

## Leveraging the Role of Library Partnerships to Understand Undergraduate Research Contributions to Humanities Scholarship: A Case Study

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### Abstract

The library and the Undergraduate Research Opportunity Program at the University of Michigan partnered in an investigation of student-faculty research collaboration in the humanities. The authors found that providing early opportunities for undergraduates to collaborate on such projects was highly beneficial for both students and faculty mentors. Students contributed and gained invaluable skills in an experience they stated was more meaningful than that of a conventional classroom, whereas faculty mentors could juggle multiple projects, benefit from students' technological skills, and articulate the salience of their research processes and their work. The authors also discuss the role of the library as a crucial catalyst in changing the perception of the humanities at higher education institutions, particularly as it exposes students to research projects and professions within the library.

**Keywords:** *campus collaborations, humanities, libraries, early undergraduate research*

**doi:** 10.18833/spur/2/3/1

Much of today's discourse about the state of the humanities in higher education focuses on the solitary nature of humanities research, the ambiguity of what this research entails, and the value (or lack thereof) of humanities training for the workforce. In popular media and in national political discourses on education, humanities scholars have been questioned about the value of their work, at least in the present-day format. Regardless of the true extent of a crisis in the humanities, these discourses have required humanists and those who work with humanists to critically

examine methods and programs for research, education, and support of the humanities (Bérubé and Ruth 2015).

To explore the relationship between humanities research and undergraduate education in the context of these larger issues, the library and the Undergraduate Research Opportunity Program (UROP) at the University of Michigan (U-M) partnered to pilot a program evaluation study investigating student-faculty research collaboration in the humanities. UROP operates on the basis that undergraduate research is a "high-impact" educational practice (Kuh 2008) and an institutional retention strategy and thus focuses on research engagement of first- and second-year students (Locks and Gregerman 2008). UROP pairs students with faculty research projects across the disciplines (Healey and Jenkins 2009; Hu et al. 2007; Lopatto 2006), and U-M librarians work closely with UROP students in a variety of capacities: teaching information literacy concepts, educating students about technology, and consulting on specialized topics. Each year, UROP places more than 1,300 undergraduate students in research projects, but fewer than 10 percent of those projects are based in the humanities, although more than 25 percent of U-M students graduate with a humanities degree (U-M Office of the Registrar 2018). Thus, this partnership between the library and UROP aimed to shed additional light on the small number of humanities research projects and determine the role that the library could play in fostering increased faculty-student collaborations in humanities research (Schantz 2008).

In the evaluation process, three main areas were discovered that the library could leverage to catalyze humanities research involving undergraduate students. First, because

of their close relationships with researchers, librarians understand the breadth of humanities research approaches and the diversity of materials used by humanists. The research here shows that humanities research processes can be better discovered through close attention to particular projects rather than a survey of broad disciplinary methods (see also Murphy 2014 and Valentine 1993 for focus groups as alternative approaches). Second, the library is uniquely positioned to provide both institutional professional experience and liberal arts exposure by sponsoring undergraduate research projects. In doing so, the library can address student and parent concerns about postgraduation jobs and the translatability of liberal arts skills to the job market. Finally, the library is an indispensable partner (see Dewey 2005 on the embedded librarian) in identifying places for collaboration (Haigh and Kinsella 2016) and facilitating interdepartmental partnerships that advance teaching and research (Dickenson 2006; Dotterer 2002; Haglund and Olsson 2008). This is particularly salient in highly decentralized academic spaces like U-M, where the library is one of the few resources used by the entire institution.

### Research Methodology

Most studies on undergraduate research employ survey methodology, collecting large data sets from multiple institutions and focusing on various disciplines (see Bauer and Bennett 2003; Cowan 2012; Merkel 2001; Stanford et al. 2015). Because of this, the nuances of humanities research, especially outside the curriculum (see Shapiro et al. 2015), are often overlooked in a sea of data. Many library studies on humanities practices focus on uses of the library by students to complete class assignments or honors theses (Head 2008). The research team took a more localized and in-depth approach, limiting itself to the University of Michigan campus and employing interview methodology so that results could lead to improved services and support for undergraduate research (for a similar approach in the library context, see Foster and Gibbons 2007). In the language of data analysis, the research methodology and assessment were exploratory rather than confirmatory (Tukey 1980). The work and data were continually assessed as part of the research, allowing the research to lead the process rather than attempt to verify a specific outcome. Centrally focused on local service improvement and considering its exploratory nature, this research was not regulated by U-M's Institutional Review Board.

