

CHANGING THE FACE OF RESEARCH

Spotlight on undergraduate research at Pitt

Provided by University of Pittsburgh
Office of the Provost

The education of the whole student is something that Pitt students and their parents are hearing a lot about these days. Simply put, it means that the “Pitt experience” extends beyond the classroom, into the laboratories and libraries and art studios, onto the playing fields, across the campus in co-curricular activities and living environments, into the city itself and even across the globe—all as part of getting our students ready to better compete in their chosen fields. This yearlong series, “Changing the Face of Research” will concentrate on the growing undergraduate research program at Pitt and discuss the importance of this particular experience to the development of our students. Watch carefully during Pitt home games and you will see some of these students in action on the Jumbotron at Heinz Field (and on the scoreboard in the Petersen Center). For more information, visit www.pitt.edu/~UGR.

Below is an interview with Dr. Patricia Beeson, Vice Provost at the University of Pittsburgh.

Why is undergraduate research important for Pitt students?

Student involvement in investigating, understanding and producing knowledge gives them a role to play in our central purpose and mission, which builds confidence and competence. Regular faculty contact provides an engaging one-on-one relationship which fosters academic skills and allows students to discuss intellectual issues outside of the classroom, not only with their faculty sponsors but with student colleagues as well. Undergraduate research also helps to bridge the gap between the social and intellectual lives of students, by strengthening social ties to the University community where friendships are developed and role models are emulated.

What do students have to say about their research experiences?

It’s interesting—we recently surveyed some students and I was struck by their responses to the question, “What was the best part of your research experience?” What fascinated me was how similar their answers were to those of my faculty colleagues. “The feeling you get when you sit back and realize that you’re delving into the unknown.” “What you find could be something that no one’s ever even thought of before.” “There is a kind of satisfaction that comes from knowing that



you have contributed to a larger academic community.”

What are some examples of research that Pitt students are working on?

Pitt students are working on everything from cures for Alzheimer disease and diabetes to a better understanding of how galaxies structure the universe and how biotechnology and nanotechnology can change the way we function in the world. But students are not only doing research in medicine and the natural sciences. We find researchers in the Theater Arts and Philosophy departments, in English, in French and Spanish, and in Psychology and Business, to name just for a few examples. Many students are spanning several departments with multidisciplinary research in important fields of endeavor and are traveling to different parts of the world to conduct their research. With more than 2,000 faculty on campus, students are able to explore many different options.

Is there anything unique about the opportunities at Pitt?

Because Pitt is a major research university, the research experiences we can offer our students are fundamentally different from those offered at primarily undergraduate institutions. Our students have access to some of the top researchers in their fields, and get to work with scholars who truly are on the cutting edge of their disciplines. Pitt students also have greater access to medical research because the University’s medical school and the UPMC medical complex are adjacent to the undergraduate campus. Our students also have access to the rich research materials found in the city of Pittsburgh.

How is undergraduate research funded?



The main source of funding for undergraduate research is our faculty who, in addition to providing their guidance and support to students, attract funding for these research experiences from federal agencies such as the National Science Foundation and National Institutes of Health.

Over the years, Pitt has cultivated a

substantial summer research community by directly sponsoring the University Honors College’s Brackenridge Fellowship program and the University Center for International Studies’ Research Abroad Program. In addition, Pitt deans raise money from donors and alumni to sponsor research experiences for students.

Is undergraduate research for the many or the few?

We want it to be for the many. We are probably one of the top 10-15 public AAU (Association of American Universities) research universities for undergraduate research. It is something we are good at and that distinguishes our undergraduate programs from those at other universities. And, with the changing interests and aspirations of our undergraduates, I expect undergraduate research opportunities will continue to grow at Pitt.

Photos of students from the Research Experience for Undergraduates Program.

CHANGING THE FACE OF RESEARCH

Undergraduate students at Pitt have more opportunities:

- ◆ To work with world-renowned researchers
- ◆ To explore the important questions of our time
- ◆ To share in the joy of exploration and discovery

It’s no wonder undergraduates are changing the face of research at Pitt.

For more information on Pitt’s opportunities for undergraduate research, visit www.pitt.edu/~UGR.

Undergraduate
Excellence in Research



University of Pittsburgh