



Of Dogs, Cats, Zombies, Vampires and the Research and Creative Works Conference

HECTOR BECERRIL

Editor's note: Perspective wanted to interview Héctor about the development of the Research and Creative Works Conference. Because we're short on staff, he interviewed himself. Since the writing of this article (May 2014), Héctor's hopes were realized and the responsibility for the R&CW conference has been transferred to the new Office of Faculty Development and Mentored Student Research, with Sid Palmer as the conference chair, and the council of associate deans as the new faculty advisory committee. This move marks an even stronger degree of institutional support for the conference and will undoubtedly result in wonderful improvements. The student director for the conference has also changed as of April 2014.

The article presents the state of affairs for the R&CW conference at the time of its writing in May and recognizes the work of the previous faculty advisory committee.

So, tell us one “behind-the-scenes” moment that stands out for you about the Research and Creative Works Conference.

It was a dark and stormy night. Parker was walking down the sidewalk between the library and the BYUIC, when something he saw disturbed him deeply. It was some time after 10 pm, he had had a hard, long day in preparation for the end of the semester and he was heading home in hopes for warm food and a few hours of rest. How could this be happening now? Yet, there was no mistaking that there was a light in Maria's window and Parker knew what he had to do—so he went in, and he found them.

What do you mean?

Parker Crandall was our second student manager. The conference was going to be held very soon and things were not quite ready. He and others worked through the night that time to make it happen. I did not find out about it until the third day. I did notice them being a little slow the next day, and railed on them for it, but nobody said a word.

Ah, these are plucky chaps you have at the R&CW!

The very best.

And you were kind of, harsh...

They did call me the “evil overlord,” after the *Megamind* character. Maria had an even more interesting codename, from another movie, but I won't give it away.

Sounds like you had a good relationship with the team then...

Never you mind, we digress. The meat of the business is that the R&CW conference management team is a great place for the very best students to work because they obtain experience interacting with administrators, faculty, department chairs, and deans from all across campus, as well as with alumni, professional societies, graduate schools, companies, and others as they seek to form alliances that can improve the conference and bless our students.



I wonder how many other university conferences are managed by students?

I could not tell you for certain, but not many. The folks at the Council of Undergraduate Research (CUR) were very surprised when they learned about our model, “for students by students,” as Dan Moore likes to say. They were particularly impressed when they learned that every paper submitted to our conference is judged, and that written feedback is given to the students and their faculty mentors the day after the conference. They also could not believe our faculty would be so generous to help us judge. We tried explaining to them about walking on water, but some of them were agnostic. What really threw them for a loop was that we hold the conference three times per year. Most other institutions that have a conference hold it once per year or even every two years.

Wow, I did not realize that. And how did we get to this point?

That is a long yarn, but the way I was told starts with Bryan Pyper realizing that there were some faculty and students who collaborated in academic projects outside of the classroom, and he wanted to recognize their going the second mile. He joined heads with Rick Hirschi, Rhonda Seamons, Jason Hunt, Greg Roach, and Eric Gee, and together they got a puppy.

A puppy?

Why, yes, the cutest one you’ve ever seen. It was vivacious and friendly, and all the students wanted to play with it because it made them feel loved and special in a place where doing research was pretty much discouraged. Many faculty liked it too, myself included, and would come and judge for it because we saw that students who presented their projects really wanted to know how they were doing and how professional their work was. So the puppy grew and got stronger under the tutelage and sacrifice of the original faculty advisory group. They did everything for it, they got the rooms, the money, the food, they got the students, the judges, the programs. They even got external speakers a few times and worked really hard to keep it growing for about three years until it got weaned.

What do you mean?

Somehow Dan Moore came to me one fine September morning and asked me to help Brian co-chair the conference for one semester and to take it from then on. I felt honored, but accepted reluctantly because I knew that not everyone likes dogs and this one was getting bigger, messier, and smellier than it had ever been. But, I took the leash in hand and started running...

Importantly, I hate running. Fortunately, there were three elements that made significant and positive difference in my experience with the conference. First, Dan was there for us whenever we have needed him. Second, Brian Schmidt had the genius idea of assigning Maria Nate as the administrative support to the conference; he also mentored

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us and secured funding from from the Academic Office. Third, Kelly Burgener challenged us to use students to run the conference in a sustainable way. He pointed me to Andrew Bradbury, the medical director of our BYU-Idaho health center, who had succeeded in implementing a student-led model for pretty much their whole operation. So Maria and I met with Andrew, whom I knew before as my Tae Kwon Do instructor. As a good sensei, he did not fail to share his wisdom with us.

Remarkable.

And so it happened that Maria and I got with chemistry students Camilla Jones, Kathleen Gienger, and Parker Crandall. Together we started meeting with the faculty advisory group, and we grew the puppy, potty trained it, and cleaned up after it a few times. Next came Anna V. Nielsen, who took the little dog running twice a day every day and made it strong, and showed it to every one on campus through personal visits and by making promotional videos. She also wrote a complete handbook about how to take care of it to keep it healthy and growing. After Anna came Jarom Robertson; he followed the handbook to the “T” and the doggy grew and got shiny. Next, Bridget Lundie put it on Facebook, and at that point it was ready.

Ready for what?

