

Building a Model for Interdisciplinary Research at a Small College

Introduction

Undergraduate research is widely seen as beneficial for both students and faculty (see for example, Osborn and Karukstis 2009). At our regional liberal-arts college, however, heavy teaching loads and service requirements leave little time for faculty research. In addition, there is no office of undergraduate research, and there is little financial support available for undergraduate research. One consequence is that there is little consistency across departments and disciplines concerning engaging students in research.

In the humanities and social sciences, for example, there has been no history of research with undergraduates. Faculty members often feel that it takes students years to develop the skills and knowledge to do research in these fields (see Schantz 2008). There is, however, a strong tradition of undergraduate research in the sciences. Chemistry faculty secure external grants that fund undergraduate research throughout the academic year and often into the summer. Somewhat in the middle of these extremes, the psychology faculty has developed a culture in which students volunteer to work with faculty members on their research projects.

In response to the underdeveloped research program in the humanities, the college received a generous donation to provide research grants to faculty in this area. We secured one of these grants from the college to support a two-year interdisciplinary research program that included faculty from our humanities (history), social sciences (political science), and natural sciences (psychology) programs. We endeavored to build a model for undergraduate research that spanned disciplinary boundaries and that would benefit both faculty and students.

In this article we describe the model we developed, highlight the mutually beneficial impact that undergraduate research has on faculty and students, and briefly describe the outcomes of this project, including a regional interdisciplinary undergraduate conference.

Overall, our experience has been rewarding in several ways. First, our model, which began in 2008, led to a new undergraduate research program in our Department of History and Political Science, where students can now take courses in which they

conduct undergraduate research. This provides students with an opportunity to do research and for faculty to be rewarded for the substantial work that this kind of teaching requires. Second, our program has developed students' research skills and knowledge about their own discipline's research methodology, as well as approaches used in other fields. Third, our collaboration facilitated the development and recognition of junior faculty.

The Model

Our goal was to establish a partnership in which students and professors shared responsibilities for a significant scholarly project with the potential to contribute to the history, political science, or psychology literatures. Together, students and faculty examined novel issues in these fields, with faculty members mentoring students by helping them navigate their discipline and avoid obvious quagmires. We opted to develop a central theme and a common theoretical foundation that would allow each faculty-student team to advance questions relevant to his or her specific discipline. We chose the topic of fear and terror, which has political, historical, and psychological implications.

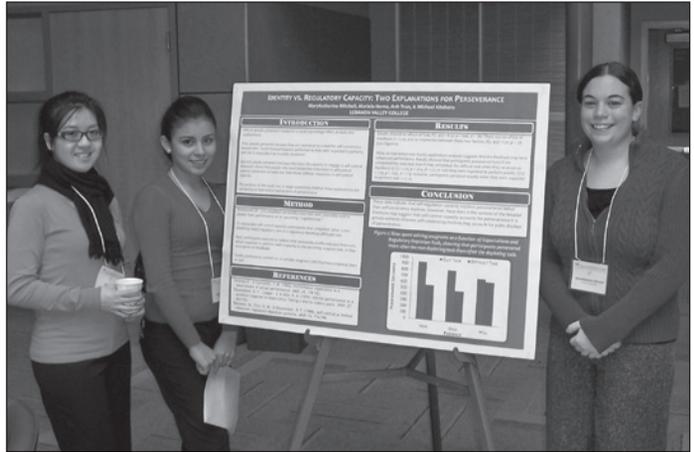
Each research team designed a semester-long project with one of the four authors of this article. Groups ranged in size from one to eight, with more than 40 students participating during the two-year program. Because our approach was interdisciplinary, and we felt it was important for the four teams to interact, we all got together for pizza or sandwiches several times a semester. Students took turns presenting their work to the larger group. This gave them an opportunity to become familiar with thinking through and discussing research, and it also exposed students to the similarities and differences in developing research questions and approaches across disciplines. Thus, each faculty member worked closely with his or her own team, but the groups were able to share the experience of conducting research on a single theme from different disciplinary perspectives.

