

Professional Development as a Way Forward for Undergraduate Research in the Humanities

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Abstract:

This reflection piece explains ways in which professional development opportunities can be framed to help humanities faculty consider undergraduate research in the classroom, as well as formulate longer-term projects that can sustain work with students. Workshops, online classes on digital tools, and discussions highlight ways in which faculty developers can frame support for and the development of undergraduate research in the humanities.

Key Words:

Student-faculty undergraduate research, Humanities research, Professional Development, Digital Humanities, Digital Tools.

Introduction

At McDaniel College, a small, 1600-undergraduate/1400-graduate student private liberal arts college in Westminster, Maryland where I teach Art History as a tenured professor, collaborative undergraduate research in the sciences and social sciences has been well established. Substantial endowed funds are available for faculty, by competitive application, who wish to conduct collaborative research with undergraduate students in the summer. Applications to fund summer research projects with undergraduate students have always been open to humanities faculty, but comparatively few have applied. Yet, as research has shown, undergraduate research can be a rich experience for students and often levels the playing field with first-generation and minority students (CUR 2015; Brownell & Swaner, 2010; Gregerman, 1999; Locks & Gregerman, 2008). McDaniel College has a large percentage of these two populations: about 30% of each incoming class is first-generation, and the minority population of our undergraduate student body is about 20-25%. The faculty and administration at McDaniel College agree that undergraduate research opportunities need to be strengthened overall, and in the humanities in particular. This piece will

examine faculty development programs that I put in place to achieve greater numbers of humanities faculty members engaging with undergraduate students on collaborative research projects.

It was clear from the trend of the lower rate of humanities-based applications for summer research, as well as discussions I have had with my McDaniel colleagues, that faculty members in the humanities were not sure how to conduct research with undergraduate students. This is not unique to McDaniel College. Collaborative research in the humanities has often been noted as a difficult puzzle to solve (Schantz, 2008). When I talked to humanities faculty, they all admitted that their research tends to be a more solitary activity. Combined with a more isolated research approach, the publication process can also be long in the humanities. In my own experiences, publishing in art history takes a very long time, with articles sometimes appearing long after an undergraduate student graduates. A new paradigm is needed for faculty in the humanities to collaborate with undergraduate students in research; the model that works for the sciences and social sciences might not work for the humanities.

It was clear that humanities faculty needed to think differently about the types of projects that would “count” as undergraduate research and to learn about options and possibilities that could support such work. Thus, I began my professional development plan for faculty with workshops and discussions that were meant help expand the definition of undergraduate research. I focused on two specific areas that I felt were inextricably linked to McDaniel’s goal to establish more humanities based undergraduate research: 1) develop specific research assignments in humanities courses at all levels of the undergraduate curriculum; and 2) encourage faculty to think about more innovative long-term research projects, possibly with digital tools, that could integrate work with undergraduate students. While research projects conducted by students alone in the context of assignments for a humanities course may not fit the typical definition of “undergraduate research,” it was important for me to help faculty begin to devise research questions and topics that might lead to other types of longer-term research projects that they could, in fact, complete with undergraduate students. Thus, while student research in course work may not be considered research with faculty, the design of those types of projects was the first step in creating a deeper understanding among humanities faculty about how they might include undergraduate students in their research.

In support of both course assignment design and longer-term research projects, I led a workshop on assignment design in December of 2015. I presented an assignment from my Roman Art and Architecture class titled “Daily Life in Ancient Rome.” For this assignment, each student is given a role from Roman society (patrician, plebeian, slave, etc.) as well as a gender. These roles are chosen at random by the students. For the assignment, each student writes about what he or she would experience in a typical day in the city of Rome after researching the sights, sounds, and scents from the ancient city. There is a set minimum number of architectural works that they must write about. Students are required to research all aspects of their societal role while using proper citations and appropriate sources.

After presenting this assignment at the workshop, a wide-ranging discussion ensued with about 25 of my colleagues from different humanities disciplines. I set a deadline a

few weeks after this workshop for applications for a stipend to support the design of a new assignment to be used in a spring 2016 semester class. Accepted proposals for assignments were given a stipend at the end of the spring semester after the assignment was used. Part of the condition of the stipend was also an agreement to attend an assessment workshop and to discuss the assignment at that meeting.

