

Walking an Unclear Path: Challenges and Accomplishments Associated with Encouraging Undergraduate Research at a Teaching-Intensive University

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Currently, many institutions are facing challenges with regard to the recruitment and retention of students. One way to partially address these challenges is to engage undergraduate students in research, as this can increase students' satisfaction with their educational experience (Bauer and Bennett, n.d.). Individual programs and institutions vary in how undergraduate research experiences are structured. Some have undergraduate research methods courses incorporated into curricula, others encourage high-achieving students to enroll in honors programs to participate in research, and others encourage individual faculty to train undergraduate students in research on a one-on-one basis utilizing an independent study format. Some have funding specifically for undergraduate research projects.

In this presentation, information was presented regarding the recruitment and retention challenges associated with a mid-sized regional teaching-intensive institution. University level resources for undergraduate research were outlined, and challenges associated with a limited structure for undergraduate research at the program level were identified.

To meet the needs of an undergraduate student's research interest in consumer economics given this context, an independent study format was utilized. At this particular institution, a maximum of nine independent study credits can be applied to a student's graduation requirements. During a summer session, the student enrolled in a one-credit independent study to provide them with a basic foundation of research methods. The student was required to complete a series of readings from an introductory research methods text (Patten, 2007) as well as read published student research in the area of consumer economics to develop an understanding of expectations for student-level research projects. Additionally, they were required to engage in weekly one-on-one conversations about the readings with the faculty supervisor, and were required to write reflections for each reading addressing the content of the reading, what new information they gained from the reading, and questions the reading generated for them.

In a subsequent Spring semester, the student enrolled in another independent study credit to further their research skills. The focus of this independent study was completion of the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI) modules, as completing these are a requirement of the Institutional Review Board before students, faculty, and staff can engage in research.

As a result of these independent study experiences, the student was able to articulate the steps involved in conducting research with human subjects, developed a basic understanding of quantitative and qualitative research designs, and was able to make connections between consumer economics and other fields of study with regard to their developing specific research interests. The student also reported an increased level of confidence in applying for graduate programs and successfully completing a Master's level thesis and co-authored a consumer economics-related encyclopedia article that was accepted for publication. Based on these experiences, engaging undergraduate students in consumer economics research may have a positive influence on graduate program recruitment and retention. A specific challenge related to engaging undergraduate students in research at teaching-intensive institutions is for institutions to develop meaningful incentives for faculty to engage undergraduates in research activities.

References

Bauer, K. W., & Bennett, J. S. (n.d.). *Alumni perceptions used to assess undergraduate research experience*. Retrieved from <http://www.udel.edu/RAIRE/Alumniper.pdf>

Patten, M. (2007). *Understanding research methods* (6th Ed.). Glendale, CA: Pyrczak Publishing.

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