Individual Projects

History. John Hinshaw's students conducted more than 40 interviews on ethnic identity. This project was linked to the fear-and-terror theme in that it was developed from research that shows that anxiety about death is often expressed in bias against members of out-groups or in the identification with one's own ethnic or racial group. Over time, the project's emphasis shifted to focus on the impact of Hispanic migration to central Pennsylvania. Students collected and analyzed newspaper articles and demographic data (based on the U.S. census, crime statistics, and obituaries). Hinshaw is working with two professors of Spanish on how to develop a new model of undergraduate research and service learning. In turn, two Spanish majors are now collecting interviews in Spanish and English. Next year we plan to incorporate Hispanic high-school students into the project. We anticipate that this will result in publications in both the History and the Spanish Departments.

Political Science. Diane Johnson, who studies and teaches comparative politics, used this theme to extend her research interest in nationalism by concentrating on the relationships among terrorism, fear, and nationalism. The first year, she and her students collaborated on a paper that tested two hypotheses developed by the students. Each participant chose a case study (in this case, the U.S. after 9/11, the 2004 Madrid train bombings, Palestine/Israel, and Peru during the Shining Path rebellion). The members co-wrote the introduction, literature review, and summary and findings. They presented the paper in January 2010 at the Southern Political Science Association conference. In the second year, her group tried (ultimately unsuccessfully) to build a database showing the effects of terrorist attacks on nationalism during a defined period of time. They then decided to examine how fear affects citizens' views toward national leaders under specified circumstances. Each team member developed a hypothesis and chose and developed his or her own specific question and case. The group met weekly to discuss progress and work through any problems.

Chris Dolan used the theme to focus his students on degrees of continuity and change in U.S. foreign policy and elite foreign policy responses to global terrorism. He and his first group of students examined whether past U.S. counterterrorism measures have been effective in managing terrorist attacks against American citizens. They sought to answer two questions: (1) Does U.S. foreign policy provoke instead of prevent terrorist activities? and (2) Can a psychological theory about the



Student poster presentation at the "Challenges of the 21st Century Conference". Pictured from left to right are Lebanon Valley College students Anh N. Tran, Mariela A. Horna, and Mary Katherine E. Mitchell. This poster won one of two "best poster" awards at the conference.

intergroup consequences of death-awareness supply political scientists with an appropriate theoretical lens through which to understand foreign-policy strategies towards terrorism? The collaborators framed the research questions and the literature review, established the theoretical framework, and collected data. In the second year, a different team of students concentrated on testing the theme of continuity and change by collecting global public-opinion data on America's image, performing comparative case studies of the U.S. interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan, and examining the strategic presidential doctrines of George W. Bush and Barack Obama. Group members met every other week to discuss and frame each section of their papers.

Psychology. This interdisciplinary collaboration helped Michael Kitchens start his own laboratory group, a practice common among our psychology faculty members. In the first year-and-a-half of the project, he used the fear-and-terror theme to develop research questions that focused on how the awareness of one's own death affects self-regulation and self-awareness processes. The examination of those questions provided a context for students in his lab to generate their own hypothesis regarding this theme. Currently, they are investigating how existential threats affect a shift towards or away from religion. Some of the preliminary data collected from this project was submitted to a national research conference. In sum, the project allowed him to develop a lab, and in turn, provided a context in which students matured into developing their own sophisticated research ideas.

The Culminating Event: A Research Conference

At the outset of this research project, we anticipated hosting a one-day conference on our theme of fear and terrorism. As the event approached, we decided that we might not generate enough interest with such a narrow topic, so we broadened it to the theme of “Social Challenges for the 21st Century.” Thus, our focus became a celebration of undergraduate research of a cross-disciplinary nature and collaboration between faculty and students. We put together a conference Web site and created a conference email address for correspondence. One of our colleagues in the art department generously agreed to design a promotional poster, and we sent out a call for participation to about 20 of the colleges and universities within a two-hour driving distance of the college. We also contacted a well-known scholar, who is a very dynamic speaker, to give the keynote address at lunch.

We were very pleased with the results. Approximately 60 students and faculty members from six institutions gave papers or presented posters. Lebanon Valley’s president and vice president for academic affairs both welcomed the participants and attended for part of the day. We enlisted the help of faculty colleagues to judge the best papers and posters and gave small cash awards to the winners. The cost was partly defrayed by a \$10 conference-registration fee. Overall, we spent approximately \$2,500, which included lunch, light refreshments during the day, the printing of the posters and programs, a small stipend and travel costs for our keynote speaker, and the awards to the paper and poster winners.

