My institution, Elon University, already has a vibrant and thriving undergraduate research (UR) program, and the number of humanities projects undertaken each year is impressive. Elon also boasts strong participation each year at NCUR, with a number of humanities projects accepted annually (though not from the Department of World Languages and Cultures). Still, we could still do better: the ratio of sciences to humanities projects at Elon is quite striking in its disparity, approximately 4 to 1 in any given year. The Office of Undergraduate Research acknowledges that students in the humanities, and even more so the arts, do not take advantage of the opportunities for UR nearly as much as the STEM disciplines. Why is this? Some of it comes down to semantics. But much of it is quite simply perception.

What’s in a Name? A Lingering Identity Crisis

The Department of Foreign Languages at Elon University where I teach French just changed its name. Henceforth, we are the Department of World Languages and Cultures. My colleagues and I recognized the need for the change, but it was not without much discussion that spanned several months. Several incarnations of the current name were bandied about, and we all had our own reasons for our preferences. In the end, it came down to grappling with the plurality of the word “culture.” Yes, we teach about so many different cultures in our fields, but we also teach about Culture and its inextricable link to language. In the end, we voted for the name that best characterizes our mission and our identity, and we chose a name that we feel accurately includes each language taught in our department. This was not an easy task for us, and the change was precipitated by not only a lingering identity crisis in terms of our perception of ourselves, but also and equally importantly by others’ perceptions of who we are and what we do.

One of the biggest misconceptions about what language professors do from those outside academe in particular is that we only teach the language and that what we primarily teach is the skill of speaking. When most lay people think of language teachers, they likely think of grammar. We do teach grammar. And some of us even research it. Research in and about another language indisputably implies...
research in and about another culture as well. We research literary theory. We study defining moments of culture and civilization. We are scholars of history and literature. Some of us are service-learning scholars, while others focus on the scholarship of teaching and learning (SOTL). We research religion and gastronomy. We also study politics and keep up with current events in our target language/culture. And we do all that in another language.

In sum, World Languages and Cultures faculty devote a fair amount of time to scholarship, and this is evident in the depth and breadth of our publications that emerge annually. We strive to engage our students in our research interests through our teaching in order to show how languages foster advanced critical thinking and are inherently interdisciplinary. While students in World Languages and Cultures do conduct faculty mentored research every year, the percentage of those students who go on to present at Elon’s annual Student Undergraduate Research Forum (SURF) is relatively low. We are doing our best to embody the Elon model of the teacher-scholar, and yet it seems that only a small fraction of our students actually endeavor to conduct UR through the program. I have a few theories about this, which I will broach momentarily.

Keeping the perspective on identity in mind, I believe Elon acknowledges that in order to move forward and continue to serve as a national model in this arena, it is imperative that we develop better resources and implementation strategies that are specific to the needs, processes, and desired outcomes of A&H research, rather than trying to adapt methodology and pedagogical tools that were created expressly for STEM disciplines. Though we have a thriving program, we still have a lot to learn and should welcome new ideas that will further enhance our offerings. Like all UR programs around the country and world, we should seek to develop arts and humanities-oriented workshops for future mentors, develop and offer arts and humanities-specific UR development for students, and, we should consider changing the name of the office and program to a title that is perceptively more inclusive of the arts and humanities.

Furthermore, it is not just the name that gives both current and prospective students and faculty a very precise perception of the UR programs at many institutions. It is also the visual representation and the web presence as well. It does not advance the case either that the two photos on the web for the Perspectives on Undergraduate Research Mentoring (PURM) main page are limited to students and mentors engaged in laboratory work. Basically, the visual images associated with many UR programs and journal websites often send a clear message, unintentionally though it may be, that inherently excludes the arts and humanities.

**Bridging the gap: Increasing A&H Undergraduate Research participation**

As humanities scholars, we should seek to reveal the reasons behind the disparity between STEM discipline student research participation and our own in hopes of enhancing participation from A&H faculty and students, alike. Undergraduate Research programs need both, but sometimes it seems as if the humanities faculty needed to mentor the students are in shorter supply than the students themselves. Professors/mentors play the crucial role of identifying talent and encouraging students to harness and develop their skills and ideas. It is our job to inform students of the scope and possibilities for research in our fields.

There are many obstacles to our success in this arena, and the principle obstacle may well be time. I do not mean to imply that faculty members are not willing to take the time to mentor students. On the contrary, many of us already do, and many more would like to. But the hard truth is that it is extremely time-consuming, and the time commitment to compensation ratio (if one even exists) makes it a very hard sell. Another obstacle that causes it to be more time-consuming than it has to be is the lack of student preparation and ability to conduct research at an advanced level. Many students do not even
begin to think about research until the end of their 3rd year, and they come to the process ill-prepared and uninformed about potential topics, research methods, databases and a plethora of other subjects.

