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**INTERGRATION OF UNDERGRADUATE RESEARCH WITH ACADEMIC DEVELOPMENT OF JUNIOR-LEVEL GEOLOGY MAJORS: A SUCCESSFUL EXAMPLE FROM A LIBERAL ARTS UNIVERSITY IN ALABAMA**

CAPELLO, S.V. Earth Sciences, Uni. South Alabama, Mobile, AL 36688,  
stephanie\_vc@yahoo.com;

HAYWICK, D. W., Earth Sciences, Uni. South Alabama, Mobile, AL, 36688

The University of South Alabama is a medium sized, liberal arts university that offers BS degrees in geology. The average geology major completes 48 semester hours of geology courses out of a total 128 hours required for the BS degree. In order to increase their exposure to geology and geological analysis, many students opt to conduct directed research projects under the direction of a faculty member. There are several ways in which this can be done. Some projects are small-scaled and are designed for completion within a single semester. Others are large-scaled and designed for extended research for one or more individuals. In 1998, a three year, multiple student research project studying estuarine sedimentation in a Gulf Coast embayment was initiated at the University of South Alabama. Due to a dearth of senior students, junior geology majors were invited to participate in the research. Despite some complications owing to limited geological training, the majority of the undergraduate students felt that they greatly benefited from the research experience. They recognized the importance of learning valuable laboratory and problem-solving skills, appreciated being put in a position of responsibility, and felt that research in a group environment better prepared them for eventual careers in the geosciences. The major weakness of this undergraduate research approach was that some students felt that their projects were too limited and/or too tedious to allow sufficient interpretation of their results. Overall, we feel that research opportunities for junior-level geology majors has been a rewarding experience for both the students and the supervising faculty members. In addition, exceptional students can be identified early in their academic careers and encouraged into research by expanding their directed studies projects.