

The Importance of Placing Students First in Designing Research Programs at Predominantly Undergraduate Institutions

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Introduction

Many colleges and universities are increasing their expectations on faculty members to engage in increased levels of scholarship, a trend that is accelerating at predominantly undergraduate institutions (PUIs). At some schools there has been a reduction in teaching loads with the expectation that faculty members will shift more of their time and attention towards scholarship, while at others the teaching loads have remained constant while the level of scholarship has increased. Resources are being moved to support these efforts and evaluations of faculty members are being adjusted to reflect those modifications. It is quite amazing how quickly these changes have occurred, and how fast our mental shift from seeing many schools as “teaching only” institutions to ones where a teacher/scholar model has taken hold. With all the effort being put into this monumental shift in the cultures of our institutions, I believe that we should more carefully be considering how these research programs are being put in place. Are there approaches to institutionalizing programs that work better than others? Do our initial attempts at designing research programs matter in the long run? Are there ways to sell our research efforts to faculty members, administrators and other decision-makers that will lead to the desired outcomes for our programs? The heart of my point will be that we need to include student learning as an essential component of our scholarship at the inception of our research programs. I believe that the way we initiate our programs and how we sell them may end up haunting and inhibiting our future efforts if student learning is not imbedded from the beginning.

Reasons for Engaging in Scholarship

Why do faculty members engage in scholarship at PUIs? There is usually not one answer given to this question but rather a collection of reasons. First, research is to be pursued because it allows faculty members to make contributions to their academic field. A second reason frequently given for increasing the amount of scholarship is it allows faculty members to remain intellectually vibrant. We all hope to have long careers so measures must be in place to help us retain our excitement and dedication to our profession over extended periods of time. Using this concept, faculty research and scholarship is a form of faculty development and is essential

for the well-being of our departments and institutions. Third, many state that research on our campuses is essential because it can be used to inform our teaching. A common perspective is that we need to stay current in our fields so that we can transmit the most up-to-date information and approaches to our students in our lectures and laboratories. Related to this idea is the frequently made statement that the best teachers are the best researchers and that in order to be a first-rate teacher one must be an active scholar. Fourth, some institutions also state their interest in using faculty scholarship for the prestige it brings the institution. Development officers and public relations offices frequently highlight the research accomplishments of the faculty as one important measure of academic quality. Stories abound of faculty members engaged in projects that will lead to long-term benefits for the citizenship or that will solve important problems.

My concern revolves around the fact that what is frequently lost in these discussions for doing scholarship is its direct impact on our students. Although faculty members in the natural sciences and experimentally oriented social sciences routinely involve students in their work, this is far from the norm in other areas. It certainly could be argued that intellectually vigorous faculty members who use their scholarship to feed new concepts into their classrooms are impacting greatly their students. I agree. These collateral effects can be important and should not be discounted, but the empirical evidence that they have a large impact on student learning is difficult to find. In addition, there are much better curriculum development approaches than instituting an extremely expensive research initiative on a campus.

Numerous articles in this journal speak to the importance of involving students in research activities and indeed, this is an essential part of the charge of CUR. I have written elsewhere of the importance of student-centered approaches to scholarship (Malachowski, 1997) and have discussed the negative consequences of research that does not involve students on our campuses. In order to minimize these negative outcomes, I believe it is essential that all faculty members at PUIs who are research active engage in scholarship that includes students as an integral part of the work or we will reshape our institutions in ways that are detrimental to student learning.

Approaches to Institutionalizing Research at PUIs

There are a number of PUIs where scholarship has been in place for many decades. However, there are many more where scholarship is just now taking root and at these institutions, policy decisions as to what constitutes scholarship, what resources are needed and what purpose research serves are being considered. The involvement of students in scholarship would only rarely be mentioned as one of the top two or three reasons for the monumental shift in the culture and practices now on-going on our campuses. We now call our approach to research the teacher-scholar model but when the research does not include students, this model flies in the face of calls for universities to focus on student learning.

