THE ROLE OF RESEARCH IN UNDERGRADUATE EDUCATION
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When I was asked to write this piece on the role of research in undergraduate education, my first thoughts were related to the foundation in research skills that undergraduates gain through their participation in such programs. These skills prepare students for moving into the more focused community of scholars in graduate studies. Beyond technical proficiencies, the relationships formed with faculty mentors not only help increase students’ understanding of an academic discipline, it gives faculty an in-depth understanding of the student, which can help a professor write a student an expansive recommendation letter for graduate school. But as I examined this subject further, I discovered that participation in undergraduate research may play a larger role in the academic lives of these students than merely preparation for graduate school.

The National Conferences on Undergraduate Research (www.ncur.org) believes that undergraduate research is crucial to pedagogy in the 21st century, citing evidence that inquiry-based learning, which encompasses all aspects of research, including creative endeavors, fosters increased levels of student learning. Undergraduate research, then, enhances not only disciplinary skills, but also skills that can be transferred to other domains, allowing for added benefits in academic areas outside of a student’s specialization. Expertise developed may include improved critical thinking and even self-management skills associated with organization and discipline, which are necessary to complete a research project. In my experience, some of the undergraduates who are best at skills such as time management are the elite student athletes. These skills are developed through years of experience in balancing training in the sport with other aspects of the person’s life. Similarly, sustained, in-depth participation in undergraduate research – of the kind fostered by the Honors College – may facilitate the development of an “elite undergraduate scholar” through gaining expertise in an academic field and in self-management skills.

Additionally, emergent research cited by the American Psychological Association in the March 2010 issue of Monitor on Psychology suggests that today’s college students – the so-called Millennials or Generation Y – respond better to multifaceted forms of learning that are relevant to their lives. Undergraduate research opportunities provide a complementary milieu for learning in addition to that of a traditional in-classroom setting, enhancing the students’ overall educational experience. Also, the tendency of Millennials to be experiential learners who seek to apply ideas to real word situations resonates with many aspects of the undergraduate research model.

In sum, the goal of undergraduate research is not to narrowly focus the student. Rather, participation in undergraduate research has the potential to seamlessly integrate into many aspects of their lives, promoting the hallmark of the Honors College: student attainment.

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