How InfoReady helped OSU modernize their undergraduate research competitions

"Hopefully the message is clear that for these examples of undergraduate student research opportunities, we definitely increased efficiency and saved time and resources."

Christine Johnson, PhD
Associate Vice President for Research

OSU

OKLAHOMA STATE
UNIVERSITY

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UNIVERSITY

Stillwater, Oklahoma
1,200 faculty (FTE)
20,000 undergraduate
5,000 graduate
go.okstate.edu

HIGHLIGHTS

Challenge
The manual work required to manage and grow undergraduate competitions was time-consuming and inefficient.

Solution
The team selected InfoReady to manage their prestigious undergraduate scholarship competition then expanded to others.

Results
- Eliminated weeks of staff time in processing and reviewing applications
- 15% increase for prestigous scholarship program
- 203% increase in application volume for symposium

CHALLENGE: Modernize processes for efficiency and expansion for undergraduate competitions

Undergraduate research and limited submissions are a major focus of Dr. Christine Johnson's work in the Vice President for Research's Office. The manual work to manage up to 35 submissions for a single undergrad competition was a hugely complex, time-consuming, and inefficient process. Each submission was composed of multiple elements, typically arriving in hard copy at various times, then tracking those elements, noting missing components and errors, and advising students and reviewers of the status. Christine and her team needed a new way to manage the application and review process for these competitions, especially the Niblack Research Scholarship Program and the Undergraduate Research Symposium.

"Now in its 23rd year, the Niblack Research Scholarship Program is OSU's most prestigious undergraduate research competition, offering financial support for not just the 12 successful applicants but also a graduate student mentor with whom they'll work especially closely. The applications themselves are rather complex, involving submission of an essay, university transcript, resume, and two letters of support from faculty members – one, the applicant's mentor and research project guide; the other, a general letter of recommendation."

"All of these materials came trickling into the office by paper, sometimes one item at a time. That meant putting pieces of paper into the students' files and tracking with a checklist to see if all the components were complete."

"As a result, it actually took us several weeks after the due date just to compile all of this. Plus, our office solicited four or five

faculty members from disciplines in the biomedical sciences to review all 35 applications, and that's asking a lot. **So clearly, we needed to make some changes."**

The OSU Undergraduate Research Symposium is a full-day campus-wide activity open to all undergraduate students, regardless of discipline and what phase in the research process they are. Students are offered the choice of three presentation formats -- poster, flash talk, or videotaped presentations of performing and visual arts.

"Our initial effort back in January and February of 2020 utilized Google forms to receive applications and by mid-March that year, we had about 60 students apply to participate in the symposium. Unfortunately, the pandemic caused cancellation of the event that year and also in 2021, **so a successful effort this current year was critical."**

SOLUTION: InfoReady

The team turned to InfoReady to automate and streamline the application and review processes for the Niblack and Symposium competitions.

*"***We began soliciting applications for Niblack Research Scholarship competition around the very same month we acquired InfoReady -- which says something about InfoReady's learning curve!** I did have some concerns about moving away from paper. Students can obviously navigate online applications, but following complicated instructions on letters of support was less certain, and so was whether they'd give faculty members sufficient lead time to provide the letters.*

"I also took a risk in having all application materials due the same day, in part because the faculty research sponsors had to include very specific information in their letters concerning the proposed project. Fortunately, my concerns turned out not to be concerns at all. When the applications came in, **I immediately exported the information into Excel and began sorting and organizing, so the applications were quickly ready to go out for review."**

Spreading the word around campus about participation in the Undergraduate Research Symposium required an intense and targeted strategy through faculty and Student Services to reach the undergrads. Since the Symposium had been cancelled for the last two years, making sure students were aware of this opportunity and participated in it was very important.

"Communicating the event was a concern, but I was also concerned about the quality of the abstracts. We asked students to provide a 350-word maximum research abstract and requested they give it to their faculty research mentor before submitting it to us, as we wanted the abstract to be edited and polished for easier review. I was concerned, too, that the abstracts might be submitted in 100 different formats, because this is campus-wide competition open to all disciplines — many with quite different format standards."

"The applications were due on February 25 and even with both an ice storm and snowstorm closing the University for 6 days in that already short month, **the record number of applications arrived in time — no way that could have happened with a manual submission process — and I was really impressed by their quality***. As expected, there were some nominal differences in format by discipline, but it wasn't too difficult to reformat them for publishing the online conference proceedings."*

RESULTS: Dramatically reduced time while improving application and review quality with increased volume

With the Niblack Scholarship, the sight of 35 or more file folders on the desk, each stuffed with documents, was reason enough for eliminating paper processing and going with InfoReady's automated process, but Christine and her team were even more delighted with the amount of time they saved.

"We saved three weeks using InfoReady because everything was submitted in the same order for every single application, and every single application was complete — which meant no worries about missing a component."

"Even with verifying information, the applications went to reviewers within two days after the competition closed. InfoReady's automation also allowed us to expand our reviewer pool from 4 or 5 to 12 faculty members, thus reducing the burden on each of them. And where our previous manual process needed to allow reviewers 4 to 5 weeks to do their work, **InfoReady made it possible to cut that time in half."**

The results for the Undergrad symposium were also impressive.

"Thanks to our efforts in getting the word out plus the ease of using InfoReady, we had a
remarkable 203 percent increase in applications.

"What I really want to focus on, though, is efficiency, because this is where I was amazed at how we utilized InfoReady and what it could do. I came into work around 8:30 in the morning and by 10:30, only two hours later, I had exported the data into Excel, organized it and the Symposium program was set and ready for exporting the data into Excel. "

"Hopefully the message is clear that for these two examples of undergraduate student research opportunities, we definitely increased efficiency and saved time and resources."

In our Niblack Research Scholars application, we saved five weeks of processing time in terms of compiling the applications, scanning them, getting them ready for review, and then the review process itself. And for our undergraduate research symposium, right now I'm so far ahead on that program that there's a little bit of wiggle room to breathe.

Not only was the ease of grouping and creating our schedule of sessions very easy, but we've also eliminated errors, have not had any misplaced or lost applications, and no missing components. That's remarkable in itself, since we've increased applications in both of these activities and doubled the number of reviewers.

Overall, I don't know how we would have been able to manage all of the necessary parts without using a tool like InfoReady.

Ready to move from manual to InfoReady?

InfoReady can automate and streamline the work around competitions for funding, awards and much more for your institution.

Contact us at sales@inforeadycorp.com to learn more or for a free demo. Or visit us at inforeadycorp.com.