CUR Focus

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Undergraduate Research in the Humanities: Challenges and Prospects

Using a grant from the Mellon Foundation, Hendrix College hosted a weekend-long conference in September 2007 titled "Undergraduate Research in the Humanities: Challenges and Prospects." The conference included twenty-six participants, including eleven students, from ten institutions belonging to the Associated Colleges of the South (ACS). John Churchill, Secretary of Phi Beta Kappa, gave the keynote address that launched our collective deliberations on a range of important issues that have been said to hobble undergraduate research in the humanities: 1) that research in the humanities is characteristically, if not inherently, non-collaborative; 2) that humanities research cannot be neatly segmented for students in the tidy ways that research in the natural sciences can; and 3) that in order to achieve good research results, prohibitively long apprenticeships are necessary for humanities students, particularly in the realms of language expertise and other highly specialized fields of knowledge.

Unlike more traditional conferences, this one unfolded not with a series of prepared papers, posters, or formal commentary. Rather, it was designed to foster cogent and spirited dialogue on important pedagogical issues that are involved in doing humanities research with undergraduates. The student participants in the conference played a particularly vital role, helping faculty members to reflect on important methodological issues and explaining what they found compelling about their individual experiences as co-researchers with faculty members. It is rare that faculty members and students from different colleges have the opportunity to reflect together on pedagogy and practice. The Associated Colleges of the South plan further events to explore undergraduate research in the humanities, demonstrating a commitment to community in the process of undergraduate research. A working group of ACS deans and faculty members are presently exploring funding opportunities that could support a multi-year series of events highlighting both the products and processes of humanities research by undergraduates.

To prepare to discuss the challenges, participants in the conference were required to read several articles from the *CUR Quarterly* (among them V. Daniel Rogers' "Surviving the 'Culture Shock' of Undergraduate Research in the Humanities," March 2003, and Todd McDorman's "Promoting Undergraduate

Research in the Humanities: Three Collaborative Approaches," September, 2004). As the weekend unfolded, we confronted and reframed the challenges Churchill outlined, seeing in them particular opportunities for humanities research rather than insoluble problems. This piece attempts to capture some of the major ideas that emerged from two days of intensive discussion and debate. Although my colleague Nancy Fleming, associate director of the Odyssey Program at Hendrix College, and I took detailed notes on the conference, what I offer here is not a transcript but rather some ruminations—grounded in our group discussions—that point to the great promise of collaborative research with students in the humanities.

It has become an article of faith in the academy that collaborative undergraduate research in the humanities is a tough nut to crack, and perhaps even an oxymoronic proposition, as David DeVries noted several years ago in his *CUR Quarterly* article "Undergraduate Research in the Humanities: An Oxymoron" (volume 21, pages 153-155). The barriers to collaborative research in the humanities are simultaneously disciplinary and structural—professional journals adhere largely to single-author pieces, and collaboration between humanities scholars of prominence is rare. Then there is the problem of research funding (for joint faculty and student projects) and the issue of how such work would count for faculty members in cases of promotion, tenure, reckoning of course loads, or compensation. Students may see the presentation of an essay at a professional meeting as a species of credentialing that will make them attractive candidates for competitive graduate programs, but for faculty members the payoff is less clear. What, other than the inherent goodness of working with talented students, is the professional incentive for faculty members to take on such daunting projects?

Participants at our conference observed that institutions—especially those dedicated to the pursuit of the liberal arts—need to create administrative structures that recognize and reward faculty members who take on humanities students for shared research and writing projects. Administrative support—research stipends, summer research grants, or institutes on pedagogy—represents the lifeblood of any undergraduate research program. We also wondered why and how we, as faculty members and students in the same academic consor-

tium, knew so very little about how administrative support for humanities worked at our respective institutions. Our first task moving forward, we came to believe, should be to share information and to showcase successful examples of administrative structures that facilitate undergraduate research in the humanities. They do exist.

We also came to question the basic assumption that shared work in the humanities is necessarily more individualistic than research in the social or natural sciences. We wondered, further, if humanities researchers may become more collaborative without necessarily accepting the laboratory models (or even the student learning outcomes) designed by natural scientists. One participant reminded us, quite cogently, that there was a time in higher education when research in the natural sciences was much more individualistic than it is now. In short, there may be no innate reason, aside from the weight of encrusted tradition, why research in the humanities needs to be less collaborative than research in other disciplinary areas. Humanities scholars need to process, share, and work to create the kinds of bureaucratic models that will promote research communities. (For more information, see the entire Summer 2008 edition of *CUR Quarterly* "Focus on Undergraduate Research Communities.")

