

TEACHING
UNDERGRADUATE
RESEARCH IN
RELIGIOUS STUDIES



Edited by
BERNADETTE McNARY-ZAK
& REBECCA TODD PETERS

Teaching Undergraduate Research in Religious Studies



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Undergraduate Research in Religious Studies (found in Appendix I) is a product of the work of these two groups.

Opportunities to present portions of our work at meetings of the American Academy of Religion and the Council of Undergraduate Research helped us refine our thinking about the distinctiveness of this pedagogy in humanities disciplines. Special thanks to Tim Renick for inviting us to present some of our work at a 2007 AAR Leadership Workshop titled “The Religion Major and Liberal Education.”

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Teaching Undergraduate Research in Religious Studies

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I

Theorizing Undergraduate Research in Religious Studies

Bernadette McNary-Zak and Rebecca Todd Peters

In the fall of 2001 we both began our first tenure-track positions in religious studies departments at church-related liberal arts institutions. By our second year, we had each been asked to mentor undergraduate students in projects that fell under the institutional rubric of “Undergraduate Research.”¹ While we had each written advanced theses during our own undergraduate days that are parallel to what is now being called “Undergraduate Research,” this nomenclature and the accompanying trend in higher education to promote intensive, individualized opportunities for substantive and original research at the undergraduate level has increased markedly in the humanities in the last ten years. While we each enthusiastically embraced the possibility for mentoring students, this was quickly tempered by the realization that there were few resources in the humanities to support our efforts.

We share an approach to pedagogy that recognizes good teaching as a process of figuring out how to connect ideas, materials, and concepts with varied groups of students day in and day out. Consequently, we believe that innovation, improvisation, and spontaneity are necessary hallmarks of good teaching. Through experimentation, trial, and error we learned that some kinds of research projects and experiences were successful while others were not, and our conversations with our peers yielded similar stories. We also recognized that while our ability to innovate and respond to student requests for new forms of engaged learning in the form of

Undergraduate Research was a reasonable expectation on the part of our students and our institutions, it was neither efficient nor effective to expect individual faculty members across the country to reinvent the wheel.

As we discussed our own best practices and compared our definitions of what we regarded as sufficient quality for student work in Undergraduate Research with each other and with colleagues, we recognized that we were mentoring student projects in many different ways with different degrees of success. Through these informal conversations we recognized that student work yielded varying results and levels of quality in the finished project. Increased involvement with mentoring students and attention to the national conversations about Undergraduate Research in higher education convinced us that there would be an increasing demand for religious studies faculty to participate in mentoring Undergraduate Research. Our interest in establishing rigorous standards for this new pedagogy in the field of religious studies prompted us to initiate a broader conversation in the field about the need for disciplinary standards of excellence that would help define what it is we expect when undergraduate students engage in the practice of Undergraduate Research in our discipline.

Background for Undergraduate Research

The first task to address as we move forward in thinking about Undergraduate Research is defining our terms. If it seems obvious to us that all students are engaged in research and writing at some level in their undergraduate work, then what exactly do we mean by the use of the term *Undergraduate Research*? Indeed, undergraduate students engage in multiple forms of research activities as a part of fulfilling general education and departmental requirements. These research experiences include but are not limited to preliminary work in introductory and research methods courses as well as more advanced research papers in upper-level courses, capstones, or senior seminars.

We intend Undergraduate Research as a technical term that does not refer to all research done by undergraduate students. Undergraduate Research is distinct from other research requirements as it entails a more intensive and extensive research experience than traditional forms of research with students in the discipline. Drawing on the classroom experience of designing research and writing papers, Undergraduate Research explores a focused, discrete body of knowledge in preparation for developing a research question, a research agenda, and a research product. As a result, Undergraduate Research often

assumes the form of an independent study, honors research, tutorial, or summer research fellow.

The purpose of Undergraduate Research is to move beyond the typical expectations of departmental course work by striving to train students who have the capacity and desire to envision, sustain, and complete a complex, high-quality, and nuanced analysis in the methodological and research tools of the discipline; to prepare them for continued study in the field; and to foster independent, intellectual development. This is consonant with the Council on Undergraduate Research's (CUR) definition of Undergraduate Research as "an inquiry or investigation conducted by an undergraduate student that makes an original intellectual or creative contribution to the discipline."²

The institutionalization of Undergraduate Research as a distinct pedagogy within higher education originated in the field of chemistry as a way to promote independent thinking and original research among undergraduates through an apprenticeship model of education. In 1978, a group of chemists formed CUR as a national organization to support and promote this pedagogy in chemistry programs at private liberal arts colleges.³ Gradually, the organization expanded to include the disciplines of biology, geosciences, mathematics and computer science, physics and astronomy, psychology, and the social sciences.

The fact that the institutionalization of Undergraduate Research originated in the natural sciences is not surprising given the collaborative approach to scholarship that characterizes research in the natural sciences. The nature of lab work facilitates the incorporation of research students in ways that are often incompatible with research in humanities. When the traditional model of Undergraduate Research is predicated on incorporating undergraduate students into a faculty member's research project, the very nature of work in the humanities often makes it difficult for humanities scholars to imagine how to go about mentoring students in Undergraduate Research.

Currently, institutions across the country are encouraging and supporting faculty in all disciplines to incorporate this pedagogy into their departmental programs. The impact of the educational reforms of the 1980s and 1990s continue to give grounding to their efforts. In her work on the impact of The Boyer Commission, Wendy Katkin observes that the commission's 1998 report "was driven by the conviction that research universities are uniquely positioned to offer an undergraduate education that takes advantage of the immense resources of their research and graduate programs and that makes 'research-based learning the standard.'"⁴ In addition to institutional and national emphases on expanding Undergraduate Research opportunities for students across the country, increasing numbers of faculty are recognizing the value of

working with undergraduate students in intensive mentoring relationships for improving their own teaching as well as improving student learning (see chapter 3 for a more detailed discussion).

