Corporate and Foundation Partners Judge Rutgers Undergraduate Student Research

On Friday, April 26th, CFR proudly welcomed fourteen of our corporate and foundation partners to campus, where they served as expert judges at the 10th annual Aresty Undergraduate Research Symposium. Held at the Livingston Student Center, the Symposium featured more than 500 research projects, carried out by Rutgers undergraduates, on topics ranging from exercise science to ethics, and from climate change to cognitive development.

“The breadth and depth of the knowledge of these undergrads was amazing,” remarked Douglas Schoenberger, Vice President of Corporate Responsibility and Public Affairs for Verizon, as he reflected on his experience at the event.

Chris Silver, Solutions Account Manager at AT&T echoed Douglas’ sentiment, noting that he was “truly impressed by the many different topics and real world applications that each student put so much time and effort into researching.”

Judges toured the expansive and highly energetic Symposium, interacting with the student presenters, and ultimately, assigning each a score based on the quality of their poster presentation and ability to explain their research and respond to questions on the fly.

In describing his impressions of the presentations he was asked to judge, AT&T’s Government Account Manager Frank Guzzo explained that he “actually learned a lot from the students.”

“I jumped at the opportunity to learn, observe and interact with the students as a judge,” added Chris Donan, Director of Business Operations/Strategic Programs at AT&T. “It was an inspiring and gratifying experience spending a day with these impressively knowledgeable, passionate and articulate undergraduates.”

Representatives of AT&T, iconectiv, Santander, Wells Fargo, Johnson & Johnson, Verizon, Houston Lumber, Juniper Networks, Colgate Palmolive, Ernst & Young, and Waste Management had the opportunity to witness, first hand, the diversity and quality of research ongoing at Rutgers when they served as guest judges at the 10th annual Aresty Undergraduate Research Symposium.
The Aresty Research Center for Undergraduates, which was founded in 2004 through a generous gift from Jerome and Lorraine Aresty, works to inspire and facilitate student research by helping Rutgers’ students understand the research process, identify and connect with faculty mentors, seek funding for their work, and present their findings to audiences of all kinds. Aresty has already provided some $2.2 million in support for student research in the humanities; social sciences; and science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) disciplines.

“The breadth and depth of the opportunity the program the Aresty Center makes available to a wide spectrum of undergraduate students at Rutgers is beyond wonderful,” George Tsacnaris, Principal Product Manager at Iconectiv remarked as he reflected on the Center’s mission. “I hope the spark has been lit for students to ask themselves ‘what’s the next step?’”

Indeed, students’ involvement with the Aresty program is often critical in lighting that “spark.” “I didn’t know who Dr. Barchi was,” explained undergraduate researcher Ogechukwu Erechukwu, as she described her introduction to Dr. Francis Barchi, the professor who would ultimately serve as the faculty advisor for her research into Ethics Frameworks on Biological Specimens in the Global South. “Aresty puts up information about all of the faculty and their work, and I was very interested in ethics, so I wanted to work with her.” “It’s allowed me to grow immensely,” said Christopher Herrara, who credits his work detecting rat vocalizations in the West lab as having fundamentally changed his educational experience at Rutgers. “I now talk to faculty in the hallways, as opposed to just seeing them in classes, which is pretty cool.”

Participation in the Aresty program does more than just help students build new types of relationships with their faculty mentors, however, it is the genesis of truly top-notch research.

“I commend Rutgers for providing a valuable developmental experience for students,” Bonnie Petrauskas, Director of Corporate Contributions for Johnson & Johnson said, relating her impression of
the research on display at the Symposium. “The students were impressive with presentations comparable to professional conference quality.”

Lucia Gibbons, Wells Fargo Regional President of Northern New Jersey agreed. “I was so impressed with the critical thinking, problem solving and communication skills of the students I met and the high quality of their projects and posters. My experience with these students leaves me heartened about the future of our country!”

An opportunity to carry out an independent research agenda, often for the first time, students’ experiences with the Aresty program also help prepare them for their professional lives after Rutgers. “It definitely broadened by opportunities and what I thought about in terms of my career options,” explained Veronica Vargas, whose research into the health implications of diabetes patients’ attitudes their disease was supported by a block grant from Johnson & Johnson. “I knew research was something I wanted to go into, so I think this experience just solidified that interest.”

And potential employers value the kind of experience students gain with Aresty. “I do similar events at many universities,” explained AT&T University Relations Manager, Christine Goodwin, “and one thing that’s setting Rutgers apart is an event like this where we can see that there truly is an emphasis on research. It certainly builds the students’ critical thinking skills, and makes them very competitive candidates.”

Whether it’s an opportunity to engage in cutting-edge research, the chance to connect with faculty members in a new way, or an experience that helps shape a student’s career trajectory, the Aresty Program is many things to many people. President Barchi may have captured its contribution to university life and the student experience best, however, when he told the crowd gathered for his afternoon speech, “The pursuit of new knowledge. The generation of scholarship. What you’re doing and talking about today. (…) You cannot get that anywhere but a thriving, integrated place like Rutgers that has the spectrum of opportunities for you as students. You have to go out and get it. You have to go out and reach for it and grab it. And that’s part of the beauty of the Aresty Program – it provides the catalyst for you to do that.”

Now in its tenth year, this was the first time representatives of corporations and foundations were included among the judges at the Symposium. According to the Aresty’s Director, Brian Ballentine, this
addition has only made what was already a stellar experience for the student participants that much better. “The Symposium on its own is exciting for students, but having an audience of executives from beyond Rutgers made the experience truly unique. They were so excited to share their research and make it relevant to our partners from business and industry.” For the generous contribution of their time and talents, CFR is especially grateful to this year’s guest judges.