

Guide for Faculty Wanting to Engage Undergraduate Students in the ASLE Community

Background: Until recently, ASLE has been successful in mentoring graduate students in the discipline. As part of ASLE’s mission and Strategic Plan, the Graduate Mentoring program has focused on strategies to support graduate students. However, in recent years, faculty have expressed interest in extending the same kind of mentoring and professionalizing opportunity to undergraduates. Several faculty members have successfully brought undergraduates to ASLE, and the de facto role of undergrads at conferences has been as presenters on undergraduate or pedagogy panels. This document, a resource for faculty mentors of undergrads, is a result of the Undergraduate Task Force’s research and recommendations—first organized by Salma Monani in 2012, discussed at several EC retreats between 2013-2015, and led by Sarah Ray and Sarah Wald—on how to formalize and improve the experience for both faculty and students. ASLE is committed to continuing to implement these recommendations.

Overview: There are many benefits to undergraduate involvement in ASLE, and specifically at the organization’s biennial conferences and off-year symposia. Those benefits extend not just to the student, but to the faculty member and to the general ASLE community as well. However, there are also challenges in ensuring that the experience is a positive one for the student(s) and faculty member(s). This short document is a resource for faculty interested in involving their undergraduate students in ASLE.

Rationale: By attending or participating at an ASLE conference or symposium, undergraduate students can gain an understanding that academic discourse happens in real time, with real people, trying to address shared questions about problems that matter to them and matter in the world. Furthermore, students can feel empowered by realizing that they too can contribute to such conversations, and that they can be the future of the field.

This is especially important for students from groups historically underrepresented in higher education, and it is made possible not just by the conference experience itself but by the faculty-student mentoring that takes place before and after the event. Engaging undergraduates in conferences can thus support the stated ASLE missions “to inspire and promote the work of scholars, educators, *students*, and writers in the environmental humanities and arts” and to promote “equity, diversity, inclusion, and accessibility on behalf of the membership.” Undergraduate research experience (URE), of which conference attending and presenting is a part, is an important pathway to graduate school as well as a wide range of careers. In particular, networking and exposure to the field at conferences is central to the professionalization and retention of students from historically underrepresented groups, and participating in the ASLE conference can help students professionalize for multiple career paths beyond academia, especially given ASLE’s growing support of such “alt-ac” opportunities.

Benefits for Faculty: There are potential benefits for ASLE faculty members as well. Increasingly, and especially at teaching institutions, faculty are evaluated based on undergraduate participation in their research. For faculty in the humanities, conferences are one of the main avenues for such participation and collaboration. More specifically, among ASLE members who are active in research on pedagogy, the direct inclusion of undergraduate student voices can greatly enrich such work, as well as enrich the ASLE

community as a whole. Overall, by welcoming undergraduate students into the ASLE community, we are priming the next generation of environmental humanists, activists, educators, and professionals. This is some of the most important work that we do.

Three potential types of undergraduate involvement: When considering what type of involvement is best, it is important to take into account the student's capabilities, the substance of the student research, and the amount of time/effort that both the faculty member and the student are willing to put into the experience.

1. Faculty member helps facilitate the student(s) to attend the conference.
2. Faculty member helps facilitate a dedicated undergraduate student panel at the conference, perhaps serving as a chair or respondent.
3. Faculty member helps facilitate the student(s) submitting and presenting a paper as part of a preformed panel of faculty and/or graduate students.
4. Conference or symposium organizers involve undergraduate students as volunteers in conference organizing and logistics.

Considerations:

- **Costs of attending/funding.** Keep in mind that conference attendance can be expensive and that while ASLE does provide some travel awards, these are limited and are often not enough to cover an attendee's full cost. Undergraduate students can be in precarious financial positions, and thus it is important to be upfront with students about the associated costs of travel, lodging, and registration.
 - Recommendations:
 - The absolute best way you can involve undergraduates is to host a symposium or conference at your institution. This is a low-cost way for them to be intimately involved. Prior to the conference, you can teach a special topics course that involves students in the hosting process, and introduces them to the keynotes' scholarship and the theme of the conference. Have a "mock-ASLE" conference that helps students prepare for presenting. Create structures that allow your students to be part of the hosting experience as well as the intellectual conversation.
 - Consider encouraging students to seek out funding opportunities through their department or university. Many schools have funds or awards for undergraduate research that can be used towards conference presentations, but note that in many cases, such funding is only available to undergraduates who are presenting at the conference in the same capacity as a faculty member or graduate student would.
 - Note: ASLE does not currently have a specific funding category for undergraduates.
 - Consider developing a trust or award system in your department from alumni donations to support undergraduate professionalization in some way.
 - Some schools have department or college-level funding for student support, which require advance planning. If you know ASLE is a year away, consider

applying for this money early, then identifying the students to attend at a later time. Finding where to look at your institution for funding for undergrads is a great experience regardless of whether you use the resources to bring undergraduates to ASLE.

- **Amount of work** (for both faculty member and student). This includes the mentoring that takes place before the conference, such as helping a student prepare a presentation and get ready for the “conference experience,” and it includes important work at the conference itself. Students need to be vetted carefully, as they also represent you and your institution. For example, after one bad experience, one professor now only works with students who have completed viable projects in previous classes that the professor can help revise and reframe for the presentation.
 - Recommendations:
 - If you are evaluated for your mentoring, write about your efforts for your annual reviews, have your institution promote this opportunity through the newspaper and newsletters, announce your students’ achievements, and gain visibility for your program through these desirable professionalization opportunities for undergrads. In other words, get credit for doing this work, because there is no ‘overload’ structure that pays for this.
 - Try to combine your efforts; build the mentoring time into a unit of coursework, so you and the students are compensated for the time. Or, design a capstone course around the conference preparation. Offer an independent study (if you are compensated adequately). Depending on your institution, there are some creative ways to make this mentoring work “count” beyond just the love and support of your students.

