

Isabella Garrard, Manning Littlejohn, Kallen Zhou

National Conference on Undergraduate Research

Richmond, VA | April 13-15, 2026

In April 2026, GUARD members Isabella Garrard, Manning Littlejohn, and Kallen Zhou attended the National Conference on Undergraduate Research (NCUR) in Richmond, Virginia. Our experience centered largely on exploring graduate education pathways, particularly through conference sessions and professional development opportunities. Together, we attended Virginia Commonwealth University's session, "Is Graduate School Right For You," where we gained a foundational understanding of graduate programs, including application expectations, program structures, and long-term career implications.

We were able to further explore these insights at the conference's Future Fair, which featured a wide range of undergraduate and graduate programs. Notably, we were surprised to encounter several graduate programs specifically focused on data science, an area closely aligned with our work at GUARD. These interactions helped contextualize potential next steps for our academic and professional development and made graduate education feel more tangible and accessible.

In addition to attending sessions, we formed a meaningful connection with the leadership team of *Discussions*, an undergraduate research journal at Case Western Reserve University. During this conversation, we shared GUARD's mission to expand undergraduate access to research and strengthen students' skills in study design and execution. Their team expressed interest in collaborating, and we hope to build on this relationship moving into Summer 2026. In particular, we aim to leverage this connection to better prepare our research assistants to engage more deeply in the research process, especially in the area of research design.

Our poster presentation provided valuable, firsthand experience in a professional conference environment. Audience engagement varied throughout the session, ranging from quieter periods to moments where we were simultaneously discussing our work with multiple attendees. This dynamic environment required us to quickly adapt how we communicated our research depending on audience size and familiarity with the topic. Compared to our experience at the Mississippi State Undergraduate Research Symposium, we observed that NCUR attracted a more technically diverse audience, which led to more in-depth and specialized discussions. One especially meaningful moment was connecting with a Mississippi State alumnus who sought out our poster specifically to support fellow Bulldogs.

While artificial intelligence was widely discussed throughout the conference, we observed a relative lack of presenters directly researching AI-related topics. This highlighted a broader gap between the rapid integration of AI into everyday life and the pace of academic research examining its use and implications. As we continue to expand our own project, we have also become increasingly aware of the time lag between completing research on a given model and the release of updated versions of that model. This reinforces the urgency within AI research to produce work that remains timely and relevant in a rapidly evolving field.

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Overall, our experience at NCUR led us to a shared conclusion that graduate school is a viable path for each of us to consider. The sessions and resources available at the conference played a significant role in shaping this perspective. At the same time, we found that the breadth of opportunities at NCUR exceeded what we were able to fully engage with during our time there. There were several sessions of interest that we were unable to attend, and we recognize the value of a longer stay at future conferences. Additionally, this experience provided important insight into the level of logistical planning required for conference participation. As we look ahead to applying for NCUR 2027, we plan to begin preparing earlier, particularly in securing funding and organizing the overall experience to maximize both academic and professional outcomes.

