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## Academic Fest Puts the Spotlight on Student Research

Steven Michels

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A record number of Sacred Heart University students from various disciplines recently gathered in the University Commons and adjacent classrooms to present their research projects to attentive faculty and peers as part of SHU's fifth annual Academic Festival.

This year, 153 students participated in the event—more than any previous year. They offered 120 presentations in the arts, science, health professions, nursing and business (76 poster displays and the balance paper-based). Most participants were undergraduates and almost all were seniors, with many honors students among them. The research work, guided by faculty advisers, was a culmination of their learning over the course of their academic experience at the University.

[Steven Michels](#), professor in [Government, Politics, and Global Studies](#), serves as chair of the newly formed Committee for Undergraduate Research, which coordinated the event. “The ability of Sacred Heart’s students to work with faculty mentors is unparalleled among universities,” Michels said. “And the process gives students an opportunity to make an original contribution to a particular body of research.”

Michels cited an added benefit of the Academic Fest. “This is great job preparation for our students—presenting and organizing, learning skills that will help students get and maintain a job,” he said. “I graduated from college in 1996, and our final conference was nothing like this. This is really extraordinary,” he said.

New to the process this year is a digital archive element. Specifically, all student research work will be archived online by Digital Commons Librarian Beverly Lysobey and her team, so it can be permanently on record and accessed by anyone across the world. The system will even track views.

Junior Kimberly McNally, enrolled in the [College of Health Professions](#), presented her capstone poster project, which she created as part of her honors program. It was labeled with the cumbersome yet accurately descriptive title, “Comparing MVPA, Energy Expenditure, RPE and Enjoyment of a U12 Boys Soccer team during a non-competition (friendly) game vs. a competition (league) game.” As an [exercise science](#) major who plans to study [physical therapy](#) at SHU next semester, with the ultimate goal of being

a pediatric physical therapist, McNally wanted a pediatric-focused research endeavor that would provide insights about physical activity among children.

To this end, McNally attended two Under 12 boys' soccer games in Shelton. She outfitted the same team at each occasion with accelerometers strapped around the players' waists to measure step count, calorie use and heart rate. McNally explained that the sport represented a moderate-to-vigorous physical activity (MVPA), and the accelerometer helped gauge the participants' rate of perceived exertion (RPE). "The boys lost both their games, with the loss being greater for the friendly game. They worked harder in the friendly game because they were losing by a greater margin, so expended more energy. Conversely, they were more sedentary in the league game because they were enjoying it more and the loss deficit was less. Overall, though, the boys didn't really perceive a difference between the class of play—friendly or league—and the outcome wasn't really that important," she said.

McNally, who plays soccer at SHU, said she found the results interesting because of the parallels with her own conference vs. non-conference games, and she observed a correlation between competitiveness and age and corresponding energy expenditure.

She said she received invaluable support from her teacher, [Valerie Wherley](#), clinical assistant professor and undergraduate clinical coordinator in the exercise science program. "Her focus is pediatrics, so that was very aligned with my interests. And her son plays on the team we studied. She was very organized and helpful with my preparation," McNally noted.

Graduate student Rachel Shang embarked on a research project titled, "Comparing Nonword Repetition Measures in Bilingual Preschoolers." Her research challenged 50 four-year-olds at an inner city public school program with syllable and nonword (nonsense) repetition tests as a way of determining language and literacy delays. She concluded that the tests were indeed potential indicators for identifying both monolingual and bilingual preschoolers at risk for such delays.

The study was particularly interesting to Shang as she finishes her first year of grad school and aims for a career in [speech-language pathology](#). "There's nothing more important than being able to communicate with your loved ones. I've already worked with children in the Bridgeport school system, applying my learning in an effective way," she said.

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