- **Preparing students for the conference experience (and ensuring integration)**. It is important to help students to integrate into the conference community, to make the most of their time and opportunities there (beyond just presenting), and to come away feeling like it was a transformative learning experience. Just like faculty and graduate students, undergraduate students get out of the conference what they put into it. Many ASLE graduate students are thrilled to have the chance to mentor undergraduates at the conference, and being around graduate students can often make it easier for undergraduates to feel part of the community. This not only provides non-intimidating community for undergraduate students, but also mentoring experience for graduate students. Fostering a mentor/mentee dynamic at this early stage is the kind of professionalization that builds community.
 - Recommendations:
 - Contact (or have the undergraduate students contact directly) the current ASLE graduate student liaisons to set up opportunities for the undergraduates to meet or shadow graduate students.
 - Review the online resources below to see how you can be most helpful in preparing students to attend a conference.
 - Encourage students to develop a schedule based on the program in advance of the conference.

- Encourage students to research the keynote speakers
 - Spend some time going over the program with the students to help them understand what they are reading. This is a crucial introduction to the field—reading titles, grasping stream-themes, going over key scholars whose work makes them important for students to seek out, etc....
 - Talk about what happens at a conference, what a panel is like, what people are doing, etc., so they are familiar with the “culture” of academic conferences before they arrive.
 - Find out if any of your colleagues are bringing undergraduates, and put the students in touch with each other so they can meet up while there, or plan an undergrad event.
 - Have students practice their presentations with you or in front of your department. Make it a fun event! Invite friends and colleagues. Use the opportunity to create community by supporting the students
- **Conference customs:** Undergraduate students typically do not know some of the unwritten customs, etiquette, or unwritten knowledge for how to operate at an academic conference. It is important to prepare undergraduate students for how to answer questions, how to network, how to navigate a program, how to make the most of their time there, etc. Pressure can be reduced for students by setting up an undergrad-specific panel for them to present on, although a student who is already more comfortable in scholarly conversations and has a thoroughly developed paper could present on panels with faculty members, too.
 - Recommendations:
 - See above.

Contact: If you have specific questions or concerns about facilitating undergraduate involvement at ASLE conferences, please get in touch with Stephen Siperstein (stephen.siperstein@gmail.com) or with an ASLE member who has experience navigating this process, including Sarah Ray, Sarah Wald, Salma Monani, Kevin Maier, and Brett Werner.

Additional resources: There exist many websites geared towards undergraduate students with information about conference attending and presenting. Most emphasize the natural or social sciences, though much of the information is useful for the humanities as well. Here are a few:

- UCSB Undergraduate Research guide to conferences (and packing): <https://undergrad.research.ucsb.edu/2016/01/undergraduate-researchers-guide-conferences-packing/>
- Claremont Student Success Center guide to presenting papers in the humanities (geared towards graduate students but applicable to undergraduate presents as well): <http://www.cgu.edu/pages/864.asp>
- University of Maryland Center for Undergraduate Research guide to writing a conference paper: <http://www.ugresearch.umd.edu/writingconferencepaper.php>

Testimonials from ASLE members, both faculty and students:

“I’ve helped undergrads present at two ASLE conferences and found it very rewarding for me and for the students. First, by explaining the conference format and layout to the students, I gained a better understanding of how the program is constructed and how the work is accomplished; this also helped me realize that a lot of the work of conferences happens outside of actual sessions. In addition, working with advanced students to prepare presentations helped me better understand the process of turning a seminar paper into a viable presentation. In both conferences, the pressure on the students was reduced by setting up undergrad-specific panels for them to present on, and in one case serving as a respondent to the student papers.”

– *Kevin Maier, Associate Professor of English, University of Alaska, Southeast*

“Attending an ASLE conference was a great decision for me as an undergraduate student. The conference familiarized me with a field and allowed me to gain insight on how to attend, and what to expect from, an academic conference. Being exposed as an undergrad to the interdisciplinarity and intersectionality of ASLE, and hearing presentations from other scholars from all levels of academia, interested me to pursue graduate school and continues to inform my current work as a graduate student in an Ethnic Studies department. Many of the scholars I met at my first ASLE conference have become formative references for my own research.”

– *Jen Smith, PhD candidate in Ethnic Studies Department, University of California, Berkeley*

“Attending the 2015 ASLE conference as an undergraduate student was one of the best networking and educational experiences that I have had. With the mentoring and guidance of an ASLE faculty member at my institution, I was able to take advantage of all the opportunities at the ASLE conference. I doubt that there are many academic conferences that cover such a wide range of perspectives and topics as ASLE does, from “Challenging the Narrative of Undocumented Immigrants as Invasive Species: An Examination of the Counter-Conductive Potential of Desert Humanitarian Art” to “Exploring the Ecology of Christian Vocation in Wendell Berry’s Port William Fiction.” Encountering such a breadth of topics helped me realize that there are many avenues through which I can apply my Environmental Studies knowledge. One of the highlights of the ASLE conference was the pedagogy workshop focusing on “The Depths of Latina/o Environmentalisms.” Not only were my undergraduate peers and I afforded the opportunity to share our personal stories and knowledge, but we also had the opportunity to meet and converse with a group of professors and educators who are doing important environmental and social work within communities of color. It was this direct exposure to new research and leaders in the field that made my experience at the ASLE Conference positive one.”

– *Noemi Pacheco, undergraduate student at Humboldt State University*