In 2008, the members of CUR voted to create a new division dedicated to those disciplines in the arts and humanities. While Undergraduate Research has certainly been taking place in a variety of forms in the arts and humanities, it has, for the most part, lacked a formal or centralized forum for resources, funding, and sharing ideas and practices. As a result, the decision by CUR to expand representation marks a potentially significant moment of promise in the development of Undergraduate Research as professors in these disciplines determine how to articulate their role in the national conversation and effect the continuing growth of this pedagogy.

Religious studies faculty who are engaged in mentoring Undergraduate Research recognize several significant benefits for students who pursue the types of focused, intensive research projects that fall within the rubric of Undergraduate Research. These benefits include richer engagement with a focused content area; honing critical thinking, research, writing and presentation skills; and building competence and confidence (see chapter 10 for further discussion). Psychology professor, David Lopatto, has argued that Undergraduate Research helps to “realize the goals of liberal education” because it fosters personal growth and development as well as providing professional skills for students.⁵ These benefits are also identified by students. In a study that examined the summer Undergraduate Research programs of four liberal arts colleges recognized for excellence in Undergraduate Research, Lopatto found that science, social science, and humanities students all rated the benefits of “learning a topic in depth,” “developing a continuing relationship with a faculty member,” “understanding the research process in your field,” and “readiness for more demanding research” very highly.⁶ While the research process will necessarily differ among the natural sciences, social sciences, and the humanities, these findings highlight that there are significant similarities in the value of Undergraduate Research to student development that occur across all three modes of inquiry. Given the recent increase in Undergraduate Research in the humanities, further research on its effectiveness needs to be undertaken.

Offering Criteria for Undergraduate Research in Religious Studies

Precisely because the practice of Undergraduate Research in religious studies is such a recent phenomenon, there are not yet standards in our discipline that define what counts as Undergraduate Research and benchmark what

qualifies as excellence. In order to begin to address these deficiencies, we formed a Working Group of thirteen scholars of religious studies representing a range of subdisciplinary and institutional contexts that gathered several times over a three-year period to give sustained attention to Undergraduate Research in our discipline. The criteria offered here were generated by the Working Group (see Appendix I: Working Statement on Undergraduate Research in Religious Studies).

Learning goals are certainly an important aspect of any pedagogical approach. As faculty and students work together to map these learning goals, they should pay particular attention to what can and ought to be learned in an Undergraduate Research project. When we considered the contributions that Undergraduate Research can make to the learning process of undergraduate students in religious studies departments, we identified several basic learning goals as important aspects of this pedagogy. Undergraduate Research should be framed around the cultivation of independent thinking and developing one's voice and contribution. Seeing familiar and odd conjunctions between topics should reinforce learning and contribute to new frames of understanding. As a form of research, Undergraduate Research requires students to ask questions, conduct investigations, and build methodological skills in systematic ways; it is also incumbent on the student to seek theories, answers, or solutions. In this way, Undergraduate Research is a form of training the student to identify gathered knowledge in a way typical of an experienced practitioner or expert in the discipline, and to share that knowledge in public forums.

Learning Goals of Undergraduate Research in Religious Studies

- to cultivate independent thinking.
- to cultivate an academic voice.
- to develop an original contribution.
- to see familiar and odd conjunctions between topics that could both reinforce learning and contribute to explorations into new frames of understanding.
- to demonstrate capacity for communication of research discoveries through presentations and papers.
- to seek their own theories, answers, or solutions.
- to conduct investigations, building methodological skills in systematic ways.
- to identify gathered knowledge in a way typical of an experienced practitioner.

In our efforts to theorize the foundations of Undergraduate Research in religious studies we identified four criteria that define this pedagogy as distinct from other forms of research in a typical program of study in the discipline. Given that these criteria remain contested within our own Working Group, we offer them in this venue to prompt discussion, dialogue, and debate with our colleagues in the discipline about the role and function of Undergraduate Research in departments of religious studies across the country.

Original Intellectual or Creative Contribution to the Discipline

Our Working Group focused its initial efforts on the question of whether the CUR definition can and should apply to Undergraduate Research in our discipline. While we readily agreed with the first part of the CUR definition that Undergraduate Research constitutes “an inquiry or investigation conducted by an undergraduate student,” we were not in agreement about whether or not it was necessary or even possible for undergraduates to make an “original intellectual or creative contribution to the discipline.” We asked directly and specifically whether, and how, categories of “original” and “contribution” were defined in the field and, from there, whether they were categories that we could, or should, apply to Undergraduate Research. Given that these were categories defined by and through the experience of Undergraduate Research in the natural sciences, we wondered whether or not they were adequate for the purposes and intentions of Undergraduate Research in religious studies. We were hard pressed to replace these categories outright with more appropriate ones because we had not yet acquired a sufficiently clear understanding of how we envisioned the research process and product of Undergraduate Research. As we probed the boundaries and guidelines for conducting Undergraduate Research in the various fields of religious studies, we recognized that our interpretation and application of the categories of “original” and “contribution” would necessarily have to be broad enough to incorporate the multiplicity of methods and approaches, as well as the distinctive models of inquiry, that are extant in our discipline. Moreover, we also acknowledged that the ways in which we understand “original intellectual or creative contribution” will vary depending on the specific project at hand and that this is a reflection of the epistemological variety in the humanities (see chapter 2 for a more detailed discussion).

In an effort to recast the CUR definition in a way that is appropriate for the discipline of religious studies, we interpreted “original intellectual or creative contribution” to include encountering/uncovering new data which are incorporated into existing frameworks, discovering new insights or