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Developing and Encouraging the First-Year Undergraduate Researcher

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Abstract: A simulated conference in first-year curriculum reinforces undergraduate research as beneficial to both honors and campus communities while fostering scholarly development and campus engagement among honors freshmen during the coronavirus crisis.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic; first-year experience (FYE); high-impact practice; undergraduate research; Salisbury University (MD)—Glenda Chatham and Robert G. Clarke Honors College

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As outlined by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U), integration of high-impact practices (HIPs) can lead to improved levels of active student learning, student-faculty interaction, and campus engagement outside the classroom. Salisbury University's Clarke Honors College offers a range of HIPs for students throughout their undergraduate career, including a strong focus on one HIP specifically: undergraduate research. The focus begins in Honors 111, a required first-year-experience course that offers students a rigorous introduction to undergraduate research practices and asks them to develop an original research question, conduct background research with primary and secondary sources, and support arguments with academic evidence. A hidden element of the course's success is not the fifteen-page final paper but a week-long mock Student Research Conference (SRC).

The SRC, a graded component of Honors 111, offers students a space to present a poster or oral presentation of their research to an audience of peers

and faculty. For the assignment, students submit abstracts of their research paper, attend sessions during the week, and participate in Q and A with fellow presenters. They are evaluated on their presentation using a modified version of the AAC&U Critical Thinking rubric. The SRC attempts to offer a robust mock conference environment, complete with a program, feedback cards, a post-conference survey, and guest attendees. All oral and poster sessions are moderated by Honors 111 faculty and others across campus. During the COVID19 pandemic, the SRC occurred in a synchronous remote setting using the Zoom platform for conference sessions; this move to a fully online format modeled the agile response of many conferences worldwide and provided students with a unique research presentation experience.

The Honors 111 SRC serves as a critical element in the course's overall success, benefiting both the students and the larger campus community. First, students advance in their overall scholarly development and campus engagement. Students gain an appreciation of the research process by drafting abstracts and presenting their preliminary work in advance of completing their final paper. The conference also encourages students to see research not as an individual task but as a collective enterprise that can be enriched by community feedback and participation. For example, students learn how to respond to questions from the audience and how to incorporate feedback into their final papers. Finally, by recruiting faculty moderators from across campus, the SRC creates increased opportunities for students to mingle with potential research mentors and expand their academic areas of interest.

In addition to benefitting the individual student, the SRC supports the larger campus community in several ways. First, the SRC reinforces the institutional focus on undergraduate research, and students are more likely to present at future conferences, increasing the university's presence on a local, regional, and national scale. For example, each year a handful of Honors 111 students are accepted to present their research papers at the Northeast Regional Honors Council (NRHC) Annual Conference. Because these students receive feedback on an abstract as part of the SRC assignment, they are well prepared to revise these abstracts for conference submission. Further, students who succeed in Honors 111 are skill-ready undergraduate researchers who make strong candidates for faculty labs and projects. Inviting faculty to moderate sessions allows early access to research conversations with these skill-ready students. In addition, by inviting representatives from the Salisbury University Office of Undergraduate Research and Creative Activity, the SRC allows for direct conversations between students and university leaders

in undergraduate research. Lastly, because the SRC introduces students to the collective nature of research, they are more likely to attend and actively participate in campus research events (such as the Salisbury University Student Research Conference), bolstering attendance numbers and student engagement. In recent years, Honors 111 students have published their research in *Laridae*, Salisbury's newly launched undergraduate research journal. Future assessment studies by the Honors 111 team will explore whether exposure to feedback during the SRC prepares students for the journal's review and revision process.

By bringing together individual researchers in a collective environment, the SRC encourages first-year students to discover "the sense of excitement that comes from working to answer important questions" (AAC&U). In doing so, the SRC reinforces undergraduate research as a high-impact practice worthy of continued support and development. Hosting an SRC takes time and intentional planning, but if embedded within a course's larger structure, the experience can serve as a gateway to future undergraduate research engagement for students and faculty alike.

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