

Creating a Culture of Student Inquiry:
The Case for Undergraduate Research

by

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As a sociologist, Dr. Hampton is concerned about culture: its rules, roles, and relationships. These can either enable or impede change.

Background information

- The designation of the University of Maryland as a research extensive and a land-grant institution firmly establish both our teaching and research mission.
- The 2000 University Strategic Plan created the expectation that we would elevate the quality of undergraduate education as well as to build a university-wide culture of excellence in research.
- Even before the 2000 Strategic Plan update there were many faculty and staff who were very interested in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning and issues associated with developing a learner-centered culture.
- The Center for Teaching Excellence (CTE), a unit within the Office of the Associate Provost and Dean for Undergraduate Studies has a good track record for developing trust among the faculty regarding issues of teaching and learning. Our CTE-Lilly Fellows and our American Association for Higher Education Summer Academy teams, dating back to the summer of 1996 have addressed many of the issues associated with enhancing undergraduate education.

The Challenge

- How do we build on our mission as a research university, enhance the undergraduate experience, and create a culture of inquiry? Questions to be considered were:
- How is such a culture developed?
- Who must be involved?
- What must be the guiding principles, and how can these principles be maintained?

Answering these questions were seen as important to our desire to transform the experience and results of an undergraduate education program.

The success of the project depends on issues such as:

- Bridging the gap between teaching faculty uninterested in research and research faculty unconvinced of the value of undergraduate teaching.
- Creating an institutional culture in which the basic approach undergraduate classrooms is the identification of central questions incorporating research and exploration as activities.
- Establishing discovery and analysis as guidelines for the undergraduate student's educational experience.

Easily identifiable impediments

- Fragmentation of students, faculty, and administration on the University of Maryland campus.
- Student and faculty anonymity on a large campus.
- Student acceptance of the role of passive, rather than active, learners. Some suggest that there is a lack of curiosity among undergraduate students as compared with students from past decades.
- Role of adjuncts and part-time instructors in undergraduate courses.
- Historically, faculty have engaged mainly graduate students as partners in research.
- Faculty are only beginning to recognize the potential contribution undergraduates can make to their research agenda. Similarly, the potential for enhancing teaching and learning through research are relatively unexplored.
- In some instances a departmental culture which is anti-new initiatives.

Some positive and encouraging factors

- Some courses already incorporate a number of these concepts
- A research culture already exists on campus
- The campus administration is receptive and supportive
- There are a number of programs on campus designed to involve undergraduates in faculty research or which are designed to provide students with an opportunity to conduct independent research
- Rollinson Fellowships in Chemistry
- Howard Hughes Medical Institute Undergraduate Research fellowships and Catalyst Program
- Women-in-Science and Engineering
- MERIT
- JANUS–History Journal
- Gemstone
- College Park Scholars Discovery Projects
- Work Scholars
- Senior Summer Scholars
- The Child Development Lab
- PSYC440 Experimental Psychology: Cognitive Processes
- COMM 200: Introduction to Critical Methods

Maryland Center for Undergraduate Research

Goals

The goals of the Maryland Center for Undergraduate Research reflect the educational objectives of the university. While the explicit goals emphasize activities and actions designed to lend cohesion to campus research initiatives aimed at undergraduates, the implicit goal is to provide support for the development and maintenance of a culture of inquiry inside and outside the classroom.

The explicit goals encompass the following:

- To collect and disseminate information about Maryland undergraduate research initiatives and opportunities

- To distribute materials about undergraduate research at Maryland to external inquirers
- To be a contact point for Maryland internal inquiries about undergraduate research programs
- To develop a monthly calendar of campus research activities involving undergraduates and posting and maintaining the website for the calendar
- To distribute external information concerning undergraduate research initiatives, programs, funding sources, inquiry-based classroom techniques, etc.
- To create a journal for undergraduate research papers or reports
- To create and maintain a database of campus mentors for undergraduate research
- To collaborate with McKeldin Library staff to develop workshops and other faculty resources for dissemination of information about integrating research into undergraduate education; to develop workshops/information sessions about research for the Undergraduate Research Assistant Program (URAP) participants and other interested students
- To serve as liaison for work-study students interested in participating in a research project
- To serve as a funding source for small faculty incentive stipends
- To develop a collaborative role with the Career Center to promote the idea of research as a component of career development
- To develop ongoing contacts with the Council on Undergraduate Research (CUR) and the National Council on Undergraduate Research (NCUR) as sources of information and possible forums for the presentation of research efforts by University of Maryland undergraduates
- To maintain contacts with the National Science Foundation (NSF), the National Institutes of Health (NIH), the Smithsonian Institution, and other organizations that strongly support the use of undergraduates in substantive research roles.

Hopeful Signs

- The University Librarian has provided us with space (“the final frontier”) in the main library
- Energetic and engaged advisory committee
- The Associate Provost and Dean for Undergraduate Studies sent a letter to all new faculty regarding undergraduate research opportunities
- Council of Deans has endorsed this initiative as something we should do even in a compromised fiscal environment
- Provost sent a letter to all faculty encouraging them to be creative and think of ways that we can build a more inclusive research culture on campus
- First Year Committee is exploring developmentally appropriate ways to more effectively introduce students to the research/creative culture

We are not where we want to be, but we measure small victories. It is a work in progress, however, so one should not declare victory too soon.

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