

UMSL discovers a niche in research

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Monica Carlsen-Krause prepares some materials to study the DNA of a tropical plant as part of her doctoral these research at the University of Missouri St. Louis on Monday. (David Carson)

Criminologist Richard Wright and his graduate students interview St. Louis street criminals to gain insight into how violence spreads in urban areas. Biologist Patricia Parker travels to the Galapagos Islands a couple of times of year to study diseases in birds.

And physicist Sonya Bahar, who recently received an award from the White House for early-career scientists, conducts research into the brains of rats with the hope of finding treatments for epilepsy in humans.

They are among dozens of prominent researchers whose home base is the University of Missouri-St. Louis.

While UMSL may be better known to local St. Louisans as a commuter school, the sometimes overlooked university is gaining renown these days as a prolific research engine. In a recent 2006-07 national index, it ranked fifth in the country in faculty research productivity among small research universities, following notable schools such as San Diego State University, Boston College and Georgetown University.

Some critics may have gripes about the methodology behind the productivity index that was created a couple years ago by the for-profit group Academic Analytics. But the ranking nonetheless shines a light on UMSL, which often gets overshadowed by the bigger players.

"I think we've been doing really great research for quite awhile," UMSL Provost Glen Cope said. "But because of where we are — because Washington University is across town and because Columbia is 100 miles away — we get dwarfed in some ways," she said.

UMSL also doesn't immediately come to mind as a research institution because it doesn't have a medical school. Cope noted that medical research often captures headlines and the public's attention.

Nonmedical research "isn't as sexy in some ways," she said. "The grants are not as big and the results are not as splashy."

Still, UMSL, which has 13 doctoral programs, brought in \$25 million in federal, state, and private research grants last year, said Bob Samples, a university spokesman.

Cope said UMSL has been placing more emphasis on research in the last decade or so. Artists are expected to create new works regularly, history professors are expected to write books, and so on, she said.

"If they want to succeed here — get tenure, be promoted — they need to publish," she said.

The high bar for research is set from the very top with UMSL Chancellor Thomas George. A chemist, he puts out about a paper a month with a group of researchers from around the country, in areas such as nanotechnology.

Academic Analytics' faculty productivity index weighs factors such as published books and journal articles, citations, federal research funding, awards and honors.

Cope likes the index because it distinguishes between large and small research universities. It isn't fair to measure schools like UMSL against larger institutions where some faculty members only do research and do not teach, she said.

While the index's size distinction may benefit UMSL, it doesn't help UMSL's counterpart in Columbia, Cope said. The University of Missouri-Columbia, while larger in research scope than UMSL, was outmatched by behemoth research universities and didn't make the index's top 50 list of large research universities.

As for other area institutions, Washington U. came in 41st and the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign 37th in the category of large research universities.

Parker, who had 14 papers published in journals last year, is happy to see UMSL finally being recognized.

"It's about time," she said.

She remembers comments from colleagues at Ohio State University when she was wooed to UMSL about a decade ago. Many of them couldn't understand why she would want to leave for what they called a "branch campus."

But she said the decision was a no-brainer for her, because she knew UMSL had one of the best tropical ecology programs in the country.

Wright, the criminologist, noted that UMSL also creates a supportive research environment by awarding seed money to some young scholars to help them keep projects rolling. The University of Missouri system also gives about \$2 million a year in startup money for researchers at the four campuses, he said.

He said one of the appeals of UMSL is its proximity to the city of St. Louis.

"For criminologists, we live in a city with social problems," he said. "That's an unfortunate thing."

But it makes for a good research lab, he said.

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