I believe it would serve all institutions of higher education that seek to enhance or even create new UR programs to form a sort of A&H task force, a team of faculty members who are chosen to advocate for arts and humanities UR specifically. In the same way that I feel it advantageous for the Department of World Languages and Cultures to remain a unified force when it often seems all too natural and easy to split off into our own individual language bubbles only to concern ourselves with our language-specific curricular needs, I am not at all suggesting that UR programs split off into discipline-specific sections. What I am advocating for is acknowledging the need for customized plans according to disciplines in order to enhance the program holistically. We need to learn about and develop successful models of application and assessment tools designed by and for scholars in the arts and humanities, not simply adapting methodology and rubrics based on STEM discipline models.

For example, an A&H task force could be elected based on qualities such as the diversity of faculty disciplines and, thus, their ability to represent both arts and humanities fields in a well-rounded manner; passion for and interest in UR (demonstrated through involvement and experience as mentors as well as a genuine desire to enhance UR as a whole); and concrete evidence of excellence in scholarship via publications, exhibitions, and the evident successes of students who have done UR with them. Easier said than done. This would constitute a significant service commitment on the part of the faculty, not to mention the financial resources that would need to be allocated for on-going training and professional development for this task force as well as supplies and resources for workshops.

In general, A&H faculty could use some mentoring themselves on mentoring, and students quite simply need to get involved in the process as of their first year in college. These proposed ideas may take time, planning, and funding that many programs simply do not and will not have for a while; however, there are other ways to start to facilitate this process without excessive supplementary resources if faculty can simply identify potential mentees early. As Paul Miller, director of Elon’s Office of Undergraduate Research, has suggested recently, students can receive UR credit for any activity related to research. They can use the time and receive the credit for preparation of a future project. They can also receive credit for learning research methods by helping a faculty mentor with their own research.

For example, Associate Professor of English Dr. Crystal Anderson teaches courses in American and African American literature, American studies, and Asian popular culture. But she also currently works on several digital humanities projects around Korean popular culture, one of which uses Elon students as research assistants. This is key, and this is where humanities professors would do well to follow the STEM disciplines research model of collaboration. In her commentary “Enhancing Undergraduate Research in the Arts and the Humanities,” Cathy W. Levenson affirms this sentiment as well, stating that the office of Undergraduate Research in the Arts and Humanities at her institution encourages A&H faculty to “use the ‘science model’ of UR.” She insists that the process is “a continuum that begins with getting students interested in research and later involves helping them identify their interests, find a mentor, and become actively involved in the research process” and that his process applies equally to the sciences and the humanities.

That being said, in the sciences, we often see teams of students and faculty working on projects together. Students get involved early in the process of assisting faculty with their research, get familiar with it, and often end up co-authoring articles with faculty members. Collaboration plays a major role in the sciences with students in the role of research
assistants. While the idea of a research assistant in the humanities is almost unheard of, it would serve both student and faculty well to consider this model, as Levenson points out. She explains that UR projects in the humanities “are often independent endeavors with students working on topics related only tangentially to the faculty member’s own research,” and that although “the one-on-one aspect of this model can be beneficial to the student, the faculty member gains little from the relationship.”

For A&H scholars, having students search databases, gather sources and type up properly formatted bibliographies, for example, would be mutually beneficial. Although some professors might be reluctant to suggest that students perform such tasks, Levenson is convinced that it is “precisely this type of work that students not only need to see, but need to actively participate in to become productive researchers.” I could not agree more.

One strategy that some of my colleagues in World Languages and Cultures and I have begun employing as well is approaching students about their senior capstone projects early on while we are currently teaching something that we intend to publish or present in some shape or form in the near future. We will tap certain students for their talent and suggest that they conduct research on a topic directly related to our research, something that we have covered in a class they are taking. We actively promote the mentor/mentee relationship in an effort to explain how having a professor whose research agenda actively involves this topic is extremely beneficial for the student. Students have responded favorably to my suggestions in the past year, and working with them on topics that I am pursuing has helped me to stay current and dialogue on topics on which I would otherwise be writing silently, alone at my desk.

**Conclusion**

So, then where does that leave the humanities? Although I do believe that A&H scholars need more customized resources for faculty and student training, and that the perception of UR in general needs to change, the future looks bright for humanities research at the undergraduate level. The fact that this issue of *PURM* is devoted to the question of its enhancement is certainly a step in the right direction, and we can only hope that it will spark conversations in other academic circles around the nation.

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**Works Cited**