For liberal-arts institutions, this task may contain unique promise, capitalizing as it does on the close relationships that already abide between faculty members and students on many of our campuses. Student-faculty research might come to be viewed as the natural outgrowth of work in specific courses or emerging out of the advisor-advisee relationship within disciplines. A case in point: While I worked on this essay, a student who had taken my American Revolutionary Era class last year dropped in for an unscheduled conversation. Now he wants to undertake an independent research project on Thomas Jefferson's handling of the Barbary Pirates so he enrolled in an independent-study course with me. Working with students on humanities research could be reframed as a process that is integral to the entire project of undergraduate education, one that is a natural extension of what is best about the liberal arts.

Assuming for a moment that we could triumph and actually implement robust structures for undergraduate research in the humanities, is it the case that work in the humanities cannot be segmented into smaller-scale research projects as easily as work can in the sciences? Science students can bite off a small problem, conduct a particular experiment, investigate a

discrete issue in some wider path of study. Yet research in the humanities connects to other fields of knowledge in quick and messy ways. Good humanities research tends to spiral outward, sweeping across disciplinary boundaries, constantly leading to spheres beyond itself. Where, for instance, does a research paper on James Joyce's *Ulysses* properly end? Or a study of the Qur'an? Or a project to consider the causes of the American Civil War? Even our efforts to help students narrow down such hopelessly ambitious projects sometimes fail. And with good reason. The elements of interdisciplinary study we trumpet as a hallmark of the humanities may thus work against us in narrowing down projects to a doable, practical scale. How, we wondered, might we harness the centrifugal nature of undergraduate projects in the humanities?

We might begin by problematizing the notion that research in the sciences can really be neatly parsed out along disciplinary lines or by discrete experiments. Think of neuroscience or biochemistry or bioinformatics and the notion that the sciences are about the creation of tiny building blocks of knowledge seems to melt away. But then we are left to confront the conundrum of what we might call "original research." Don't science faculty members and students do work that is real, original, and path breaking, while much of the research done by humanities students is derivative and replicative? Barring years of study, could a student really have something new to say about James Joyce? Without Arabic firmly in their grasp, how might student researchers do significant work on the Qur'an? Could a team of student researchers read—even over the course of a year—the seminal works that probe the causes of the American Civil War? In short, aren't the achievements of student researchers in the sciences more significant than anything we might achieve in the humanities? In an educational culture now obsessed with outcomes-based assessment of students' learning, this last issue looms as particularly important.

The hurdle to jump here may be the assumption by many of us in the humanities (me included) that authentic research must be original research in order for it to be meaningful. This is essentially a paradigm for student research that we have inherited from graduate and professional schools, shaping how we think of doing work with our undergraduates. The real question is whether this model of research does anything to benefit our students. To be sure, our very best humanities students will be able to publish in reputable, respected, and peer-reviewed journals. Perhaps we admire students who do this because

they remind us of ourselves; of the grit we displayed as graduate students when we set out to become scholars in our own right. I would also suggest that this graduate school model lurks behind even the best undergraduate research conferences and journals: We academics, as one of our conference participants put the matter, may have a strong desire to replicate ourselves in the lives of our students. There is an ethical and moral dilemma here that goes, for the most part, unobserved in discussions of undergraduate research. The desire to perpetuate the academic species may be well intentioned, but it narrows our angle of vision when it comes to seeing undergraduates as fully vested research partners.

Let's think our way out of this corner. If we were to focus on the process of undergraduate research rather than its outcomes (narrowly defined), might we not glimpse its value more clearly? Students who engage in what George Kuh calls "high impact" learning experiences in college (including undergraduate research in all areas) benefit enormously from the process of the work itself. (See Kuh's "Director's Message: If We Could Do One Thing ..." in the 2007 annual report of the National Survey of Student Engagement.) If we imagine that even a modest essay on Joyce, the Qur'an, or the American Civil War might teach students deeper skills in critical thinking, research, and writing, have we not achieved our ends?