The research team was composed of three librarians and one graduate student in anthropology; the student had firsthand experience as a UROP student and peer adviser as an undergraduate. Four undergraduate students were sponsored over two years of conducting this project. Interviews were conducted by four UROP undergraduate student researchers, allowing observations of students and practices from a meta level. In other words, this

collaboration provided faculty and staff with an opportunity to participate in the daily work of a research project with undergraduate students. An anthropological approach was employed in the research to seek the complex processes at work in these collaborations. Anthropological approaches have been gaining influence in the corporate and academic worlds as a set of methods that improve the understanding of customers and their environments in a more comprehensive way. Even the New York City Department of Sanitation has had an anthropologist-in-residence since 2006.

The research team drafted a semi-structured interview guide to preserve a level of consistency among the interviews. However, the goal was to allow interviewees to articulate their academic and research trajectories on their own terms. The interview guides for faculty (Peters et al. 2018) and students (Joque, Vander Broek, and Aenasoale 2018) were slightly different to account for their different roles; however, the questions about the projects were consistent. Ten faculty research mentors and 10 undergraduate research assistants were interviewed. During the interview process, the researchers continuously explored their own roles in relation to each other and recalibrated as necessary in an effort to maximize the success of the research collaboration with undergraduates (see also Davis 2015 on mentoring undergraduate researchers and interdisciplinarity). Mentors who no longer employ undergraduate research assistants also were interviewed, so the researchers could understand the reasoning behind their decision.

The interviewees chose the location of these conversations. Some invited the researchers into their offices and shared their research materials in either digital or physical form. Other faculty members saw it as more fitting to talk in the researchers' workspace and said they did not always conduct their research in their offices. Ranging from archives/libraries to cafes and home offices, humanities research locales rarely seem to be confined spatially.

The interviews were transcribed and coded for themes that emerged out of the conversations with faculty and students. The goal was to understand the kinds of connections made by interviewees among humanities research, education, and "real life." In other words, would undergraduate research experiences be understood as an important part of a faculty member's research agenda and growth as an educator? Did faculty and students consider humanities projects a venue to offer skills that could be extended beyond postsecondary education?

### Findings

The findings focus on experiences and outcomes for students and faculty, as well as the role of the research mentorship process. There was a disconnect between faculty perceptions of student collaboration and the reality of collaboration. Faculty and students involved in collaborative

projects found the experience to be rewarding; faculty especially noted that it caused them to think about how their work could be divided into manageable chunks and distributed to students, allowing them to keep multiple projects moving forward—much like a studio or artisanal workshop. Students also benefited immensely, learning about the research process and academia beyond the classroom environment. Finally, through the form and content of this project, it was discovered that the library can play a central role in connecting undergraduate research and faculty research.

One faculty interviewee stated that undergraduate research is often discussed among her colleagues as “tricky”:

I’ve talked to a lot of my colleagues about this ... How do you engage undergraduates to work on a postgraduate professorial-level research project? That’s a tricky bit, right? Very often they don’t have the language skills, which is key. Very often they don’t have the familiarity with the research methods; they very often don’t know how to use the library. Seriously, they have never walked into the stacks.

This excerpt captures some of the barriers for faculty when considering humanities research with undergraduate students. When describing why they would not want to work with undergraduates, faculty often expressed fears that students were likely to lack crucial skills for carrying out research. Publishing concerns also emerged as part of the conversations with faculty: they worried about sufficiently rewarding their undergraduate researchers within the context of the current paradigm of solo publishing and the tenure system (see also Grobman 2007 and Rogers 2003).

There were clear benefits to faculty from participating in collaborative research, which balance the challenges posed by the academic reward structure and the individualistic publishing models most common to the humanities. Although faculty members expressed concern about publishing with an undergraduate student, they also acknowledged that these collaborations allowed them to work on two or more projects at the same time. One student said:

[M]y sponsor was ... working on ... her book, which is the most important thing. I didn’t help her with that. ... [S]he kind of has a second project ... , and a third project for something way off like 5 or 10 years ... . So I would kind of juggle the second and third projects that ... she wanted to do ... at some point. I would kind of do the groundwork for something way off in the future. That was where I was the most valuable for her. That’s kind of what she was trying to tell other faculty members ... they [students] don’t have to help you with the book that you are writing, right now. But they can help you do groundwork for the next book you want to write or the next book after that book you wanna write.

