



Guest Editorial—“The Long Road to Knowledge”

Terry L. Hunt, Ph.D., Professor of Anthropology and Dean of the Robert D. Clark Honors College

As you may know I am an archaeologist, who, over the summer, will be taking some of our Clark Honors College students to study abroad on Easter Island. The native inhabitants call their island Rapa Nui, a tiny speck in the South Pacific famous for its stone statues, or *moai*, that have stood for centuries. Much of my work has focused on the so-called mysteries of Rapa Nui: why were so many of these statues created, and what is the story of the people who created them? I have spent several years of my career attempting to find answers to these questions.

When I first traveled to Rapa Nui to conduct archaeological research, I expected to help confirm the widely-accepted story of how the island’s inhabitants hastened their own destruction by deforesting the island, triggering war, famine, and cultural collapse. Instead, I found evidence that just didn’t fit the popular narrative. As I looked more closely at data from earlier archaeological excavations and at some similar work on other Pacific islands, I realized that much of what was claimed about Rapa Nui’s prehistory was mere speculation. I went on to discover that the downfall of the Rapanui people was actually a consequence of European contact, with their newly introduced diseases and enslavement of the native people. It was near genocide, not “ecocide” that caused the demise of the Rapanui.

If I had never traveled to the island and conducted research for myself, I would have carried on believing the accepted scholarship that others had proposed. Derek Bok, a president emeritus of Harvard, stated that many students enter college with “ignorant certainty”: certain that they know everything or, if not, that there is one straightforward answer to any given problem. He goes on to hope that, as graduating seniors, students exit full of “intelligent confusion.”

The world is an impossibly complex place, and only the naïve among us expect answers that are black and white. When you conduct original research as an undergraduate student – research that no one else has done before – you are contributing directly to expanding human knowledge. The results you get and answers you find may not be clear-cut, may require interpretation and analysis based on context and nuance. You may be required to deduce and extrapolate to find the answers you seek, and at the end of it all may discover that you have even more questions than you started with.

Through the experiential learning that research provides you are also developing the skills to be an independent thinker and researcher; to discover for yourself, instead of taking answers for

granted. Cultivating “intelligent confusion” can be a method for approaching life and living, both in and out of the classroom or research laboratory.

Author Barbara Kingsolver said that “wisdom is like frequent flyer miles or scar tissue; if it does accumulate, that happens by accident while you’re trying to do something else.” You can’t go out searching for wisdom, but it finds you, as you work, as you learn, as you become someone more interesting than you imagined. Don’t trust other people’s word for answers, go out and find the evidence for yourself. Acquire new knowledge. Through creativity, passion, and hard-work you can and will develop your own compass – trust it.