

A Mixture of Disciplines

Research Symposium Challenges Cadets to Communicate

BY MARY PRICE

On Tuesday, April 22, participants in VMI's Undergraduate Research Symposium had an opportunity to polish their public speaking and presentation skills by presenting the results of their research to an audience of both peers and faculty.

The symposium, which has been an annual event at VMI since 2001, is sponsored by the VMI Center for Undergraduate Research and is supported by the Jackson-Hope Fund. This year, there were just under 75 cadet participants from a variety of academic disciplines, along with a small number of students from nearby colleges and universities. Entrants could choose to present their work via either a poster or an oral presentation, and this year, one cadet chose to participate in both categories.

"I was really glad to see all of the representation of liberal arts, humanities, and sciences, just to get it out there that research is not always empirical," said Maj. Abbey Carrico, assistant professor of modern languages and cultures (French).

Carrico, who is in her first year teaching at VMI, volunteered to judge this year's URS presentations as a way to get to know the wider VMI community. In that role, she judged a presentation session focused on gender roles in the classic Spanish novel *Don Quixote*, and then headed to Preston Library to judge posters, which this year consisted entirely of entries from the sciences and engineering.

"The most important thing for me was to see how they could communicate," said Carrico of her approach to judging both the presentations and the poster sessions.

In the end, Carrico was pleased with what she saw and heard. "[The cadets] all did an excellent job of communicating without using specific jargon I wouldn't understand, but also without dumbing it down," Carrico commented. "I was really impressed with that."

Lt. Col. Greg Hartman, associate professor of mathematics, was likewise pleased with the two biology and one physics presentations he judged, which were grouped under the title, "Science for the Real World."

Hartman noted that communication skills are critical for scientists, many of whom will have to appeal to non-scientists at some point in their careers in order to obtain funding.

"At some point you have to take what you're saying and not dumb it down, but at least give an analogy that other people will understand," he said.

"Looking back at my own life, the more presentations you give, the more you try to explain what you're doing to an audience, the better you get at it," Hartman continued. "Part of this whole [Undergraduate Research Symposium] is just practice talking in front of groups."

Another of this year's judges, Lt. Col. Pennie Ticen, associate professor of English, Rhetoric, and Humanistic Studies, also sees the symposium as a chance for cadets to grow as learners, thinkers, and presenters.

"One of the things that I think is really good for the cadets is that they get



Cadets discuss their research with one another and with Cmdr. Dan Joseph '91, associate professor of applied mathematics, during the URS poster session. – VMI
Photo by John Robertson IV.

to present their material in front of other students, and we have students from other schools, so they get to see themselves in a bigger arena, . . . which is really instrumental in their growth as thinkers," said Ticen.

She mentioned the symposium as a tool for getting cadets, and particularly 4th Class cadets, to see their academic work in a larger context, and not just something that is handed in for a grade and then forgotten. In the past, she explained, she's offered extra credit to her students for attending the symposium.

Ticen herself makes a point of attending the symposium. She recounted the time she'd been to the poster presentation of a cadet she'd taught who majored in chemistry. "He did a good job," Ticen recalled. "I could follow him."

She added, "That's really the mark of whether you know your stuff – if you can explain to an audience that isn't familiar. You have to break down your terms. You can't talk in the disciplinary codes we all learn to talk in. . . . I think the Undergraduate Research Symposium does a good job of kind of mixing all those [different academic disciplines] together."

Agreeing with Ticen was Maj. Megan Newman, head of VCUR. "If [the cadets] can't present their material in a way that's understandable to anybody, that's an issue with their presentation," she said. "A good presentation is a good presentation no matter who is attending, listening, or judging."

For Newman, the symposium is a critical part of VCUR's mission to support undergraduate research.

"It's all part of a larger effort to contribute to the cadets' academic and professional development," she said. "We want to showcase the really fantastic academic work that these cadets and their advisers have been working on."