USF undergraduate research on the rise

By: Jerome R. Stockfisch | Tribune Staff
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For the next two years, college student Daniel Schadrac will be drilling down into two areas of health communication: how to help low-income people get colorectal screenings and how people in those communities get their health information so hospitals and doctors can best reach them.

But Schadrac’s not a graduate student. He’s not even an upperclassman.

He’s a first-year student at the University of South Florida, and he represents a growing trend at USF and at universities nationwide — undergraduate research.

"This has gone beyond ... a good job or a good-looking" resume, said Schadrac, who was born here shortly after his family fled genocide in Rwanda. "What undergraduate research has allowed me to do is build my character."

USF now has at least 2,500 undergrads working with faculty mentors on rigorous inquiry.

"Undergraduate research is a matter of course here," said Richard Pollenz, director of the school’s Office of Undergraduate Research. "No matter which faculty, across every discipline, they will work with graduate students and undergraduates."

The concept is tried and true. Especially in the sciences, faculty researchers have relied on the help of undergraduates for decades. More than 650 colleges and universities are members of the Council on Undergraduate Research.

But educators are now recognizing and documenting that the practice is a strong contributor to the engagement of younger students.

"The recent interest has been because these practices have been defined as high-impact," said Jillian Kinzie, associate director of Indiana University’s Center for Postsecondary Research.

"When students get involved in research, they’re more likely to persist, more likely to be retained, more likely to graduate; they will likely have a higher grade point average, and they will learn more and at a deeper level."

Undergraduate research at USF was cited by Provost and Executive Vice President Ralph Wilcox last month as one of the key factors in the university’s six-year graduation rate jumping 15 percent in five years. Wilcox said research "anchored" undergraduates in the USF community, and the school was "very intentional in providing undergraduates the benefits of a top-tier research university."

Indiana University’s center compiles an annual National Survey of Student Engagement, and although it doesn’t single out undergraduate research, it does identify it as a high-impact practice, along with such strategies as internships and service learning.

The survey concludes that first-year students who were engaged in one high-impact practice, and seniors who experienced two, reported greater gains in knowledge, skills and personal development and were more satisfied with their educational experience.
Pollenz is researching the effect of undergraduate research at USF.

“We can surely show that students that have research experience remain in the disciplines,” he said. “One of the hypotheses I’m working on is that if we can get a student an undergraduate research experience as a freshman or sophomore, perhaps now they’re going to remain in those majors and be much more committed.”

That’s significant, because in the critical science, technology, engineering and math fields, only four of 10 who start in one of those fields graduates in it.

But undergraduate research is not only for STEM students. Sharon McCaman, a junior dance major at USF, is organizing a student dance film festival that is requiring her to research steps from selling tickets through online services to booking a venue, creating a website and providing content.

“You don’t think of dance as being research — not traditional research,” she said. “You think of numbers and medicine. For those of us in the arts to be encouraged, and told that what you are doing is investigative, and it is research and you really should think of it in that way … is so cool.”

Meanwhile, at USF St. Petersburg, junior mass communication major Karlana June Morgan has won a national award for her research on the portrayal of Vietnamese women in that country’s print media.

She looked at Western media, concluding that women were often dehumanized, objectified and sexualized, and she hypothesized that the situation would be similar in Vietnam. It was not.

"I was very pleased to find that," Morgan said. "Research often brings up more questions than answers, so it’s definitely something I would like to continue researching on a larger basis.”

Her paper, “The Portrayal of Vietnamese Women in Vietnamese Print Media,” won the 2013 Undergraduate Research Award from the Association for Practical and Professional Ethics.

Schadrac said his research in public health at Moffitt Cancer Center on campus has brought him out of his shell. He had been on a solid pre-med academic track but decided to change his undergraduate major to Africana Studies. He will continue to pursue osteopathic medicine.

“Maybe I may have been much more afraid to step out and major in the humanities,” he said. “But I was able to study something that is not just for the facts of knowledge, but to grow in wisdom as well.

“Not only do I have a reason to study the cultures of Africa and America, and see what it means to be black here, but I can implement that in my field,” he said. “I can go into these communities and understand just what I am assessing.”

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