

Collaborative Research in Business Schools: Benefits from the Research Group Model

The benefits of collaborative research have been widely documented in the literature (eg. Gates et al. 1999; Umbach and Porter 2002; Schneider 2004; Elgren and Hensel 2006; Lopatto 2006). Lopatto (2006), for example, has argued that participation in undergraduate research contributes to personal growth in students' self-confidence, tolerance for obstacles, interest in their discipline, and sense of accomplishment.

Although business students account for approximately 22 percent of undergraduate degrees in the U.S., business is one discipline that has been largely absent from the discussion about undergraduate research. One of us (Bartkus 2007) has noted, for example, that business projects accounted for fewer than 3 percent of the presentations at the National Conference on Undergraduate Research in 2007 and that business faculty make up less than 1 percent of the members of the Council on Undergraduate Research.

Given the importance of undergraduate research and the under-representation from colleges and schools of business, Bartkus (2007) introduced the Research Group model to encourage greater involvement by faculty and students. Since it began to evolve in 2004, the Research Group in the Jon M. Huntsman School of Business at Utah State University has continued to evolve and provide benefits to both students and faculty members. Here we describe the structure, benefits, assessments, and implications for future development of the model.

Research Group Model: An Overview

The model, developed at the Huntsman School, summarizes its mission this way:

The Research Group™ is a not-for-profit consortium of business and university scholars, corporate leaders, and qualified undergraduate students dedicated to the advancement of high quality research experiences. Its mission is to provide students the opportunity to develop core competencies in the use of the scientific method as it relates to business and public policy issues. In doing so, students become better prepared for success in graduate school and their chosen careers. The guid-

ing motto of The Research Group is "Research that Matters." (Bartkus 2007, 8)

As a consortium, the administrative structure of the model is relatively straightforward. Students enter the program as "associates" (as opposed to students) and work under the guidance of "partners" (as opposed to faculty). These titles are intended to reflect the notion that students are gaining relevant work experience, which has been cited as an important consideration for employment (Nair and Ghosh 2006) and admission to graduate business programs (Yeaple, Johnston, and Whittingham 2010). In this regard, the Harvard Business School's Web site (http://www.hbs.edu/mba/faq/#app_work) defines work experience as, "opportunities in which students have been able to develop their professional and leadership skills."

To further ensure that the experience is relevant, the model encourages students to publish in peer-reviewed publications and/or present at scholarly research forums such as at the National Conference on Undergraduate Research. Students who succeed in those areas become eligible for promotion to the "senior associate" level where they continue their research and also mentor incoming associates.

Students and faculty members are also required to obtain training and certification in human-subjects research through the university's institutional review board. This certification is the national standard and provides students with a bona fide credential. Additionally, students can receive awards from the Huntsman School in recognition of their research scholarship (eg. annual Awards for Scholarly Merit). The school also designates one deserving student each year as the outstanding undergraduate researcher. In these ways, students gain both relevant experience and documented recognition of research productivity.

In sum, the model takes the traditional educational concept of undergraduate research and administers it under the auspices of a professional research organization. The result? Both students and faculty develop a greater sense of ownership and pride in the program.

Assessing the Outcomes

Assessment of the research program consists of documenting research presentations and publications, and tracking the number of students and faculty involved and the awards they receive. The following summarizes notable outcomes and trends since the program began to evolve in 2004:

- Students and faculty have collaborated on 25 scholarly presentations or journal publications. Representative journals include the *Journal of Travel Research*, the *Journal of Education in Business*, and *Review of Business in Information Systems*.
- Student researchers have made 40 presentations at undergraduate research conferences such as the National Conference on Undergraduate Research and the Utah Conference on Undergraduate Research.
- Seven students have made presentations at professional conferences such as the conference of the Marketing Management Association and the conference of the Western Decision Sciences Institute.
- A student/faculty research collaboration received a “best paper” award at a regional conference.
- Bartkus received the John L. Blackburn Award for Exemplary Models, from the American Association of University Administrators in 2007 for an article on the program published in the *CUR Quarterly*.
- Five students have entered doctoral programs upon completion of their undergraduate degrees.
- One student was recently selected as the valedictorian for her graduating class.
- Faculty members have published articles on undergraduate research in the *CUR Quarterly*, *Decision Line*, and the *American Journal of Business Education*.
- Approximately 25 percent of the faculty members in the Huntsman School are now actively involved with the undergraduate research program.
- Approximately 15 to 20 students now participate in the program each year.

Benefits for Students

The research group has developed five new initiatives specifically designed to provide benefits for our students:

1. *The Consumer Outlook* is an online survey-research program, from which participating students gain experience in questionnaire design, sampling, data collection, analysis, and reporting. The resultant research is intended to be published in a peer-reviewed outlet and/or presented at a research forum.

2. *Deli-Nation.Com* is an online publication that reports on events in the restaurant industry. Students work as editors, staff reporters, writers, Web masters, and video producers to develop and operate this social-media site within the business school.

