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FEATURE: AAC&U MEMBER INNOVATIONS Undergraduate Research: Not Just for Research Universities

An educationally significant springtime ritual has taken root at Estrella Mountain Community College in Avondale, Arizona. Now in its third year, the Maricopa Student Conference draws students out of their individual classrooms to share their academic research in an interdisciplinary scholarly setting, and creates a lively forum to allow both students and faculty to exchange ideas on a variety of topics.

The conference brings together students from all ten of the colleges in the Phoenix metropolitan area's Maricopa system. This year's conference, which will be held April 23, 2008, is focused on "Pop Culture in Society." The theme, which was chosen by a student-led planning group, has drawn presentations from across the disciplines on topics as diverse as black and Latino relations in the barrio; gender issues and stereotypes in country music; Shakespearean stereotypes in popular culture; and the image of the multicultural family on television.

Promoting Student Research

The conference is the brainchild of Kathleen Ludicello, division chair of liberal arts at Estrella Mountain, who pushed to create a serious research focus for the event. "The conference is part of our overall goal to provide students with as many academic privileges as we can so that the playing field is leveled with students at four-year institutions," Ludicello explains. "We created the conference to mirror the way graduate student conferences are structured, with speakers, break-out panels, and opportunities for scholarly discussion—so the students taking part can really see themselves as academics."

As Tim Elgren, past president of the Council on Undergraduate Research and associate professor of chemistry at Hamilton College, and Nancy Hensel, executive officer of the Council on Undergraduate Research, explained in their 2006 *Peer Review* article, research experiences can have a transformative effect on undergraduate students. Elgren and Hensel wrote that courses and programs designed to involve undergraduate students in research projects "promote greater exposure to the primary literature; create opportunities to articulate and test hypotheses and intellectual models; and encourage students to contextualize and communicate objectives, approaches, analyses, and conclusions."



Estrella Mountain Community College has a primary goal of ensuring that its students are prepared to transfer and succeed at four-year colleges and universities.

The Maricopa Student Conference is part of Estrella Mountain's mission to support a strong student research component. To prepare for the conference, faculty ask students to do traditional library research as well as fieldwork in the social and behavioral sciences. "We tell them to go find where Wikipedia got its sources," Ludicello says.

Encouraging students to do original research helps them become familiar with academic journals and introductory theoretical languages, she explains. "[Undergraduate research] prepares students to have critical discussions on topics such as race and class on a more sophisticated level, both here at EMCC and



For first-generation students in particular, we need to extend the learning environment outside the classroom as much as we can," explains Kathleen Ludicello, division chair of liberal arts at Estrella Mountain.

mathematics, Toms says, the conference is putting the application of learning on display. "What does math have to do with pop culture? We have poster displays that answer that question."

in the work they do beyond our college. By engaging in critical discussion here, they will be prepared to engage in the kinds of broader issues they will encounter in the workplace or in upper-division classes when they transfer."

This year's conference coordinator, Malik Toms, division chair of developmental education and a faculty member in liberal arts at Estrella Mountain, explains that the Maricopa Student Conference is both integrated with general education courses and also introduces students to ideas beyond their own courses. "We try to relate everything back to the classroom. In essence we are saying, how does your class apply to the real world? How does the real world apply to your class? Most importantly, how can your learning make a difference in your world?" By bringing in disciplines from physics to English to psychology to

Preparing Students for Successful Transfer

Ensuring that students are fully prepared for the next level of their education is a primary goal of both the conference and the larger Estrella Mountain curriculum. "We aren't a junior college," Ludicello points out. "Many students attend EMCC to get their 100s and 200s out of the way and go right into 300-level courses at one of the three big schools in the area." The Maricopa Community Colleges have transfer articulation agreements with Arizona State University, University of Arizona, or Northern Arizona University, which means that many students receive their general education at Estrella Mountain and move into the larger local four-year universities as third-year students.

Toms, who served as conference director last year as well, emphasizes that participation in the conference helps prepare transfer students for work in their chosen majors. "I've had a few students who have gone on to four-year universities talk about how they were inspired by the conference," he says. "One student who was recognized at our first student conference now works as a team leader for Barack Obama supporters. She was chosen over students from Harvard and Yale based on the fact that she knew how to carry herself in a public forum."

Expanding Intellectual Opportunities on Campus

Estrella Mountain is a Hispanic-Serving Institution, and also serves a large number of students who are the first of their family to attend college. This presents some specific challenges for students that Estrella Mountain's conference is designed to address, Ludicello says. "For first-generation students in particular, we need to extend the learning environment outside the classroom as much as we can because they do not necessarily have the privilege of going home and having people to talk to about their academic work. While they are on campus, while they have made arrangements to focus on their academic work, we need to capture their time. So while they are already on campus, we need to make as many opportunities available as possible."

To encourage as many students as possible to participate, the conference is scheduled during the most-attended day and time of the week. To further encourage attendance, Bryan Tippett, Estrella Mountain's vice president of academic affairs, has officially excused absences for students attending the conference, and has encouraged faculty to plan their classes for that day around the conference. As Toms explains, "the conference serves as a campuswide assessment of student learning and engagement." After the conference, students complete an assessment piece that is designed to help them recognize how the conference has strengthened their general knowledge, their knowledge in international affairs, and their knowledge in terms of the specific subject matter they are researching.

Involvement in the conference enriches and extends the student research experience beyond the classroom, Toms says. "The conference gives them a platform to share their voices and ideas with a larger audience. Normally, students write these incredible papers that we instructors read and that's the end. With the conference, students can reach a larger group and make a long-lasting impact. It's like the poet Saul Williams says: 'Let your words inspire words.'"

This feature article was guest-written by AAC&U Associate Director of Web Communications Noreen O'Connor

This feature article was guest written by AACE's Associate Director of Peer Communications Research Center.

For more information about the [Estrella Mountain Community College](#) student research conference, visit its [Web page](#). For more on undergraduate research, see the [Winter 2006 issue of *Peer Review*](#) and [online resources](#) from AAC&U's 2007 conference on undergraduate research.

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