

## **Innovation Through Adversity: Georgia Collegiate Honors Council Goes Virtual**

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**Abstract:** Each year, Georgia Collegiate Honors Council (GCHC) hosts a conference at which students from college and university honors programs throughout the state share their research through podium and poster presentations. Several studies have shown that attending and presenting at academic conferences are valuable formative experiences for undergraduates, and, anecdotally, the honors directors and deans of GCHC have observed such benefits in their own students' experiences. In 2021, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the GCHC conference was adapted to a virtual environment, incorporating video presentations posted to YouTube and panel discussions conducted in Zoom. Though adopted purely out of public-health necessity, many of these modifications revealed unexpected benefits; as a result, GCHC leadership is considering maintaining some of the virtual elements even after the pandemic has subsided.

**KEYWORDS:** student conferences, undergraduate research, engaged learning, high-impact practices, virtual conferences, COVID-19 and education.

### **INTRODUCTION**

On February 29, 2020, the Georgia Collegiate Honors Council (GCHC) met for its annual conference, an undergraduate research showcase, at Georgia College and State University in Milledgeville. At the business meeting, Dr. David Janssen, Honors Program Coordinator at Gordon State College (GSC), was elected Faculty Vice President, and it was announced that he and Dr. Clay Morton, Honors Program Director at Middle Georgia State University (MGA) and Administrative Coordinator of GCHC since 2014, would co-chair the 2021 conference, which would be held at the Macon campus of MGA. Eleven days later, at a briefing in Geneva, World Health Organization Director General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus designated COVID-19 a pandemic, stating that the agency was “deeply concerned by the alarming levels of spread and severity” of the outbreak (Donnelly et al. 2020). Two days after that, President Donald Trump

would declare the novel coronavirus a national emergency and issue a travel ban on non-Americans who had visited twenty-six European countries within fourteen days of seeking entry into the United States.

This chain of events was concerning, to say the least, but GCHC 2021 was a year away. Surely, Morton reasoned, this crisis will have dissipated by then, and he proceeded to make the necessary arrangements for the conference in Macon. When it became clear that an in-person 2021 conference would not be a possibility, Janssen began the task of adapting the usual GCHC conference experience to a virtual environment; he did this with the help of an advisory committee consisting of Morton; Dr. Steve Elliott-Gower and Dr. Brian Newsome, both of Georgia College and State University; and Dr. Mike Savoie of Valdosta State University. The process was an instructive one, and not simply in terms of emergency situations necessitating a virtual approach. Indeed, the theme of the conference, “Innovation Through Adversity,” turned out to be apt in ways that the organizers did not foresee. In light of the current literature on the benefits of undergraduate research, recent but pre-COVID discussions on the need to incorporate a “flipped” approach to the academic conference, the personal experiences and reflections of Janssen, and feedback from students and faculty participating in the virtual GCHC conference, it is clear that some of these modifications are ones that should be considered for future undergraduate conferences, even after the specter of the novel coronavirus is far behind us.

## BACKGROUND

### Georgia Collegiate Honors Council

A statewide association of college and university honors programs, Georgia Collegiate Honors Council has a history stretching back to February 24, 1979, when a meeting of

representatives of postsecondary institutions with work going on in honors education or with an interest in considering such work was held at Macon College. Information was shared and an unsuccessful attempt was made to form an organization. Five years would pass before sufficient interest among Georgia colleges was generated for another meeting, this time at the Old Governor's Mansion on the Georgia College campus in Milledgeville. On March 2, 1984, an organization named the Georgia Honors Council was formed. Twenty-eight students and faculty members representing nineteen two-year and four-year institutions attended the meeting. While attendees gave presentations at this meeting, these focused on the nature and extent of honors endeavors at the institutions, as opposed to the podium and poster research presentations that would become the norm in subsequent years. George M. Abney of the University of Georgia, state coordinator for the Southern Regional Honors Council, presided over the business meeting to discuss the possibility of organizing a structured program that would benefit high-performing undergraduate students in the state. The group decided unanimously to form an association of institutions represented by both faculty and students. The name, Georgia Honors Council, was adopted to parallel the names of other state councils affiliated with the Southern Regional Honors Council. It was established that membership would be open to all institutions of higher learning within the state of Georgia, public and private, provided the institution offers work in honors or has an interest in doing so. The first president was Dr. Carlyle Ramsey of South Georgia College, and Dr. Abney agreed to be the state administrative coordinator. Twenty-four member institutions paid dues for 1984–85.

