

Professor Argues that Community Colleges Need "Authentic" Undergraduate Research Programs

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In the past two decades, the community college has experienced tremendous growth. By providing affordable, accessible, and rigorous academic programs, the community college has come to occupy a significant place in American higher education. For those of us who teach and administer programs in the humanities, two issues deserve our immediate attention: the ever-increasing numbers of diverse, new learners enrolling in our classes and the urgent need to reassert the value of a humanities-based education. I'd like to propose that by establishing an authentic undergraduate research program in the humanities we can address both of these compelling realities.

Any undergraduate research/creative program shares a familiar core of essential features. Whether the program is designed as a capstone experience or embedded throughout the curriculum and whether the program is administered within a single academic department or directed by a humanities-wide alliance of stakeholders, those defining characteristics remain stable and ever-present. We might identify those commonalities in the following way: a collaborative student-faculty relationship; a student-managed independent research/creative activity; an active learning environment; an effort to create new knowledge; a public sharing of results; and an evaluative process that measures quality. Any undergraduate research program in the humanities in the community college, then, must address and promote each of these individual features.

The benefits of independent research or creative activity are well-documented. These opportunities strengthen communication skills, develop essential critical and analytical strategies, nurture an appreciation for diversity, and promote the integration of knowledge from several disciplines. In addition, such an initiative demands applied learning, champions ethical behaviors, and demonstrates the need for collaboration. In short, such an opportunity should help to better shape the student who will succeed in this newer, more competitive, and globally-oriented world.

I think that most of us were attracted to the humanities because of its transformative pedagogy. Regardless of our discipline or departmental affiliation, we all share a pedagogy – in very real and daily ways – that embraces active learning, that delights in interdisciplinary methodologies, and that ultimately empowers our students. If we are to effectively educate the next generation of engaged and active citizens, we must consider the ways in which we can incorporate these research/creative opportunities into the curriculum. As we transition from one century to the next and from one model of teaching and learning to the next, we should make certain that the humanities occupies a central role in that change.

By keeping this opportunity before us, we help to define our ever-evolving disciplines and to promote our continuing vitality and relevance.

In an effort to begin this conversation, the *Community College Humanities Review* will soon publish my article "Promoting Undergraduate Research and Creative Opportunities at the Community College." In the article, I try to offer some practical advice to those faculty and administrators interested in establishing such a program. Because the emergence of undergraduate research initiatives in the 1960s were tied to the sciences, in part as a response to perceived Soviet advances, the opportunities for undergraduate research in the humanities have always been more difficult. It is even more difficult to establish a robust and meaningful undergraduate research program at the community college. Indeed, there are many significant obstacles to overcome in promoting such curricula revision at the community college.

In some departments, faculty, for a variety of reasons, may not choose to support such an initiative. Some faculty may harbor the belief that because of the wide ranging abilities of students such an initiative remains beyond the grasp of the majority of these students. In short, some faculty and staff will argue that community college students are not able to participate in this kind of activity. Other obstacles include a lack of institutional support and the lack of adequate resources to operate such a program. My approach is to imagine a partnership between key faculty and administrators and to plot a series of essential tasks: inventory of current practices, humanities-wide workshop, development of potential curricular models, strategic planning, and implementation. Hopefully the article will provoke further discussion and more comprehensive design and assessment strategies.

As representatives of the diverse disciplines housed in the humanities, we are in an ideal position to influence curricula reform. As critical and reflective teachers, we know best how to prepare students for the ethical and intellectual challenges of this century. Over 170 years ago, Emerson, in his now iconic "The American Scholar," dismissed the graduating student-scholar as the "parrot of other men's thinking." By allowing our students the opportunity to participate in such a research/creative initiative, we begin to rescue them from such "sere remains." Such a program champions the fundamental values of a humanities curriculum: to integrate knowledge and information across disciplinary boundaries; to promote a global perspective; to develop strong communication skills; to highlight moral and ethical responsibilities; and to encourage applied learning. These opportunities will only enhance intellectual development, creating a life-long passion for learning. ■■■■