Instead of having students take pieces of a currently active project, such as a book or exhibition, some of the faculty interviewed had students begin research or other tasks for more distant projects. In this way, the undergraduate student researcher could function like a member of a lab, workshop, or studio, laying the groundwork for projects that a faculty member would later hone and give final shape. The idea, the direction, and the finesse all come from the faculty member, but much of the information gathering can be accomplished by an undergraduate researcher. It is important to note that collaborative publishing efforts have been used to attract history undergraduates to research at institutions such as Virginia Tech (Stephens et al. 2011).

Faculty repeatedly mentioned that working with undergraduates on their research helped them to maintain momentum and kept them “honest” because of the programmatic requirement to regularly meet with their students and ensure that students had enough work to do. Thus faculty members not only had to keep up with their end of the project’s goals but also had to break down their projects into manageable chunks for undergraduate students to tackle. Finding themselves explaining their research to undergraduates gave them a new perspective on their work in a way that engaging with colleagues in their fields and departments could not. As one faculty member noted:

From a purely practical matter, and this is what’s great about UROP and what I think would be great for undergraduates ... —they keep you on task. It’s pretty easy to get caught up in the everyday of teaching, life and you sort of put your research on the side ... If you are having a weekly meeting, you have to weekly be working on your research. So, from that level, they are very helpful. Additionally, as you are working with them to explain your project, you have to be able to articulate your project more clearly. They will bring questions to you that will make you think.

By shifting research to a team approach with different levels and types of skill, faculty are both forced and allowed to think about their broader research goals and how to manage a team to achieve them. Ultimately, through working with undergraduates, research can shift from a solitary activity—that often is superseded by other commitments—to a better planned and managed collaborative enterprise that simultaneously trains new researchers.

Sometimes faculty reluctant to work collaboratively (Corley 2013) with undergraduates cite the students’ lack of writing, language, or analytical skills in explaining their lack of desire. Humanities work, traditionally considered monastic or individual, can feel impossible to break into manageable chunks that would work well for a more novice researcher to tackle. In this study, faculty benefited

from taking a reverse perspective and thinking, perhaps uncomfortably, about their own shortcomings, rather than on methods for dividing up their research.

Students often have stronger and more diverse technology skills than faculty, and they are well suited to learn new tools and programming languages. These abilities can compensate for their lack of specialized knowledge or sophistication in the research process, making their presence on a research team fundamentally additive rather than reductive or fragmentary and shaping the project's direction through their contributions. As one faculty member stated:

Very often humanities people, especially in history . . . don't speak the language, so I can't use them. But there are other ways [of collaboration.] [M]y two architecture students are so much more technologically aware than I; . . . they created these phenomenal maps for me, and that's great, too.

Students also benefit from collaborating with faculty on humanities research, sometimes in unexpected ways. Sheltered from the mechanics, logistics, and politics of the research process by the structure of their degree programs, curriculum, and traditional classroom engagement, students often leave college without understanding the research work of their instructors. Student participants reported that they gained a respect for and appreciation of the details of their faculty sponsors' work and even reported that their participation gave them new insights into other areas of their lives. They also gained practice in employing new skills, many of which are difficult to teach in the classroom. As one student stated:

I learned what it means to be [a] researcher. Not an undergrad researcher, just a researcher. I learned the ethics of research. I learned the complexity of research. I learned the complexity of education. I learned the politics of education. I just learned. Every single day.

Perhaps most significantly, students reported gaining a sense of accomplishment that they might not have acquired in a classroom setting. Feeling like they were doing real, original research and contributing to a larger goal rather than working toward a grade, students experienced satisfaction that was otherwise missing from their academic careers. As one student noted:

I actually felt really proud of it because I was doing things that have never been done before. So these manuscripts that I was looking at transcribing, they had never been transcribed before. They were from the 15th century; there was no existing edition. People knew they existed. They have taken photos of them to send to me, but no one had transcribed them or really analyzed them. As a freshman, sophomore, I thought that was a cool thing. I still do. It was really cool to kind of have been the one who went through these things that no one

else had looked at, and my sponsor has given me that type of responsibility.