For obedience school, of course! Alan Young, former director of the Community Connections program, came and took the dog and the nine students in the management team and began teaching it new tricks, things that I'd never even envisioned it could do, like a new session for written essays and a streamlined procedure for awards, to name just a couple. Alan has great experience organizing events and working with people, and within one short semester

the conference was well on its way to becoming a true dog show champion.

So you gave it up?

Not at all! The dog is still my responsibility, but Alan runs the kennel and I visit once a week to check on it. The current faculty advisory group, including Jack Harrell, Brady Wiggins, Jason Hunt,

Jared Williams, Lane Williams and Shawn Randall, also come and visit once or twice per semester to share their vision, give their feedback and set policy about what is accepted, how to judge, how to recognize winners, etc. And, they get to request new tricks too; indeed, it was Jack who asked for the writing session. They also help us organize the program and make sure that things belong together in sessions. Hayden Coombs, our current student manager, works closely with Alan to implement all the things that the advisory committee and I request. As you probably noticed during the Winter 2014 conference, they are doing a great job simplifying the logistics and enhancing the experience for students and faculty alike.

Wow. So what is next?

Well, thanks to the efforts of all these good people, more and more of our current judges come from companies, professional societies and graduate schools, and we are starting to see that the conference is playing a significant



role in the professional preparation and networking of our students. Some of these entities are getting very excited, and they are handing out their own awards to our students during the conference, and talking about the possibility of scholarships. Even I got an award from the Idaho Academy of Sciences (IAS) in connection to my work with the conference. Dr. Stevan Hunter, the president of IAS, has told me several times that “the BYU-Idaho R&CW conference is the biggest thing in Idaho” and promised they would promote it through their society and the societies they interface with. I am also in communication with other national professional societies, and I expect that through collaborations with such diverse organizations there will be greater benefits and opportunities for our students who present at R&CW.

That is wonderful, do people know?

It seems to me that most students and faculty mentors are not yet aware of these new developments. The student team has some ideas about how to get the word out to them, and we might also get some help through the council of associate deans and the Office of Mentored Research and Faculty Development. My hope is that by having more of these external judges we will have something similar to a professional peer-review system, and the conference will slowly morph from being a dog to being more like a cat.

Dog to cat, what do you mean?

Dogs are nice, but they are very accepting of everyone and everything. Cats are a little more selective, and people have to work hard to win them over. We have mechanisms in place that seek to elevate the quality of the works that are accepted into the R&CW, but there is only so much one can do based on an abstract. To really work, quality assurance has to come from inside the mentor-student collaboration. Because their projects will be presented before judges “from the real world”, I expect students will want to do their very best all semester to have a great project to show at the end. I also expect that faculty mentors will feel comfortable telling students to withdraw their submissions if the project does not reach the level of professionalism required for peer-review in the mentor’s discipline. So, the R&CW conference will still accept most submissions, but the

authors will become better at self-monitoring the quality of their projects because of the increased visibility of the venue. Right now we do really well most of the time, but we occasionally have some submissions with wonderful abstracts that are coupled to projects that overwhelm the judges. When this has happened and the judge points it out to me it gets a bit awkward, so I hope that these fade away. We want everyone to have the very best experience possible; students, mentors and judges.

I see your point. How do you gauge the experience that people have with the conference?

Almost from the start we hired top-notch junior and senior psychology students to develop, administer, and analyze attitude surveys for presenters, mentors, judges, and conference attendees. So far we have had Michael Petty, Andrew Lowry, Kyle Whittle, and Jordan Hunter, and they have done a great job. Eric Gee and Brady Wiggins from the Psychology Department have generously mentored our students all these semesters. Their compiled data show that students value the conference; firstly because of the feedback they receive, and secondly because of the benefit to their resumes in preparation for whatever the next step is after they graduate. They also mention that the conference prepares them for off-campus presentations in a significant way and gives them confidence in their abilities. We try to make the results of their surveys available to all faculty every semester in a one-page statistical report that indicates the number of submissions, the number of presenters, mentors, judges, their colleges, etc. We are also working with Dan Moore to make this data more available.

Wow, we’ve uncovered quite a few interesting things about the R&CW conference. Would you like to add anything before we conclude?

I have mentioned many names here, but I really need to say that this conference would not be possible without the silent and dedicated work of three individuals I have not yet named: Michael Decker, an accounting student whom I mentored to create the software upon which the R&CW conference runs. He was an excellent collaborator, and since graduating he got a job at Ernst and Young working their databases. Loyd Bigelow from Event Services and



Karen George from Custodial have also supported our event every single time. They have been a joy to work with and have helped us get through conference day with its manifold emergencies and vicissitudes; not once have they said the words “No” or “Can’t,” even when we put blue tape on the walls. It has been wonderful to work with them and with so many other good people, many of whom I would have never met if not for this assignment. I feel I have learned much and grown professionally and personally because of my involvement with the conference. I am grateful for the chance I’ve had to be associated with it, starting that fine September morning.

Thank you for your time.

You are welcome. ❁

About the title:

The first four managers of the conference were chemistry students. They were the vampires and they worked late many nights. The rest of the student team came from the humanities, and they were the zombies. Now, the vampires have graduated and the zombies have taken over. Michael Decker was a werewolf. Alan Young’s team is slightly less supernatural and they call each other codenames from the movie Top Gun. It has been fun.

