

From the International Desk

A Response to “Some Pathologies of Undergraduate Research—and How to Cure Them”

Abstract

The author responds to Ronald Barnett’s article “Some Pathologies of Undergraduate Research—and How to Cure Them,” highlighting the roles of undergraduate research in reshaping curricula and challenging students in higher education.

Keywords: *high-impact practices, pedagogy, student outcomes, undergraduate education, undergraduate research*

Criticism of undergraduate research, scholarship, and creative activities (URSCA) as a practice as well as the movement that supports it is vital for its continued progress and development in higher education. Any movement that grows with momentum needs to receive criticism that directs and strengthens the undertaking. Although I welcome criticism of URSCA and its outcomes, Ronald Barnett is not as focused on URSCA as he is on the dysfunctions that occur in our own institutions among administrative and faculty governance systems when new programs arise. He provides a warning that bad things may happen with bad actors if we fail to bring into balance the teaching and research elements of our institution. These arguments are appealing because we have seen and recognized both the characters and actions of the “pathologies” he outlines. However, a warning that dysfunctions might occur is not sufficient criticism. It also sidesteps the idea that URSCA has a long tradition in many colleges and universities that predates the more modern movement by decades (or longer). It also fails to focus on one of the key underlying rationales for the expansion of URSCA programs across the broad range of campuses and more deeply into the curriculum.

In addressing Barnett’s question “why might undergraduate research be felt to be desirable in the contemporary era?”, I have to consider it as both a faculty member and a former senior administrator. Interestingly enough, my answer has little to do with “balancing” teaching and research or the need to have students become part of the professional research output from higher education. Rather, I want to center on the idea that college should affect the student in meaningful ways that include intellectual development, personal development, and the development of attributes related to the student’s academic discipline. This is not only an argument for URSCA but also the argument for undergraduate education in a larger sense.

There is a vast literature on how college affects undergradu-

ates and influences them to grow intellectually and personally (Rodgers 1990). I will mention some of the research that ties to URSCA to provide a stronger justification for practice. URSCA is most often mentioned as a high-impact practice (HIP). Among the hundreds of things we do for undergraduates that help them grow and change during their time with us, the 10 HIPs identified by Kuh are the practices that have the most profound effects on student development across domains. Although growth occurs for students in general, the largest change and growth is observed in first-generation college students and students from underrepresented groups (Kuh 2008).

Specifically, students change intellectually, moving from simple forms of knowledge where the world is perceived in right and wrong answers to forms of knowledge where they see the world of multiple ideas and perspectives, developing a point of view that is informed by the diversity of ideas they see (Perry 1970). They also grow in a range of developmental tasks that include gaining a level of competence in a field or discipline, developing professional relationships, understanding the interdependence of the work, and learning how to handle themselves in stressful or pressured environments (Chickering and Reisser 1993). HIPs and URSCA as a HIP contribute to this student development. The reason for the desirability of URSCA has less to do with research production in higher education and more to do with high-quality student outcomes.

Perhaps I am just outlining one of Barnett’s “unifying” forces, but I would argue that URSCA is one of many ways to more effectively challenge students in higher education by having them deal with difficult and challenging material produced by others, synthesizing those ideas, forming a research or creative question, and addressing it using the methods of the discipline. URSCA is not “the” answer for students, faculty, or higher education, but it is among the strategies available to us for effective work with undergraduates in higher education. Its particular strength that it can reshape curriculum to be more rigorous and coherent, leading students to a capstone/thesis/dissertation project where they must integrate discrete ideas learned in earlier academic terms. This practice has long been understood in liberal arts colleges that have employed URSCA for many decades and is now growing in practice across the academy as departments and institutions evaluate its benefits. The fear that it will displace other practices is not well founded. It requires serious commitment to

execute well and currently reaches a relatively small proportion of students in colleges and universities. Rather than being a “privileged” practice, it still sits outside of the usual student experience in higher education. Even within the realm of HIPs, it is only one of ten practices that, according to the research, have the greatest positive effects on students. There is both room for growth of URSCA as well as a range of other “worthwhile curricular ends” in higher education.

Because it lacks a “privileged” place, the URSCA movement needs to focus on key areas just to remain in the mainstream of the higher education conversation. The most important will be the continued development of quality programs within and outside of the curriculum. This will require funding, as well as curricular and workload adjustments for departments and institutions that pursue URSCA. There needs to be a greater emphasis on research about the successes and shortfalls of URSCA. This will allow faculty and administrators to make informed decisions about the development and revision of programs as well as allow faculty and administrators to build the case for deeper adoption.

To accomplish a deeper commitment to URSCA in our institutions, faculty and administrators must work together to form what I call *critical partnerships* that focus on a set of common goals about URSCA in their institutional context (for example, a research, comprehensive, liberal arts, or community college institution). Such partnerships often are difficult to forge, but the most successful programs have been a result of these types of relationships. If they are done well, the pathology of inertia and inaction is avoided, and long-lasting benefits for students and faculty are created. 

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