Although most of the findings were derived from interviews, insight was gained into the process of researching alongside undergraduate students through some of the researchers acting as UROP sponsors themselves. This had an impact on the collaboration with UROP and other campus partners. Through serving as instructors for UROP workshops and providing research support to UROP students, these researchers gained a sense of the workings of UROP projects and the skills and concepts needed by students for their projects. They also developed a realization of the crucial role of the mentor for students, including the importance of meeting with students on a regular basis, even when meeting might not seem necessary at first glance; the need to ensure students receive the appropriate preparatory training to be successful at their work; and the necessity to create meaningful opportunities for them throughout the process. Understanding the process from the mentor's perspective allowed the researchers to provide more effective services not only to students but also to faculty engaging with undergraduates on research projects.

Additionally, a greater understanding of humanities work and its relationship to undergraduate education was gained, as well as the importance of deep, meaningful relationships between the library and campus partners. Participating in the UROP process showed the difference that becoming an insider can make in the understanding of a collaboration, which will be incorporated into the researchers' work with other groups.

The participation of undergraduate researchers on this research project provided an invaluable contribution to the conceptualization of the landscape. The insights gained from extended engagement with students and the outcomes of the program evaluation contributed to the ability to provide UROP with proposed recruitment improvements. For example, to target potential research mentors, the researchers suggested that UROP organize department-specific information sessions with concrete research project examples that demonstrate the contributions that undergraduate students might be able to bring, as well as offer workshops and assistance for research mentors who might be uncertain about the appeal of a particular project to an undergraduate student. On the student side, UROP could focus on recruiting second-year students who possess more research experience by visiting first-year seminars and collaborating with current research mentors who teach courses for first-year students.

These findings have implications for the development within the library of future services for undergraduates as well as new and existing partnerships with co-curricular



groups on campus. The current focus is on developing services that help bridge the gap between undergraduate research and faculty work, beginning with the introduction of student fellowships and a mini-grants program. Student fellows engage directly with librarians to work on projects ranging from exhibit development to creating resources to enhance the discoverability and accessibility of research materials. Mini-grants are offered to stimulate a connection between the library and student innovation on campus. Because of this experience with the UROP project, these competitive opportunities have been designed to include librarians engaging both students and their faculty mentors in conversations, demonstrating how the library can be a conduit for more effective collaboration between the two groups.

### Conclusion

This project aimed to shine a spotlight on the research process within the humanities, giving special attention to its unique potential for impact on undergraduate learners, who are so often steered toward STEM fields by parents and other advisers. Through participating in projects, students gain valuable insight into the research world that occurs outside the classroom and pride in contributing to work that extends beyond campus. Uncovering the barriers and benefits for faculty to participating in projects with undergraduates also was useful. Although faculty often perceived collaborating with undergraduates with suspicion prior to beginning a project, they frequently discovered that undergraduate students could help in unexpected ways.

As a result of this project, the researchers gained a deeper understanding of the nuances and challenges of humanities research along with a greater appreciation for the positive role played by the library in promoting both research and student learning. As this study was designed and implemented by a team that understood the goals and inner workings of UROP as well as work as library professionals who have a unique role as research consultants to many different disciplinary experts in the academy. The synthesis of this study has had a demonstrated impact on the humanities recruitment process at UROP. Since the conclusion of the study, the researchers have met with UROP staff to discuss the implications of these findings including steps that UROP might take for more targeted outreach to humanities faculty and students, which may help undergraduates understand the benefits of humanities research—even if they do not intend to be humanities majors.

As professional schools position themselves as the best preparation for securing a job after graduation, some have attempted to challenge the value of a liberal arts education in the contemporary world. Although the stakes may appear especially high (as the authors discovered in their interviews), the educational value of the humanities has

been questioned for generations in various political and economic circumstances and to varying degrees. Thus, although the humanities, alongside other fields, can and have been transformed by continuously developing technologies and research methodologies, humanists know that a well-rounded education must include the humanities. Only through such a course of study can higher education institutions produce informed, critical, and active citizens.

Regardless of the ultimate future of the humanities writ large, as long as higher education institutions commit to providing such a course of study, it will be imperative to support the humanities and assist students and faculty in developing skills and reflecting on their work. Such an education can be bolstered by the inclusion of undergraduates in faculty research, but these collaborations can be difficult to both organize and maintain. Libraries have much to offer and gain by actively participating in these research projects and helping to make them a central part of humanities education.

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