While the second Georgia Honors Council meeting was also held at Georgia College, (February 22, 1985), the pattern of a different member institution hosting the meeting each year emerged starting the next year: the 1986 conference was held at Georgia Tech, the 1987

conference at Georgia Southern College, then DeKalb College, then Macon College, and so on. Soon, it became the practice to elect both student and faculty officers each year. The faculty vice president would generally host the conference, aided by the student vice president and a second student officer, and then proceed automatically to the office of president. Over time, workshops for faculty and administrators and student essay contests with cash prizes were added to the Honors Council's purview. In 1998, the fifteenth meeting was held at Clayton College and State University, and it was here that members voted to change the organization's name to Georgia Collegiate Honors Council. Though the name was now different, the Council's mission remained unchanged, as it continued to serve as a venue where exceptional college students could present their work, be exposed to their peers' research and to exciting ideas from notable keynote speakers, boost their résumés, make beneficial contacts, and generally have an experience that would form them into confident professionals. Throughout the 2010s, the average number of student presenters at the conference was approximately one hundred. For thirty-six years, the tradition of a yearly, in-person, statewide conference for Georgia undergraduate honors students continued uninterrupted, until the fateful crisis that would rear its head shortly following the 2020 meeting.

### Undergraduate Conferences

Over the past two decades, numerous studies have demonstrated the benefits of undergraduate research in general and student conference participation in particular. Earlier studies tended to emphasize discipline-specific knowledge. Millspaugh et al., focusing on wildlife students, noted the acquisition of "research skills (e.g. problem solving, communication) [and] the process of science" (2004). Seymour et al., similarly limiting their scope to STEM students, emphasized professional experiences, including participation in science and scientific

research, thinking and working like a scientist, enhanced career or graduate school preparation, and changes in attitude toward learning and working as a scientist (2004). Mabrouk continued this trend, identifying the actual presentation of research as the most important benefit of undergraduate conference participation, with the opportunity to obtain technical information about the particular discipline of study being the second most important (2009).

Beginning in the 2010s, more attention has been given to benefits beyond the discipline- and research-centric. Galbraith noted that students saw value in the travel itself, in improving relationships and building friendships with peers, in résumé building, and, importantly, in personal development, including such elements as leadership which transcend the subject matter of presentations (2012). In addition to this broadening of context, Galbraith's article can be seen as a landmark undergraduate-conference exploration in two other ways. First, his study initiated the move toward documenting longer-term benefits, noting that the values perceived by students "held steady after one year." Second, Galbraith's emphasis on student-reported values has been echoed by later papers.

Two articles that have followed Galbraith's lead on both these scores are by Helm and Bailey (2013) and Little (2020). Helm and Bailey relied on student responses to establish particular benefits of conference participation: that the experience increased self-efficacy, was relevant to and useful for their education and goals, and engendered motivation (2013). Like Galbraith, Helm and Bailey also followed up on these students to investigate how lasting these effects are. They found that their students who participated in conferences were more likely to find success in graduate school than those who did not, although, as always, correlation does not equal causation. Little used a thematic approach to analyze data which came from an online survey of students, yielding feedback from forty-four respondents, as well as from focus groups

conducted with nine of those students to explore those findings further. Benefits noted by Little included a general positive impact on education, the acquisition of presentation skills and personal confidence, the development of research skills and perspectives, and increased engagement with extracurricular and cocurricular activities.

Some recent studies have taken a larger view of the ways in which undergraduate student participation in conferences can be beneficial. Buff and Devasagayam broadened the scope of the benefits of involvement beyond those for the participating students themselves, noting that undergraduate conferences foster a culture of undergraduate research on campus, enhance efforts to lobby for funding, and increase student and faculty engagement and interaction (2016). Kneale et al., who placed special emphasis on the tendency of undergraduate conferences to be multidisciplinary, cataloged and convincingly documented an impressive array of “skills and attributes” that student presenters acquire. These included increased confidence with regard to public speaking, the ability to reduce large amounts of information and present main findings in a meaningful and engaging way, the ability to communicate with interdisciplinary audiences, new knowledge gained from other disciplines and new awareness of research methodologies, and an appreciation for receiving and giving useful, critical feedback (2016). Finally, Walkington et al. extended the focus on interdisciplinarity seen in the Kneale et al. study, to which they were contributors, finding in the undergraduate conference experience “a student driven learning process, a multidisciplinary signature pedagogy” (2017).