So what does this mean for our (and CUR's) efforts to institutionalize student directed scholarship? While co-coordinating or serving as a facilitator at the past seven CUR Institutes on Institutionalizing Undergraduate Research and visiting numerous campuses, I have seen first-hand the issues related to research at over 100 of our four year colleges and universities. As a result, I am a firm believer in the need for us to work towards an undergraduate Research-Across-the-Curriculum Movement (akin to the Writing-Across-the-Curriculum Movement) where all areas include students in their scholarship with no area exempt from this expectation. Unfortunately however, this is far from the approach taken in many disciplines where faculty-based scholarship is being implemented rather than a student-oriented program. Although it is true that some institutions have campus-wide undergraduate research programs, many departments at most institutions do not include the enhancement of student learning as one of the desired outcomes of faculty research. I have discussed the cultural differences between various disciplines and their different approaches to scholarship (Malachowski, 1999) and have argued for faculty members in all disciplines to embrace student-faculty research because of its positive impact on student learning.

What is happening on many of our campuses is that we are establishing research initiatives that conceptually and structurally do not easily accommodate the inclusion of students once they are off and running. Once the research structure is in place, it becomes very difficult to layer on top of our programs the inclusion of students in those areas where it is not already a natural part of the research culture. I fear that at many schools, the structures in many departments have become so embedded that a student-oriented effort would no longer have a chance, as there are powerful cultural attitudes and practices that would prevent it.

What I am suggesting is that faculty at PUIs are selling our research programs to our administrators, trustees and external constituencies in a way that sabotages CUR's message.

Focusing on those aspects of research that exclusively highlight individual faculty (contributions to our fields) or institutional (prestige or name recognition) issues has negative consequences for CUR's agenda. This makes it difficult to adapt established programs to include students. I have encountered this resistance on my own campus and attribute a large part of it to the way we already have put in motion the expectations and goals for research. Including student learning as essential to faculty research at the inception of our programs is critical as it allows us to define the appropriate faculty focus, budget allocations, internal grants, reappointment and tenure documents and other reward systems in ways that benefit our students. Unfortunately, as things now stand in many departments, involving students in scholarship is not encouraged or rewarded and is not the norm.

Let me consider a concrete example of this problem. At many PUIs, rank and tenure documents are being modified and codified so that expectations on faculty include more scholarship. Frequently these changes do not include student-directed research as having any greater importance than faculty-based scholarship. As this modification is undertaken, resources are moved into budget lines to support rising expectations. Increases in funds for faculty research grants, travel funds, grants officers, university professorships and summer stipends for faculty are common ways to support these efforts. In my experiences, once these documents are revised, it becomes very difficult to modify them to change priorities so that student involvement is valued. If working with students is not included on the ground floor of the decision-making, it rarely stands a chance of showing up later.

Recommendations

So when all is said, what am I advocating? All research should be of high quality and should potentially lead to contributions to our fields. However, my argument is that we should not primarily be selling research at PUIs for the improvement of the faculty members or for institutional prestige or ego, but rather because it contributes to what we should most naturally be interested in – student learning. We should consider the following mission statement for research by all faculty members in all departments:

“Research performed on our campus is pursued primarily as a means to enhance the intellectual climate and for its positive impacts on student learning. In order to directly impact students, all faculty in all departments involved in scholarship should directly include students in their work. Secondary benefits to the faculty and institution are also of importance, but enhancing student learning is of primary importance. Decisions regarding hiring, resource allocations, faculty load and rank and tenure decisions will be determined primarily by the impact of the research on student learning.”

Some might argue that this is a case for watered down intellectual activity by faculty members. It is not as I believe research should be of high quality as judged by our peers. I do not believe in dabbling in mundane projects but believe that our work should be capable of being funded by public and private agencies and published in first-rate journals. But I do believe this objective can be attained while keeping students as the main focus.

This statement of purpose for scholarship squarely places the goals of our work where it should rest, on our students. The other positive benefits to faculty and the institution would still flow but they would not be the primary motivation for our work. In this way, we can have our cake and eat it too. In this model, we guarantee our students will benefit and our faculty and institutions will also reap the advantages. In my mind, this is much more desirable than systems now being put in place where there is a likelihood that faculty members will benefit but the students get left in the research wakes. It is critical that we imbed students into our research programs right from the outset with faculty in all areas encouraged and supported to engage students in their work. We also should be attentive to including student-based research in rank and tenure documents, decisions regarding resource allocations and in the hiring of new faculty. In this way, we can retain our core mission as student-centered institutions while we

move towards new models of faculty interests, activities, and allocations of time. In doing so, we strengthen what we always have done so well — focus on student learning and student outcomes — while retaining our identity as intellectually curious and vibrant faculty.

References

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