

Models and Assessment of Collaborative Research in the Arts and Humanities

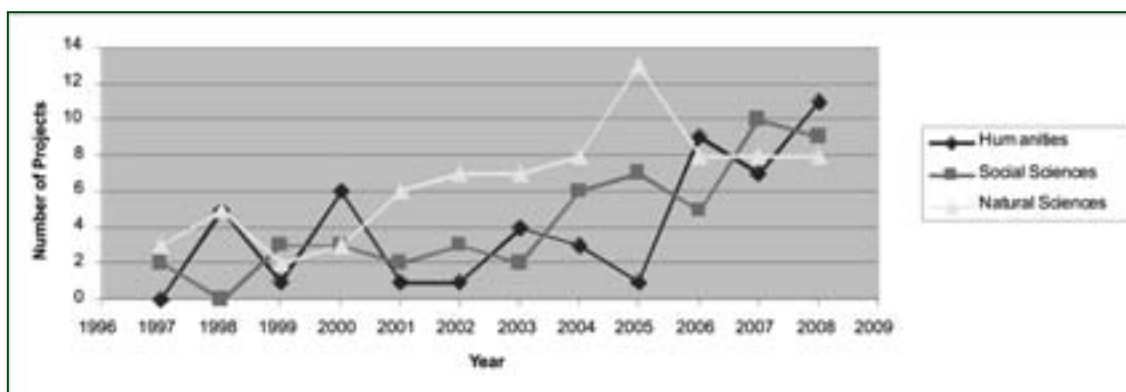
The Albright Creative Research Experience (ACRE), a campus-wide program that invites faculty members and students from all disciplines to apply for grants that support collaborative research, has evolved, expanded, and drawn strength from an increased number of diverse projects in the arts and humanities (Figure 1). In fact, since the inception of ACRE in 1997, research collaborations in the arts and humanities have slowly but steadily provided a welcome avenue for introducing students to the benefits of extensive research training and opportunities to present at conferences. Several collaborative models in the arts and humanities have been especially beneficial at Albright College, serving as a very effective means for maintaining faculty members' active research programs. Collaboration has contributed to the strength of ACRE applications and has become, perhaps, one of the most significant factors responsible for students' eagerness to undertake projects that demonstrate their capacity for critical inquiry, ability to create new knowledge in a disciplinary context, and skills at sharing their learning beyond the classroom.

Figure 1. Trends in the number of Albright Creative Research Experience. The figures reflect the total number of projects supported each year, combining the January interim and summer terms for the years in which awards were available for both terms (2004-2008).

As colleagues whose disciplinary training varies greatly, we all have benefited from working with students on research projects. Research can be especially challenging given the demands upon faculty members' time at a teaching-focused institution, but it also is central to the enrichment and advancement of our intellectual lives. Our goal is to highlight specific models for collaborative research in the arts and humanities. What do these models look like at a primarily undergraduate institution? How do such models undergird the benefits of undergraduate research for faculty members and students conducting serious research projects that differ from those in the sciences?

At Albright, three collaborative models specific to arts and humanities research reveal variations in research objectives, critical approaches, levels of efficiency, momentum, practices employed, and outcomes. We first discuss case studies, general approaches, and specific factors that demonstrate the development and completion of successful research projects by faculty members and students. Second, we outline the extent to which our assessment measures allow us to demonstrate success in integrating the arts and humanities into undergraduate research.

Figure 1. Trends in the number of Albright Creative Research Experience.



Models and Case Studies

The models for collaborative research in the arts and humanities often differ significantly from those in the natural and social sciences. As a result, understanding and evaluating collaborative projects in the humanities demands an understanding of different models of collaboration. Even within the humanities, different collaborative models exist. Our experience in examining and evaluating collaboration in joint student-faculty research projects across the sciences, arts, and humanities suggests that three primary models for collaboration exist in the humanities: the “contributive,” “parallel,” and “facilitative” models.