While the academic conference is a cornerstone of the scholarly life, there have been recent attempts to reform or improve it. These ideas have not been applied to undergraduate conferences in the literature, but there is good reason to believe that doing so would be fruitful. A case in point is Laist’s article with the acerbic title “Academic Conference Panels Are Boring”

(2017). Laist attributes the “brain-melting boredom of most academic panels” to the fact that, in classroom terms, “panel presentations are woefully ‘teacher-centered.’ They emblemize many of the worst aspects of uninspired pedagogy: the ‘sage on the stage’ (i.e., lecturing) and the ‘banking concept’ of education (in which students are containers into which educators must put knowledge).” The very problem Laist identifies is itself best explained in terms of how undergraduate students are taught. Moreover, one of his primary suggestions for making academic conferences more effective similarly borrows a concept from pedagogy: “flip the presentation.” Laist is referring to the flipped classroom, a practice in which students prepare in advance for class meetings, often by watching video lectures, and then spend class responding to, applying, and engaging with what they have learned. As Yang et al. note, “The flipped classroom uses a student-centered approach, focusing on student learning and placing the responsibility for learning more on students than on teachers while encouraging them to experiment” (2021). A number of studies have indicated that this method of instruction is effective at maximizing learning (Boevé et al. 2017; Abeysekera and Dawson 2015; Sams and Bergmann 2013). Laist believes that conference attendees as well as classroom students would benefit from this mode of presentation. He suggests that attendees be asked to read presenters’ papers in advance or to watch their PowerPoint presentations on YouTube, and then come to the conference session with questions, with a selected passage they want to discuss, or with ideas about how a presenter’s concepts might apply to other disciplines or research problems. Laist’s article was written in 2017; he had no way of knowing how salient his ideas would become with the passing of a few years.

## PERSONAL NARRATIVE: DAVID JANSSEN

A Gordon “Luddite” in GCHC’s Court

It was with a great sense of pride that I accepted the position of Vice President of the Georgia Collegiate Honors Council in March 2020 at the conclusion of our annual conference held at Georgia College and State University. It seemed rather fitting to accept that position during my tenth year as Coordinator of the Honors Program at Gordon State College. For a decade, I had been working to develop our Honors Program, seemingly one piece and one student at a time, and the GCHC provided a supportive network of experienced faculty who guided and mentored me along the way. What better way to give back than to fill a leadership role in an organization that had proven so helpful to me over the years? The tradition in GCHC, of which I was well aware, is that the incoming VP’s primary responsibility is to plan the conference for the following year. I had a solid core of engaged students who were enthusiastic about the conference at Georgia College, most of whom were sophomores and juniors, and I was already fantasizing about ways in which those same students would work with me to host the conference in 2021.

That 2020 conference was held on February 29, Leap Day, and I had no conception of the situation I was about to leap into. It wasn’t exactly the next day, but in my memory it is nonetheless solidifying as a next-day phenomenon, so let me just say that the day after that conference, COVID–19 shut us all down.

I am sure we are all just beginning to process the experience of 2020, how it has impacted our lives in the classroom and our lives in the world. The spring and summer months of that year are very blurry for me. My own learning curve with teaching online was rather steep. I balk at the use of term *Luddite* (I don’t want to break any laptops!), but suffice it to say that I had for



years resisted the call of online education, so of course I spent much of the year re-evaluating that stance. In Fall of 2020, my institution opted for a hybrid classroom approach, so like most of us, I adjusted to socially distanced classrooms, masks, and Zoom meetings, lots of Zoom meetings.

In October 2020, GCHC held a Directors' Workshop, on Zoom of course, and one of the items on our agenda was our upcoming conference. I was dreading this conversation. Cancellation was on the table, and I will honestly confess to halfway hoping for that outcome. Many of us had already experienced virtual conferences, and a solid majority were in favor of that option. Brian Newsome, the newly appointed Dean of the Honors College at GCSU and a relative newcomer to our group, suggested that we try a video conference, something that he had seen successfully implemented at his former institution. Newsome adds, "As a newcomer to GCHC, I was a bit reticent to offer suggestions on the structure of the conference. But the virtual format that my previous institution, Elizabethtown College, utilized for its spring 2020 undergraduate research conference in Spring 2020 was so successful that I recommended it and offered to put David in touch with E-town Program Coordinator Carol Ouimet." As Ouimet explained to me, E-town's format devoted the first day of their conference to independent viewing of presentation videos, and the second day consisted of virtual panel sessions focused on Q&A and discussion. Our group was in favor of trying this experiment. I did my best to convey a positive "yes, we can" attitude, although my impostor syndrome was really acting up. I (the "Luddite") had agreed to run this show.

