Mentoring religious studies students in undergraduate research (UR) has been one of the most rewarding experiences of my career so far. As a mentor I have had the opportunity to work alongside of students who have developed thoughtful research questions, have been engaging conversation partners, and have shared with me a passion for exploring the intricacies of a topic that some might find “nerdish.” I have enjoyed fieldtrips to nearby libraries with students, supported them in study abroad in conjunction with their research, and nervously watched students present their first conference papers and accept awards for their work. Moreover, some of my research students have prompted me expand my thinking about particular texts and traditions, requiring me to explore research areas other than my own, and I owe them a debt of gratitude for teaching me in these ways. These experiences and rewards make me an advocate for UR in the Humanities and I recommend it to any colleague willing and able to dedicate the time and effort to mentoring students in on-going and multi-stage research projects. The rewards of mentoring UR are great, but, like most things worth doing, successfully mentoring students in UR requires dedication and commitment.

While the religion department at my graduate institution, Emory University, spent a great deal of effort preparing us for classroom teaching, there was little mention of the possibility of UR. Consequently, I was taken by surprise when, on a job interview, I was asked about my ideas for mentoring students in original religious studies research. My surprise underscores the fact that in many Humanities disciplines, including religious studies, UR is a relatively new idea and practice. Unlike disciplines in which students have traditionally helped run studies, set up experiments, and collect data, in religious studies these types of practices are relatively unheard of. Similarly, the mention of multi-authored articles or articles co-written with students might elicit questions and confusion from religious studies faculty, as these are simply not part of our field. Attempts to persuade religious studies faculty to mentor UR students with the suggestion that this work might somehow benefit our own research and CVs is problematic and belies the fact that the dominant UR model emerged within the sciences. Thus, while there is clearly a need for further discussions among those in the Arts and Humanities on what UR looks like, there is a corresponding need to educate administrators and faculty in other disciplines on its contours and practices as well.

For instance, while I am lucky to work at an institution that accepts some version of “reading and writing” as an explanation of how my mentee will spend her time on the application for summer UR funding, I can imagine that in some contexts these activities...
seems less worthy of financial support than doing field work or conducting experiments. In other words, retro-fitting Arts and Humanities disciplines into a UR model designed in for the Sciences sometimes feels a little clunky and makes some feel the need to defend our forms of scholarly inquiry and production as “real research.”

A few years ago I had the opportunity to be a part of a two-year consultation, funded by a grant from the Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion, defining and describing UR in religious studies. On account of this consultation, I had the opportunity to talk with a number of people in my field and in Arts and Humanities more broadly about UR. One thing that makes faculty in these areas hesitant about mentoring UR is the definition of UR offered by the Council of Undergraduate Research (CUR). This national organization explains that UR is, “An inquiry or investigation conducted by an undergraduate student that makes an original intellectual or creative contribution to the discipline.” The sticking point for many is the assumption that successful UR endeavors result in an original contribution to the discipline. For some fields, this makes the possibility of a student doing UR difficult. In my case, as someone whose work is primarily within the field of biblical studies, making a contribution to my discipline requires working familiarity with ancient languages, including biblical Hebrew, koine Greek, and Latin. Students in small and mid-sized universities that embrace UR may not have a chance to take courses in these languages, let alone develop the skills needed to engage texts at the level required to make an original contribution to the discipline. I have heard similar perspectives from colleagues who work on other ancient religious textual traditions, including those whose primary sources are in Sanskrit or classical Arabic and I can imagine that faculty who do ethnographic or community-based research is based in contexts with particular dialects or languages not often taken by undergraduates might share this view. As a result, in order to mentor students in UR many of us have to redefine what is meant by “original contribution” or we require students work on topics or questions that are somewhat ancillary to our own fields of study. In biblical studies, for instance, this might mean having a student work on how a particular text or tradition is interpreted in a later context, such as how a biblical tradition is interpreted in modern film, rather than have the student work on the text itself. While this type of research may be original and creative, it is not necessarily something that helps the faculty mentor’s academic work along. Furthermore, if the student cannot work in the advisor’s field because of some academic limitation, such as facility with a language, the mentor is sometimes required to learn the related field along with the student. While this can be a way for a mentor to expand her own knowledge base, this also limits the number of students a mentor can responsibly advise. In

My intention in noting some of the difficulties associated with doing Arts and Humanities UR in a model designed for the Sciences is not to dismiss the types of research students can do, nor to discourage faculty in Arts and Humanities from mentoring students. Rather, I hope to shed light on the need for conversation among those of committed to UR on the differences between disciplines and the limitations of the widely accepted definition of UR. As I mentioned at the outset, mentoring students in their various research projects has been one of the most fulfilling parts of my job as a university professor. It requires time and intentionality, but in the end both I and my students are better off for having taken the UR path.

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1 http://www.cur.org/