The contributive model

Of the three models, this system of collaboration most closely resembles collaboration in the natural sciences. In the contributive model, students and faculty members work on the same project, but contribute different steps or parts of the project. The finished product, however, is the same: a co-authored paper or production. Whereas chemistry majors might work on different syntheses, English students might work on different aspects of Geoffrey Chaucer’s life (childhood, early literary patrons, later life, etc.) in order to produce a new biography of the poet. This model is perhaps most used in performance fields, such as theater. For example, in an ACRE-funded project in the theater department, student Jessica Halm and faculty member Wayne Vettleson jointly designed the lighting for a production of Sophocles’ *Antigone*. Working together, Vettleson and Halm grappled with aesthetics, technical difficulties, computer programs, and the meaning of *Antigone* itself. Their individual contributions were also part of a much larger project: a full-scale production of the play. Each ACRE participant added a unique contribution to a unified, finished product. Theater, after all, is essentially co-authorship.

The parallel model

The parallel model of collaboration is perhaps the most common one in the arts and humanities. Faculty members and students work on the same text, topic, or idea, but they work in parallel on separate papers or productions; in other words, the finished product features a sole author. A student, for example, might produce his or her own conference paper, while a faculty member might produce a separate article. Despite the sole

authorship, the collaborative nature of these projects should not be underestimated. At their best, these projects often resemble graduate-level seminars: Each participant is doing his or her own research, but everyone is grappling with the same general subject, and everyone is giving intensive feedback to fellow researchers. The individual’s work benefits from mutual discussion, and each participant learns from the others, but everyone’s own product remains the intellectual property of the individual researcher.

An example is the ACRE-funded project undertaken by student Megan McGrath and faculty member Lawrence Morris on the image of the Irish peasant at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. McGrath worked primarily on English-language materials and demographic information, while Morris worked primarily with Irish-language texts and the folklore tradition. The products were different (McGrath delivered a sole-authored conference paper on the political philosophy of Patrick Pearse, while Morris produced a sole-authored article on the folklore collections of W.B. Yeats and Douglas Hyde), but the collaboration was intensive. The collaboration included daily meetings in which research results were shared, ideas explored, and rough drafts dissected. While this project originated in the English Department, similar projects have been undertaken in the fine arts, history, and other disciplines.

The facilitative model

The facilitative model is another collaborative method that suits liberal-arts colleges particularly well. In this model, the faculty member intensively mentors a student and her or his research. Typically, the faculty member and the student will read the same texts or examine and practice the same techniques, in an effort to advance the student’s own command and investigation of the material. The free-flowing dialogue, in which the faculty member serves as guide, encourager, and facilitator, is essentially collaborative. The final product, however, has a sole author and may be a student’s conference paper, essay, production, or artwork. The collaboration remains student-engaged and student-focused.

The ACRE-funded project by faculty member Teresa Gilliams and student Melissa Hamilton, investigating the literary portrayal of black lesbianism, offers an example of facilitative collaboration. Gilliams guided Hamilton in researching the texts, in applying critical and scholarly methods, and in producing a

scholarly paper and conference presentation. The final product remained Hamilton's intellectual property, but Gilliams's close collaboration enabled Hamilton to produce the sophisticated argument that she did.

Assessment of Undergraduate Research

The variety of collaborative methods among the major disciplines and especially within the humanities adds to the challenge of evaluating projects' merit. Albright College's Undergraduate Research Committee is charged with providing evaluation of faculty-student collaboration, principally the ACRE Program. The committee is comprised of faculty members appointed by the academic divisions to ensure representation from across the college.

The committee created a five-item rubric to evaluate previously funded projects, in order to track the various and diverse outcomes. The learning opportunity is considered paramount to all other criteria. As a primarily undergraduate, liberal-arts institution, the faculty recognizes the necessity of creating an environment conducive to experimentation and exploration. Emphasis on learning over outcome ensures students have the freedom to take risks and push the boundaries of their respective research projects. We aim to reward the research process itself, rather than curtail work of a greater scope even if the outcome is not assured for the student or faculty member.