Moreover, if we were to assume that the process of undergraduate research is ultimately about the task of "making meaning" (as John Churchill noted), then if we design projects in which humanities students set about making their research meaningful, haven't we achieved our prime objective for student learning? Students may indeed write meaningful research papers without the burden of having to say something that no one has ever said before. They may instead locate themselves in a body of literature on a particular topic or question, connecting their work to larger themes and issues in the humanities and in the liberal arts, widely construed, as William Cronon argued in his article " 'Only Connect' ... The Goals of a Liberal Education," in the Autumn 1998 edition of *The American Scholar*. This may be a benefit of undergraduate research in the humanities that we have not celebrated appropriately. And it may be the best reason to make humanities research a deeply embedded feature in our curricula.

But can students and faculty members do meaningful research—in the sense described above—given the long apprenticeships that are necessary for doing even basic projects in the humani-

ties? The prime example here may be the foreign languages. How many students are equipped to conduct research in Spanish, French, or Mandarin, without years of grueling study? The dilemma here is real. It has been confronted before in the pages of this journal, including by Rogers, and also by many of us on our own campuses. Indeed, as an undergraduate I found myself captivated by Chinese history but was unable to pursue serious research in the field simply because I was already too far behind in the study of the language.

The deliberations of our conference participants revealed mixed views on the issue of adequate preparation. Some our participants celebrated the high level of competence that undergraduates were able to summon even for specialized projects, while other faculty members identified clear problems in asking students to tackle mature issues in humanities research without due seasoning. Participants also identified the flip side of this issue as a problem: What about faculty members who don't have particular expertise to supervise student research but are called upon to do so nonetheless? Most faculty members know what it is like to play the part of the "reluctant advisor," nudged into student projects that we feel ill-suited to manage or direct. At what point do we say "No" to eager, young students on the grounds that we really don't know the scholarly terrain as well as we should?

There may be several ways to compensate for the problem of the relative expertise of students and faculty members alike. First, we might do well to circle back to the notion that undergraduate research in the humanities need not rest upon graduate school assumptions. For the sake of our students and ourselves, we might consider reframing the proper ends for undergraduate research as encompassing the notion that decent, strong, even thought-provoking projects may well be derivative and limited so long as they set themselves to the fundamental pedagogical task of "making meaning."

Secondly, we might consider these fledgling research projects in the context of the world of the medieval European university in which they first emerged, recognizing that there is something of great value in a lengthy apprenticeship. Consider the benefits that might accrue to our students were we to ask them to serve as "research apprentices" on faculty projects. Such an apprenticeship would amount to more than mere grunt work, Web surfing, or photocopying. We could rightly require students to reflect in writing on what they learned by participating in the research process, focusing more on skills

learned and how they were changed by the research process, rather than focusing on publication. This "research apprentice-ship" model might be understood as bringing in an approach well known to those of us who supervise internships of various sorts. The research apprentice framework allows us to see the relative inexperience of our student researchers as an asset, rather than as a liability.

Finally, we need to recognize that as we forge ahead into humanities research with our students, failure is a possible outcome. And that can even be good news. Consider, briefly, the story of some student participants at our conference. Two of them had been engaged with a professor on summer research focusing on a topic relating to the American Civil War. The students dug deeply into books, articles, the Internet, and available archival material. They met regularly with their supervising professor. They were responsible, smart, savvy, and dedicated—all the things we dream our students should be. At the end of the summer, though, the project lacked focus and coherence. Buried in an avalanche of source materials, the students were not able to put together a final paper or presentation. Despite their best efforts, the project collapsed of its own weight. No measurable student learning outcome could be found.

To the surprise of some of us on the faculty, however, the students claimed that this experience—this failure—was the most important and most positive academic endeavor of their collegiate careers. The students had learned teamwork. They had learned to navigate a new world of alien sources. They had struggled with the task of making meaning. They had gained confidence in themselves as thinkers, as historians, as people. Might we consider these gains to be even more important than the production of yet another conference presentation or an article in a journal? The lesson here is that we have much to learn from our student researchers. And if we listen to them, and listen carefully, we may come to see many of the alleged hindrances to humanities research as opportunities for authentic growth beyond our imagining.

Ultimately, the pedagogical challenge for those of us in the humanities may be to reframe the proper means and ends for students as they approach research. Where we have customarily seen obstacles, we may now glimpse opportunities. We may find new models of cooperative work, new ways to integrate research more deliberately into the structures of our curricula, and new ways to recast what we want our students to take away from these research experiences. There are, indeed, many

possible and positive outcomes for undergraduate research in the humanities: Our task is to be perceptive enough to see them.

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