3. *The Research Group Quarterly* is an online, open-access journal dedicated to publishing collaborative business research, interviews with business leaders and scholars, and book reviews. Students serve on the editorial board, review articles, and manage other administrative issues related to the operation of a publication.

4. Opportunities for engagement with other business-school programs provide students with mutual support and create additional research synergy. For example, the Society for the Advancement of Ethical Leadership, a student group developed independently of the Research Group, is one of several programs that focus on a specific aspect of business. Under the mentorship of an ethics scholar, students hold regular meetings and review cutting-edge books. Students are then asked to write formal book reviews and submit them to *The Research Group Quarterly* for publication.

5. Opportunities to engage with corporate entities and issues expand students’ experiences. Corporate engagement occurs when an external organization collaborates with the business school. For example, we have had a nearly 10-year relationship with the EnergySolutions Arena/Utah Jazz to address performance improvement and training challenges faced by the company. As a result of the relationship, the company receives meaningful solutions to these challenges suggested by students, and our students gain real-world experience with a major organization.

Each of these initiatives is intended to further enhance a student’s critical thinking and communications skills through real-world applications and involvement with a faculty mentor. Critical-thinking skills are improved through assignments that require the student to address research challenges, such as sample identification and questionnaire design under the mentorship of a business scholar. In this manner, students “learn

while doing,” an important principle of action learning. (O’Neil and Marsick 2009)

Benefits for Faculty

Although students are the primary beneficiaries of collaborative research, we have found that if the program is to be sustainable, benefits need to extend to all participants. To address this issue, the Research Group provides benefits to faculty members in all three general areas of their responsibilities—teaching, research, and service.

Teaching. A synergistic relationship often exists between teaching and research. To better understand how this relationship encourages students to learn, we rely on the ARCS model developed by Keller (1983). ARCS stands for attention, relevance, confidence, and satisfaction.

First, faculty partners often integrate their collaborative research projects with class lectures. In fact, several of the faculty members require their students to make presentations in class (thus affecting students’ confidence and satisfaction) as a means of transferring the knowledge to other students. The benefit to students is that it creates a “buzz factor” (garnering them attention). As students see what others are doing in research, they become more motivated to participate in research (seeing its relevance).

Second, faculty members sometimes use the research projects to supplement lecture material. For example, a recent project on customer-comment cards was instrumental in revising a lecture on questionnaire design and survey administration (relevance).

Third, class projects can become more meaningful when they have the potential to be published and thereby formally recognized (satisfaction). For example, students can be recognized for writing book reviews for *The Research Group Quarterly* or feature articles for *Deli-Nation*. Faculty members play an important role through supervision and mentoring.

Fourth, collaborative research sometimes leads to an opportunity for business leaders to give guest lectures and even participate in class projects (relevance). When business leaders visit classes, they reinforce the lectures and provide additional context to the subject matter (relevance). And, by developing long-term relationships with organizations, the Research Group model is better able to provide this added benefit (satisfaction).

Research. A major faculty benefit from mentoring students is a research publication. These can range from regional conference proceedings to high-quality journal publications. The research group has produced 25 collaborative research publications in journals and conference proceedings.

Faculty members are also encouraged to publish pedagogy-based research that demonstrates their commitment and expertise in the area of undergraduate research. At the Huntsman School, faculty members have published articles related to the research program in such outlets as the *American Journal of Business Education*, *Decision Line*, and the *CUR Quarterly*.

Service. The value of service is often underestimated in research programs involving undergraduates. The Research Group addresses this issue by providing faculty with an opportunity to receive credit by serving on an administrative committee overseeing the program. Furthermore, because the group is an evolving model, faculty members have the opportunity to demonstrate how their ideas can help to improve the program.

At the university level, faculty members have the opportunity to obtain service credit by serving on the university’s undergraduate-research advisory board. And at the national level, faculty have the opportunity to participate in associations dedicated to promoting development in undergraduate research experiences—most notably, the Council on Undergraduate Research and the National Conferences on Undergraduate Research. The Huntsman School currently has one elected councilor to CUR.

Further Discussion

Although the Research Group program has been relatively successful, it operates in a dynamic environment and, therefore, its long-term sustainability is contingent upon continued progress and meaningful innovation. In this regard, the model appears to have important implications for the practice of collaborative research in business schools. In particular, because undergraduate research experiences have not been as formally instituted in schools of business as they have in other disciplines, the model may provide benefits to other schools of business.

For the future, the Research Group and the Jon M. Huntsman School of Business are looking for partners interested in forming a global consortium of business schools dedicated to advancing collaborative research in business. The Huntsman School will also continue its relationship with the Council on Undergraduate Research as a means of supporting undergradu-

ate experiences in research at business schools. As a group, we hope to realize continual improvement and provide effective and efficient research experiences for our students.

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