



Guest Editorial—“On Undergraduate Research”

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For me, the ultimate goal of “research” is the creation of something new. That effort generally involves the exploration of something that no other scholar has explored or the re-exploration of a subject using fresh information or recently developed methods in order to gain new understandings. But the key word is “new.” At the undergraduate level, research projects rarely transform a field, or even a subfield. The vast majority of undergraduates have neither the time nor the background to make contributions of such magnitude, and they should not be unrealistically challenged to do so. But they can – and regularly do -- make original research contributions of more modest proportions, contributions that help them grow in intellectual ways that few other exercises can match. The idea of adding something that is uniquely yours to the total quantum of human knowledge is both empowering and exhilarating; and even if that addition is almost invisibly tiny, it is nonetheless a real contribution.

In my own field, history, an excellent research paper can often appear straightforward: a well-told tale, with some subtle insight. Readers who have never done historical research might even assume that the author simply found that story and recounted it. But anyone who has tried to write original history – that is, the history of something no other scholar has ever explored – knows very well that the process is far from straightforward. To piece together a well-informed narrative about some incident or event in the past – however small and closely focused it might be -- students must do a great deal of patient digging in original sources in order to figure out what they think is going on, they must acquire enough background information to embed their contribution in a larger context, and they must learn to interpret and evaluate the validity of their sources. They must then make difficult decisions about how to conceptualize and structure their story in ways that will allow it to convey historical implications and insights. They must make judgments about what to include and what to leave out, and they must determine where to begin the story as well as how and when to end it. They must be part detective, part philosopher, and part literary artist.

When all of those factors come together in a first-rate research paper, the result gives students not only the right to feel genuinely proud of their achievements but also the deep satisfaction of having successfully completed an intellectually difficult task. They correctly realize that they have brought into being something that was not there before, regardless of whether anyone else fully appreciates what they have accomplished. They have made an original contribution. No wonder so many UO graduates looking back on their undergraduate years consider a research project – however frustrating it might have been at the time -- to stand out as the most valuable experience of their education.