### Innovation Through Adversity

During the final weeks of Fall semester, I began planning GCHC 2021 as a virtual/video conference. The Provost and Director of Student Success at GSC, who have both been

champions of our Honors Program, provided key institutional support, and our IT Director was very patient as he waited for me to catch up with his explanations of how we could host this conference. Our Student Honors Council coined the theme for our conference, Innovation Through Adversity. I loved that. It was inspiring to me. How many times had these students listened to me talk about innovation as a cornerstone of honors education? That was the day that I started thinking “yes, we can” for real.

Innovation can occur in big ways that are hard to miss, such as agreeing to host a virtual/video conference when you are not even really sure what that is, and innovation also happens in smaller increments, the import of which may not be felt right away. A good example of the latter occurred during that first GCHC meeting about the conference. Steve Elliot-Gower, our President, made the suggestion that we form an advisory committee to assist me. As previously mentioned, the committee consisted of Morton, Newsome, Elliot-Gower, and Mike Savoie, the Immediate Past President of GCHC. This group was invaluable to me. They all had previous experience hosting the GCHC conference and similar events, though none of us had done something exactly like this before. I made sure to let them know how important and useful that was for me. We have since decided that this should be a standard practice. As Elliot-Gower emphasizes, “We felt the need to convene a conference subcommittee because of the novel challenges of organizing an online conference. The subcommittee was a good idea, and it occurred to us that this is what we should have been doing in years past, and what we would do in years future since organizing a conference is a time-consuming, stressful business even under the best of circumstances.” I would imagine also that the work of organizing a conference could be a very isolating experience even in the best of times, and without the support and feedback of this group, I don’t know how we would have been successful.

Another fact about innovation is that there is a subjective element to the concept. In other words, what I experience as a new way of doing or seeing might be standard operating procedure for you. The subcommittee spent a good amount of time in December-January meetings and writing back and forth about making videos, debating platforms, creating guidelines and the like. It is possible that we spent time on these topics solely because I needed to, or at least I thought I did. Every teacher knows that moment of anxiety and panic of Not Knowing. How can I instruct students to create video presentations when I've never made a video? I spent time talking to colleagues who actually do video assignments, and I spun my wheels attempting to educate myself. Here's the thing, though: I didn't need to. Our students know how to do this; for some of them it is practically involuntary. One procedural guideline we did create was to place the responsibility of overseeing, monitoring, and storing student videos on the Honors Director from each participating institution. Once they were checked, the Directors simply needed to send me their students' links. Those links were easily pasted to a pdf. The thing that caused me the most worry about this whole experience turned out to be the simplest part of all!

### Success in Moderation

In the interval between sending out the CFP and the submission deadline, the essential review work and program planning were not all that different from what it would be in any other year. It took several efforts at communicating the novel plan, and there were predictably many questions about video formats. In the midst of all that, however, there was one issue that we had not discussed in much detail at all. I don't think it occurred to me until I started actively seeking out moderators for conference sessions. Although it should have occurred to me much earlier, we had about a month to go when it dawned on me that the role of the moderator was going to be much more challenging and demanding than usual. We're all familiar with the typical function:

the moderator introduces a panel, keeps time for everyone, and calls for questions at the end – an important but easy gig. I realized that we had spent so much effort and time focusing on Day One (the videos) that we had not sufficiently considered the other momentous change in the plan. That is, presenters were not at their session to present, but to talk about the presentation. On the one hand, we really liked the possibilities implied by that change. We've all been to conference sessions where the energy in the room really picks up during the Q&A at the end, when the next session is clamoring at the door because time is up. What if an entire session were like those supercharged final moments of discussion and debate? That of course is the goal, but the dream for me turned nightmarish when I envisioned a too quiet Zoom room with Ben Stein laconically calling for Bueller...

In my estimation, the most innovative idea that I brought to our conference was to provide some training sessions for our students who had volunteered to serve as moderators. It occurred to me that we would essentially be asking these students to lead a class discussion. Of course, one can get lucky if the presenters are all Type A's who are itching to share and facilitating the discussion amounts to "passing the mic," but in my own teaching experience I have found that those kinds of classroom gifts are given solely to the prepared. Therefore, I hosted a few Zoom sessions with moderators, and we worked together to create some guidelines and generally talked about common issues with facilitation as well as some technical concerns specifically pertaining to virtual meetings. How many times has someone who is not muted ruined a meeting you have attended in the last year? Full disclosure: I have made this mistake myself more than once. With those kinds of problems in mind, we developed a set of guidelines for moderators. Here are some of the highlights:

- ✓ Moderators should prepare for the session by viewing all panelists' videos ahead of time, and they should be ready with questions for all panelists. It is important to remember that this year's sessions are entirely focused on discussion and Q&A among all participants. Questions from the moderator may be needed to "jump start" the process.
- ✓ In order to maintain a lively and orderly discussion in the Zoom room, the moderator should ask all participants to use the "raise hand" icon on the Zoom toolbar if they have a question or want to say something and to call on people as they do so. Moderators should also monitor the room's chat and call attention to questions that are raised there.
- ✓ **The last point to make about the role of the moderator this year is the most important one:** the success of this year's conference is dependent, more than ever, on volunteers willing to take on this important role.

