

2017

An Interview with Patty Hamilton-Rodgers, GREAT Day Coordinator

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Recommended Citation

Hamilton-Rodgers, Patty and Mahoney, Brendan (2017) "An Interview with Patty Hamilton-Rodgers, GREAT Day Coordinator," *Proceedings of GREAT Day*: Vol. 2016, Article 1.

Available at: <https://knightscholar.geneseo.edu/proceedings-of-great-day/vol2016/iss1/1>

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An Interview with Patty Hamilton-Rodgers, GREAT Day Coordinator

Brendan Mahoney

What makes GREAT Day great?

Patty: One thing is the numbers. Last year we had 938 students participate in GREAT Day. This year we'd love a thousand, but...that's obviously enviable. I've talked with people who work on similar programs at other colleges about how well-received GREAT Day is—they are in awe. SUNY does an undergraduate research conference for all the SUNYs and I was talking with one of the organizers of that, telling her about GREAT Day, and she thought it was amazing. I've actually had phone calls from Farmingdale and Brockport about how we run GREAT Day, and they find it enviable as well.

I think another great thing about GREAT Day is that we're all-encompassing. It's not just research and presentations. We've got the music festival, a couple years ago we partnered with GCAB to do the Battle of the Artists, Guerilla poetry had a big display last year out on the quad, GEO did a dumpster dive...if anybody comes in we try to make it work. Everything that makes Geneseo great makes GREAT Day great.

What impact do you think GREAT Day has on our campus culture?

Patty: It's funny you should ask that—there's a national organization called The Council for Undergraduate Research that's having an undergraduate research program director's conference this summer and I've submitted a presentation on GREAT Day, so I did a little homework on this...since GREAT Day started, the number of students involved in undergraduate research has doubled and the amount of funding for undergraduate research has tripled. So that's one very real impact of GREAT Day. There aren't a lot of other variations in that ten years either, so I really think that speaks volumes for GREAT Day. I do a follow-up survey every year for people who participated—and there are always those people who will only tell me there weren't enough selections for the free sandwiches—but the people who really take the time to be mindful of their answers talk about how proud they are to present on GREAT Day and how much it means to them for people outside their discipline to see them presenting.

Why do you think it's important to have a space where people can present their ideas?

Patty: I think that it's important for people to share their work. If you're talking about basic research, part of research is telling people what you learned, what you found out. I always list in the GREAT Day program if students' presentations have been selected to be presented elsewhere, because a lot of our presentations are picked by national conferences. You know, I think at Geneseo we embrace learning on a grand scale. Part of learning is sharing your knowledge. One of the things that just blows me away every year at GREAT Day is that I can stand in the middle of the poster session—and I'm not a science person—but I can stand there with a physics student and they can explain what they've learned in a way that I can understand. They're very good about that. I think our students take a lot of pride in the work they do, and so being able to show it off is a way to express that. It's great to learn something, but it's also such an amazing feeling for Geneseo students to show someone else what they learned.



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And why is it important to share knowledge?

Patty: I mean...we're an educational institution, and a shared knowledge is part of what makes our students more complete people going forward in their lives. I think another thing that makes our students more complete is the ability to present your ideas at all. I mean I was a COMN major so I can get up in front of a group and talk about anything, but not everybody has that skill and I think that's something else that makes GREAT Day important. That's one of the most basic benefits Geneseo can provide. I think, when you learn something or complete a project, the next step is to share that, right? We all want to take a little pride in our work, brag a little, right?

What presentations did you go to last year, and to which ones do you wish you went to?

Patty: Oh sweetie...[pulls out program guide from last year] I wish I'd gone to all of these. I mean I always make it around the poster session, so I find that I can scope out the posters. There's actually a poster hanging up in the other room about art that I absolutely loved. The students never came back to collect it so I just hung it on my wall. I also try to make it to at least one of the concurrent presentations, and it will often be one by a student that I know. But I'd love to go to so many more. People will say to me afterwards that there was so much they didn't get to see and that we should do this for two days instead of one, and all kinds of stuff like that...there are so many I'd love to get to that I just can't see. The Edgar Fellows—the Honors Program—they are always present and those are always so fascinating. They've done their homework, to be cute. Mock Trial, a student organization, does a presentation that I went to one year. Just to see what they did... it was very cool. I always want to go to all of them, and I always only make it to one or two. But it's nice to just walk around the poster session. The ones that jumped out at me...there was one student who did a whole presentation on buildings that have grass on the roof. That was fascinating. There was one student—a music student—who did work one year on some musical archives that we have in our library. That was really cool as well. Physics has great posters, biology has great posters...to go back to one of your earlier questions, every department is represented at GREAT Day and I think it's that diversity that makes the event so special—and it's reflective of the entire college. There are obviously some students doing research that I don't understand. But if you walk up to a chemistry student on GREAT Day, they can tell you what they're doing in layman's terms. I always wish I could walk up to everyone and have them do that.

Did you have a single, favorite moment from GREAT Day last year?

Patty: Last year's GREAT Day speaker was stellar. He was Brother Guy Consolmagno, and he's the Director of the Vatican Observatory. His interaction with students was wonderful. During the final poster session he did a book signing, and the way he talked to students during it—I liked that a lot. I mean...the man knows the Pope! He's known the past several Popes, and you don't have to be Catholic to appreciate how important that is. Seeing someone like that here at our school and talking to our kids...that was really cool.

Great, well I think that's pretty much everything I wanted to talk about.

Patty: Well, alright. Wait, where's my Easy Button? [finds and presses it] That was easy.