

Undergraduate Student Research Project Social Networking and Student Stories Initiative

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Student Stories Initiative

The Undergraduate Student Research Project (USRP) entered the news business in May 2009. Since the Public Affairs Office has limited coverage of the Education Department, USRP took on the task of creating its own stories, capturing intern experiences through the Student Stories Initiative (SSI). The process takes approximately 3 weeks to complete. First, interns are chosen based on the quality of their work and the newsworthiness of their project. In the journalistic community, a story is newsworthy if it contains the following news values:

- Impact—how many people does the event/project affect?
- Timeliness—how recently did the event occur?
- Prominence—how well-known are the people involved in the event?
- Uniqueness—how distinctive and rare is the event or project?
- Currency—is the event related to some topic people are talking about or interested in?
- Balance—do stories encompass a diverse representation of students, NASA centers, and projects?

SSI is a voluntary effort, and the process begins when students are asked if they would like to participate. Students are asked a series of 10 routine questions to provide an overview of their entire experience, from garnering the internship award to the completion of their projects. They are given a week to respond. Once USRP receives their answers, the research phase begins. Research for articles includes examining each student’s application and project description, and conducting online research to gain a better grasp of each project (figure 1).

Prior to being published, USRP stories follow a rigorous approval process. Each story goes through the intern and through the mentor or the mentor’s technical organization to ensure the technical accuracy and nonsensitive nature of the data presented in the story. Each story also goes through the USRP administrator for final approval.

A new student story goes on the USRP website and Facebook page each week to consistently provide the public and USRP’s stakeholders with new, in-depth, qualitative data about USRP internship experiences.



Fig. 1. Intern Cody Ensley with the focus of his work—Robonaut 2.

Since the summer of 2010, USRP has increased its scope to publish in venues internal and external to NASA. Student stories have been published on the NASA

OUTSIDE PUBLICATIONS	
NASA	17
Student University	2
Local Newspaper	2

Higher Education website, on psychorg.com, at student universities, and in student hometown local newspapers. This effort generates awareness to NASA research, USRP opportunities, and student achievements while serving as a great recruiting tool for future science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) candidates. USRP was also featured in *Forbes* magazine online and on internships.com.

Special Interest Stories

In the fall of 2010, USRP began publishing special interest stories to cover a broader spectrum of topics, such as prior-service interns, interviews with African-American interns for Black History Month, coordinator interviews for Women’s History Month, intern conference attendance, and “STEM Pipeline” successes. USRP also uses the SSI to document programmatic activities, such as center visits, volunteer activities like Space Day, and recruiting activities that include the University of Texas at El Paso Leadership Conference (figure 2).

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continued



Fig. 2. The author inspiring elementary students at Space Day.



Fig. 3. Student stories and videos can be found at <http://usrp.usra.edu>

With the addition of special interest stories, the USRP website and Facebook page now have two to three new stories online each week. To date, USRP has published 78 stories and plans to publish 32 spring student stories over the summer—more than three times as many stories as USRP published for the summer of 2010.

Social Networking

USRP created a Facebook account in August 2009. In December 2010, USRP increased its friend count from 300 to around 1,900 friends, which represents over a 500% increase. They accomplished this by inviting the applicant pool to be friends. By asking interns to tag photos each semester, USRP increased its number of photos from 20 to more than 600—a 2,900% increase.

USRP uses Facebook as another venue to publish student stories, which generates more interest in the program by tagging the student covered by each story and by friends reposting stories. USRP also uses its page to give program updates and to recruit (figure 3).

In the spring of 2011, USRP created a group solely for USRP interns. This group can be used to send out opportunities for paper competitions, scholarships, and conferences. Currently, over half of USRP alumni and current interns belong to this intern group.