Creating research opportunities for distance students

The “41% of all UAF undergraduate students get involved in research or creative activities” statistic is often near the top of lists on what makes UAF unique, and for a good reason! For many of us, some sort of independent project helped flip the switch that set us on the path we’re on today. Is it possible to include online students in those transformative academic experiences? Is it possible to enjoy the rewards of being a project mentor as an online instructor? I sat down with the director of Undergraduate Research & Scholarly Activity (URSA), Trent Sutton, to find some answers to these questions.

TO BEGIN: A MINI FAQ

URSA’s main function is to provide funding (travel and research grants) and organizational support for undergraduate projects. Who can qualify?

▪ **Competitive:** Students must secure a mentor and submit a project proposal in order to be considered for funding. Funding from URSA or other organizations/departments is not required to do a research/project course.

▪ **Not Just Lab Research:** Creative and scholarly projects include all disciplines.

▪ **Part-Time Is Okay:** Students are eligible if they’re taking at least six credits a semester as part of a UAF associate or bachelor’s degree. This includes courses at CTC and rural campuses!

▪ **No In-Person Requirement:** Research/project courses are already designed to be flexible to accommodate things like field work and to promote independent student learning. Mentorship meetings and presenting project findings can be done remotely through video conferencing.

▪ **Who Can Mentor:** Any UAF faculty member, postdoctoral researcher or graduate student can be a mentor.

▪ **Not the Only Source:** URSA is one of several sources of undergraduate project funding. BLaST, INBRE, EPSCoR, and the Alaska Space Grant Program have their own requirements.

HOW TO BEGIN

There are lots of ways an independent project can form, and they often involve a level of serendipity and interpersonal connection, which can be hard to recreate online. The solution, of course, is to be clear and explicit about research opportunities for distance students, and to help students advocate for the support they need in systems that may not yet be optimized for off-campus learners. Here’s what that might look like.

Re-frame:

▪ If you have done previous campus-based projects, consider how your research topic could be widened by student researchers in other locations.

▪ If you work with specialized equipment, think of ways students can gain access to similar equipment where they live, or get involved with aspects of the topic that don’t require these special tools.

▪ If you want to encourage students to propose their own topics, consider designing independent projects or experiments in your online course that can grow and expand after the semester is over.

Publicize:

▪ Make it clear that online students are encouraged to apply and speak clearly about how they will be involved at a distance. Post to relevant listservs and on project boards like this one hosted by URSA.

▪ Talk about opportunities in your online classes. Reach out to students who have shown interest and go above and beyond in their coursework.

Support:

▪ **Other institutions** already work with distance students doing research and scholarly activity, but it’s not yet a familiar situation at UAF. As a mentor, be aware of research/project course requirements within your department, and help students advocate to make the process more inclusive.

▪ Remember that undergrads are learning research and project-based skills. For distance students, there may be some context-based or unspoken knowledge that needs to be purposefully explained. Training can take time and some creative applications of online communication tools.