For the students who participated, this event provided an opportunity to present their work in a non-threatening environment and a context in which they were exposed to research across disciplines. Likewise, faculty members were exposed to cross-disciplinary research and were able to make contacts with colleagues from other colleges. We also held a roundtable discussion in which we discussed the challenges of conducting undergraduate research. In short, the conference celebrated the fruits of our efforts during the past two years, but also provided a context for further professional development for both students and faculty.

Sustaining Undergraduate Research

As we have noted, one of the goals of our project was to develop a sustainable program of research in the humanities



“Challenges of the 21st Century Conference” held at Lebanon Valley College, February 20, 2010

and social sciences. To do this, the faculty in history and political science sought to create a new course in which students could conduct research in collaboration with faculty. On a temporary basis, students took the class as part of their regular course load, while one faculty member taught the class as part of his or her load. This was the only way to turn undergraduate research from yet another demand on faculty time to something that they did as part of their regular teaching duties. In reality, all three professors involved from the Department of History and Political Science taught a few students each semester, and once every three semesters they received credit for it. We considered providing faculty with a stipend from our grant funds, but decided that we needed time more than additional pay. This class, then, provides faculty members with an incentive to work with undergraduates, making it possible to support undergraduate research for years to come. Furthermore, we hope to establish a Center for the Study of History and Politics that will sponsor comparable projects and attract its own funds.

To further promote a sustainable program of research, a group of our students did a presentation for the college’s board of trustees toward the end of the first year of our project. The trustees were impressed with our students and our approach, and their support helped to ease the creation of a dedicated

class for undergraduate research. Thus this model of collaborative undergraduate research will continue at the college. We anticipate that as more students become interested, involved faculty members can teach the class more often; we also anticipate that other faculty members will look for ways to attract students to research projects. In short, this program allowed faculty in the social sciences and humanities to develop a sustainable model to support both students' and their own research programs.

Conclusion: Looking to the Future

This experience has been rewarding for all four faculty members involved. We made a presentation on our project at a recent faculty colloquium that was extremely well attended and well received. In addition to recognition from our colleagues, work on this project has resulted in positive consideration for merit-pay, tenure, and promotion decisions. Our model is also currently being considered by other departments on campus. Furthermore, each faculty member in history and political science received compensation as part of his or her regular teaching to work with some of our most motivated students.

This research initiative will also continue in this department with a new international-studies major designed by one of the faculty participants. Students must complete six credits of undergraduate research or an internship as part of this major. While the quality of students and their work can vary enormously, creating a culture of undergraduate research in the Department of History and Political Science has shifted from being seemingly impossible to becoming a reality.

Thus on numerous levels, we found that this interdisciplinary program was beneficial for the development of students and faculty. Indeed, we believe that our program demonstrates that both types of development can be integrally related. The collaboration with our students and each other provided learning opportunities, sustainable programs of research, and a broader understanding of research.

References

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Michael B. Kitchens

Department of Psychology
Lebanon Valley College
101 N. College Avenue
Annville, PA, 17003-1400
kitchens@lvc.edu

Michael B. Kitchens is an assistant professor of psychology at Lebanon Valley College. He teaches introductory courses in psychology, introductory and advanced research courses, and courses in his speciality of social psychology and emotion. His research interests are in self-control, social rejection, terror management theory, and individual differences in emotional intensity, and he has published work related to some of these areas.

Christopher J. Dolan is an assistant professor of political science at Lebanon Valley College. He is the author of In War We Trust and co-author of Striking First and The Presidency and Economic Policy. His research on international relations and American politics has also been published in numerous peer-reviewed journals and chapters in edited books.

John Hendrix Hinshaw is associate professor of history and chair of the Department of History and Political Science at Lebanon Valley College. His publications include books and articles about the labor industry in Pennsylvania and South Africa. He is currently working on a study of the health effects of social isolation on poor and migrant workers.

Diane E. Johnson is an assistant professor of political science at Lebanon Valley College. She is the coeditor of Globalization and Uncertainty in Latin America (Palgrave-Macmillan, 2007), and has published book chapters and articles on the relationship between interest groups and political parties in Argentina, the practice of lobbying in Argentina and Uruguay, and the democratic impact of the Internet in the United States.