The collaborative aspect of the project is the second-ranked evaluation criterion. The committee recognizes different models of collaboration, especially within the humanities, while it also values work that expresses the spirit of teamwork. The outcome or product of the successful research project should reflect the efforts of both the individual faculty member and the student. Each should bring unique skill sets and input to the project.

The contribution of the project to the field is the third assessment criterion, and perhaps the most difficult to quantify. While the faculty respects research at the undergraduate level, we recognize the outcomes may not merit publication in professionally reviewed venues. The faculty member and student must nevertheless understand their work in the context of their fields and exhibit awareness of current research.

The scope of the research project ranks next in the overall assessment. Our program includes two periods of funding dur-

ing the year. Our January interim session allows for three weeks of intense research. The summer session is considerably more substantial, with 14 weeks available for collaborative research. The duration of the project is acknowledged during review of the research outcomes.

The actual outcome/product is then evaluated in the assessment process. The committee looks for evidence of a project brought to fruition, even if the outcome originally proposed differs from the final product. Peer-reviewed exhibitions or publications are highly valued. The committee recognizes students' senior thesis projects within academic departments on campus, in addition to their presentations at regional and national undergraduate research conferences. The committee is also sensitive to the nature of our interdisciplinary programs creating overlap in traditional disciplinary presentation venues. Finally, the committee remains aware that outcomes may differ depending upon the nature of the collaboration and the discipline.

Outcomes have included co-written plays, theatrical productions, art exhibitions, and papers. For example, we currently have a student writing a draft of a novel. Within this facilitative model of collaboration, the faculty mentor is functioning as creative consultant and editor. And while the expectation is of a rough draft only, we are confident the funding and focus afforded this student at this critical time in his writing will lead to future work.

Conclusion

Undergraduate research programs structured to extend across the disciplines offer numerous advantages. For administrators, they offer the practical advantages of consolidating both human and financial resources into a single program. For students, they may enhance the opportunity to learn about interaction in scholarship and different approaches to scholarship. Moreover, the structure may encourage students to view their own work in a broader context. However, perhaps most important for all involved, an inclusive disciplinary structure may allow for collaborative work in disciplines typically excluded from such opportunity. It is our observation that, outside of an interdisciplinary framework, these opportunities are most available in the natural sciences; significantly fewer such opportunities exist in the social sciences, and they are almost non-existent in the arts and humanities. Thus, the social

sciences, arts, and humanities may have the most to gain from the adoption of such a structure.

Managing such an inclusive undergraduate research program, however, complicates processes of fairness in selecting and evaluating research projects, necessitating a careful, yet simple, ranking of the specific criteria to be employed. Not the least of the complications introduced with an inclusive model is the variance across the disciplines in what it means to “collaborate.” The various models of collaboration described above have implications for authorship, product, and methodology, all of which must be considered in selection and evaluation procedures. Given the longer history of institutionally funded collaborative research in the natural sciences and the tradition of the “contributive model” in the natural sciences, it may be tempting for administrators to assume that this is the only type of collaboration that exists.

Nonetheless, it is possible to develop program structures that are sensitive to the various forms of collaboration across the disciplines, and the development of such structures will enhance opportunities for collaborative research across the “minority disciplines.” Indeed, there were no collaborative humanities projects before ACRE began eleven years ago. Adjusting institutional structures has shifted the balance, so that they made up the greatest percentage of funded ACRE research in the most recent calendar year (39 percent of the projects were in the humanities, 32 percent in the social sciences, and 29 percent in the natural sciences). We believe the time invested in defining variation among forms of collaborative research within the arts and humanities and the time invested in integrating this understanding into an evaluative process have contributed significantly to the observed increase in humanistic research, with mutual benefit to students and faculty.

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