Teaching Undergraduate Research in Religious Studies offers scholars working in the field a refreshingly frank and thorough introduction to the definition of undergraduate research, an overview of various approaches to undergraduate research, and an examination of the opportunities and challenges afforded by undergraduate research. Based on the discussions of a thirteen-member Working Group, the volume benefits from the group’s diverse institutional and research backgrounds. Faculty from public and private institutions with research ranging from New Testament to African American Studies to contemporary Hinduism speak to the transformative promise that undergraduate research holds for the field of religious studies.

Throughout the volume, the authors helpfully affirm and question the definition of undergraduate research—“an inquiry or investigation conducted by an undergraduate student that makes an original intellectual or creative contribution to the discipline”—as outlined by the Council on Undergraduate Research (p. 3). In Part I, “Defining Undergraduate Research in Religious Studies,” the three chapters explore “original intellectual or creative contributions” for religious studies students, best practices in (and challenges to) mentoring undergraduate research, and issues in theory and method. In each chapter, the authors use their own insights and experiences, as well as their knowledge of the existing literature, to acquaint the reader with the most vital issues. For example, in “Mentoring Undergraduate Research,” John R. Lanci urges faculty to think about “the nature and actual depth of the institutional commitment” to undergraduate research, as well as having thought through “how one decides whom to mentor” and how to “check one’s need for control of the learning process” (p. 41-42). In a similar way, Rebecca Todd Peters and Bernadette McNary-Zak show in “Contributing to the Discipline” five different ways one might go about defining and implementing undergraduate research to demonstrate that no “cookie cutter” model for this work exists.

In Part II, “Approaching Undergraduate Research in Religious Studies,” the five chapters explore the benefits and dilemmas that emerge when employing archival, cultural studies, ethnographic, historical, and textual approaches in undergraduate research. Each chapter offers invaluable guidance into its specific approach as the contributors explain
and analyze tasks they have assigned in light of pedagogical successes and struggles. For example, in “Working with Texts,” Lynn R. Huber and Robin Rinehart explain how they adapted to situations in which students could not read the texts in their original language, while Paul O. Myhre clearly outlines the skills a student would need to engage in archival research. In many ways, these chapters prove the most useful as they provide readers with specific assignments, strategies, questions, and dilemmas to consider.

The last section of the book, entitled “Proposing Standards for Research in Religious Studies,” addresses the process of undergraduate research and the larger issue of institutional support. While this section seems to repeat some of the ideas explored elsewhere in the volume, these chapters give the reader more information about how to organize student research and the difference a supportive institutional environment can make.

For religious studies faculty who have heard the increasingly frequent “undergraduate research” buzz and been urged to participate, but have had little time to examine what this means for them and for their students, this volume provides a welcome introduction and foundation. The volume is clear, practical, and honest in its approach to both the opportunities and challenges afforded by this type of endeavor. As might be expected, the volume highlights the benefits, especially for students. And the voices of students who have engaged in undergraduate research appear throughout the volume; a student wrote the book’s afterward. These students underscore the power of this pedagogical approach. Contributors also emphasize the ways that undergraduate research is personally satisfying, can help our own research agendas, enhance our teaching, and aid our professional development (p. 39-40).

At the same time, I (and perhaps others will wonder with me): Are the pedagogical and professional rewards worth it? Given the multiple demands on faculty time, every second becomes a precious commodity accompanied by a painful cost/benefit analysis. However, as the book reminds us, the humanities have lagged behind other fields in undergraduate research. Why are we so different? The contributors cite lack of institutional support, the dominance and “the limitations of the scientific model of Undergraduate Research” (p. 11), and our lack of training. As David C. Ratke writes, “as a scholar in the humanities I was not trained to work collaboratively in teams” (p. 110). Are these reasons to opt out of undergraduate research? Are we content with the ways we’ve been formed as scholars? Perhaps, as the book urges us to consider, we need to more fully interrogate the meaning and purpose of scholarship in the humanities and in religious studies in order to better address these questions.