Even though we got started a little late in preparing for Day Two, I was pleased with the outcome. This is due mainly to our fantastic students who rose to this challenge. There is a real opportunity here for any organization attempting a conference model like this to develop the moderators' role as a professional skill and accomplishment. With this model, the work of moderating a 45-minute discussion is every bit as significant as presenting itself, maybe even more so.

## REFLECTION

Immediately following the conference, faculty stayed online for a debriefing session, and the overall sense was that the experiment was a success. Especially affirming was the positive

feedback regarding the session moderators. Although the consensus was positive, we also shared a desire to return to a live, face-to-face format as soon as possible. Assuming that is possible and we can soon go back to normal, we will hopefully use what we have learned from our experimental conference format in 2021. Mike Savoie, GCHC President in 2019, made this very suggestion:

The modality of this type of presentation pushed our students to focus on presentation protocols and refinement beyond a live, one-shot panel. It was a useful experience for our students, and I just wished we had more students submitting this year. The pandemic and use of technology intimidated most of us. Once we are beyond COVID restrictions, it would be a good idea to keep some form of the asynchronous sessions, possibly as a supplemental session or panel presentation. It could plug into the conference theme, possibly in a showcase or special session.

Savoie's suggestions to retain some elements of GCHC 2021 are echoed by students who completed a survey we conducted of student participants.

We surveyed all students who participated from Gordon State College and Middle Georgia State University, twelve total. We received eight responses. Students were asked the following questions:

- 1) Did you like the virtual experience of the GCHC Conference this year?
- 2) Did you like the experience of producing a video for your presentation?
- 3) Did you appreciate watching videos of other presenters?

All respondents answered "excellent" to the first question. There were four "excellent" responses to question #2 and four "very good" responses. Seven students responded "excellent" to #3 and

one responded, “very good.” Clearly, the students who responded to the survey appreciated the conference format. We also asked students to name a preference for conference format if they had previous conference experience. Only half of respondents did have previous experience, and their responses were mixed, showing only a slight preference for an in-person/live conference. Lastly, we asked students to write any additional comments that they wanted to share. Predictably, students with previous conference experience did miss the personal connection and immediacy of a live event, one of these writing, “What I missed about the live/in-person format was the mingling after presentations where you can talk to people even more if they were really interested in your project. I think that is one of the most important aspects.” At the same time, the comments overall reinforced Savoie’s suggestions to adopt some features of video/virtual presentation for future conferences. Two students highlighted the important issue of accessibility. One student remarked, “I hope that the option to attend virtually remains open to students even when in-person events are back in full swing. If for no other reason than accessibility for those who can’t travel and/or have disabilities or social anxiety, the virtual option is crucial.” This is a valuable insight and provides compelling support for keeping options open as we move forward.

## CONCLUSION

Currently, plans are underway for an in-person GCHC conference at Abraham Baldwin Agricultural College in Tifton in March 2022. But does that mean that GCHC conferences going forward will look exactly like the one in 2020 and the ones in previous years? Undeniably, the benefits of undergraduate conferences as delineated by myriad researchers include ones that are lost in the context of a virtual conference, such as building friendships with peers while away

from campus (Galbraith 2012) and the special mentorship that can be established between faculty and students who travel together (Buff and Devasagayam 2016). On the other hand, the conference format that Laist identifies as the one most likely to create an efficacious learning experience, the flipped presentation, is one that we stumbled upon as a byproduct of going virtual, and the benefits that Laist predicted were clear to all who participated (Laist 2017). Additionally, as one of our surveyed students notes, having at least a virtual option available would make the conference experience available to students who, for all kinds of reasons, cannot be served by a strictly face-to-face conference. Maybe we can have the best of both worlds. Instead of conceiving the conference experience as an either/or prospect, perhaps our best option for future conference planning would be to find ways to combine formats to provide students with a variety of modes. Although necessity was indeed the mother of invention in the case of GCHC 2021, we have an opportunity now to further develop a more inclusive approach, to innovate without the stress of adversity at the helm, and to serve, as the honors world always has and as GCHC has since that initial meeting in 1984, as a laboratory, experimenting with methods that may go on to benefit higher education writ large.

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