her Pulitzer Prize-winning professor, allowed Amanda Rutstein (left) to pursue her passion for the poetry of Sylvia Plath.

guidance and enthusiasm of the involved professors, as well as the students' motivation and interest. At the same time, however, the students are encouraged to think for themselves and work independently.

History Professor **Jeff McClurken '94** can look at undergraduate research from the unique perspective of both a Mary Washington graduate and current faculty member. "An independent research project," he said, "allows students to have a capstone research and writing experience in ways that allows them to work [with limited

supervision], to plan, create, and complete a major scholarly project on their own.

"After all,"

McClurken said, "aren't such skills central to the liberal arts experience? Isn't our goal to produce people, regardless of major, who are able to demonstrate the best kind of informational literacies and presentation abilities?"

McClurken's thoughts about student autonomy are echoed by participants in the program. **Leah Triplett's** semester-long independent study focused on Jane Austen and film. She said

this about her English professor and mentor, Marie McAllister: "She guided me in my research methods, but she never restricted me in any way. She challenged me to think about the topics I was interested in in different ways, and she asked me critical questions that demanded thought."

What has helped to keep Triplett and other students motivated and on track are the symposiums that the various academic departments host each year. These allow students to showcase their

research, which can include oral presentations, posters, displays, and performances.

New last April was a Student Research and Creativity Day, which attracted more than 100 participants representing 18 different academic areas. This all-day event showcased a great range and variety of projects from a number of different disciplines.

The event also helped students, as **Kathleen Shugart '07** noted, to refocus their research. A double major in physics and classics, Shugart spent countless hours researching a very specific topic – ancient siege weaponry – for Physics Professor George King. "I had been working on the physics of catapults for a full year," she said. "In the day-to-day research, I was so focused on the minutiae that I had almost forgotten the bigger picture of putting it all together to see the total effect of all the physics on the catapults themselves." She added that UMW's showcase "gave me an opportunity not only to share my own research, but also to listen to several of my friends talk about what they had been doing all year."

In addition, these discussions were occasionally augmented with PowerPoint presentations and video and audio clips. **Lauri Raffetto '08**, mentored by Jeff McClurken, researched slave narratives during the Great Depression, specifically interviews with former slaves that were conducted in the 1930s as part of the Federal Writers' Project. For the student research symposium, Raffetto developed a PowerPoint presentation using photos of slaves taken during their interviews and audio clips from the narratives. To lend authenticity, she added, "I dressed as 1930s interviewers would have dressed when they went into the [former slaves'] homes."

In the past, most of the individual research projects were conducted by juniors and seniors. New this fall is a research course in which each student works on his or her faculty member's research project. The class, according to John Morello, is open to students at any level and will provide a hands-on introduction to research. Students who complete the introductory class will likely develop their own individual study projects at a later time.

As so many students and faculty are realizing, undergraduate research takes knowledge learned in the classroom and puts it to work. Under Biology Professor Michael Bass, for example, environmental science major **Laura Maxfield '07** studied the impact of commercial development on the ecology of two Rappahannock River tributaries. "Spending that much time in the field at an undergraduate school has been a big plus for me," she said.

It's been a big plus for hundreds of other UMW students as well. And for many of them, those pluses have added up to even larger life and career opportunities. ■

Jack Bales, author of numerous books and articles, is UMW's longtime Reference and Humanities Librarian.