Twenty-one assignments were generated from this opportunity from 14 different faculty members representing English, History, Foreign Languages, Cinema, Music, and Art History. Assignments included the following: a paper for a 3000-level Film Analysis course in which students research a Hitchcock film character and describe the 24 hours prior to his or her appearance onscreen; a blog describing a “modern medievalism” for a 2000-level medieval literature course; and a pamphlet to explain the need for cultural understanding in the business world for an introductory level French language course. These assignments demonstrate the range of both course level and types of projects that students researched and created. The assessment meeting at the end of the spring semester included a frank discussion of what went well and what required modification. Most faculty members agreed that they would use the assignment again, though some would make some modest adjustments, and indicated that they would likely create new projects based on this model for future classes. The creation of these assignments caused faculty to rethink some of their own projects and, in some cases, led to the consideration of longer-term research projects that could include undergraduate students.

The next phase of development for faculty was to help them conceive of longer-term research projects that could potentially include undergraduate students as collaborators. I developed a working theory that an ongoing digital project could prove to be the humanities equivalent to a physical scientific laboratory. In fact, I established my own digital humanities “lab” on Italo-Byzantine panel painting, which will feature research with undergraduate students. The project aims to create a database of images of late thirteenth-century panel paintings of the Virgin and Child based on the “eleousa” Byzantine icon type: (<http://gretchenkrehlingmckay.net/ItaloByzantinePtg/>). If other faculty members were to consider to undertaking such a long-term digitally based project, significant professional development for faculty would be necessary.

Thus, in January and February of 2016, in collaboration with our Department of Instructional Technology, I established an online course that was offered to humanities faculty to learn about digital tools in order to help foster the development of new projects. The course was self-directed, and faculty could complete the entire course, or just learn about a few tools. It was divided into three distinct categories: Digital Research, Digital Scholarship, and Digital Pedagogies. There were readings and videos that faculty viewed and discussed. All aspects of the course had to be completed if the faculty member wanted to receive a stipend that was supported by our grant. The class was set up as a collaboration between myself and our Director of Instructional Technology, who was the facilitator for the online course discussions. Five faculty members completed the course, but over a dozen more logged in to learn about spatial history, platforms for building digital collections, data mining and network analysis tools. I was not sure that this investment in digital pedagogy had paid off until I sent out a query this past December 2016 to the humanities faculty, requesting a basic interest

level for those wishing to conduct collaborative undergraduate research projects alongside their science and social science colleagues in the summer of 2017. To my astonishment, eight humanities faculty members expressed an interest in conducting such research this summer, quadrupling the number of humanities-based undergraduate research projects that were conducted in the summer of 2016. Among the new undergraduate collaborative research projects that will be carried out in the summer of 2017 include an assistant professor of English's endeavor to create a website that will map locations of ghostly encounters reported in late medieval English texts.

However, not all of the potential summer 2017 research projects by humanities faculty will be digitally based. A Professor of French will work with a double major in French and Environmental Studies to develop a module on "France & the Environment," which would include policies, politics, history, role of nuclear energy, as well as European Union directives, which will support the professor's "Culture of France" class. A Professor of History, whose work focuses on the memorialization of World War I, has conceived of a project that would focus on the first national WWI memorial in Washington, DC, which will be unveiled in April 2017, on the 100th anniversary of Wilson's declaration of the United States' participation in that war.

It is clear that humanities-based research projects have some unique hurdles to face when it comes to finding ways to include undergraduate students. Furthermore, humanities faculty require professional development both in terms of constructing curriculum-based research assignments for classes at all levels, as well as learning about new digital tools that can help encourage new longer-term projects that could potentially include collaboration with undergraduate students.

Faculty developers who are thinking about ways to increase faculty-student collaboration in research in the humanities should think about a two-pronged approach. I believe that rethinking assignments in humanities courses can help expose students to more research in the humanities. The development of assignments can also help faculty rethink their own research and potentially lead to projects that could include student researchers. Learning about digital tools and platforms is also a central key to increasing faculty-student research collaborations in the humanities. Digital projects offer students and faculty alike a vehicle for viewing their work, as well as a sustained platform for making the work visible to a wider audience.

While being able to offer stipends and pay students for their time certainly helps, professional developers in conjunction with their administration may be able to find other ways to encourage faculty participation in learning about new digital pedagogies and research tools, as well as rethinking assignment design in humanities-based courses. The faculty development opportunities described here demonstrate that humanities faculty at McDaniel College – and elsewhere – can have rich, rewarding, and successful collaborative research experiences with undergraduate students just like their science and social science colleagues.

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