What is Undergraduate Research in the Humanities?

Involvement with Undergraduate Research (UR) is something with which we have both been engaged since our own undergraduate days when we pursued UR with mentors in our respective fields of art history and religious studies. As newly appointed assistant professors, each of us found ourselves rethinking UR from a faculty perspective as students came to us asking to pursue research projects that extended beyond classroom expectations and education. With a dearth of resources available regarding how to think about UR within the humanities, much less in our particular fields, we trusted our instincts and experience and began to improvise based on our own undergraduate experiences. By necessity, we involved our students in the process of defining and applying UR in our respective institutional and departmental contexts. As we have talked with humanities faculty over the years, we have found that this is pretty much what many of us have to do, trust our instincts as teachers and researchers as we work with individual students to create meaningful research opportunities.

While this type of entrepreneurial spirit is in keeping with the resolve for vibrant and engaged pedagogy, we also began to notice a range of quality among student research presentations that we saw at our own institutions as well as at regional and national conferences. Our personal commitment to UR and our interest in establishing broader criteria for our field related to UR led us to pursue a more rigorous conversation within the field of Religious Studies about the standards, definitions, and expectations for Undergraduate Research in our field. The book *Teaching Undergraduate Research in Religious Studies* offers a collection of essays by several members of our Working Group that help to set the stage for more rigorous discussions about UR, not only in the field of Religious Studies, but in the humanities more broadly.

Over time, we have come to recognize that many of the challenges and concerns that shape the nature of UR in Religious Studies are challenges and concerns that face other disciplines in the humanities as well. Understanding and discussing the unique aspects of UR in the humanities is particularly important given the origins of (and continued dominance of) UR in the STEM disciplines. It is
of singular importance that research in the humanities is neither quantitative nor laboratory-oriented. Rather, it tends to be more fluid, theoretical, and speculative, while still being grounded in rigorous research.

Teaching the art of theoretical sophistication, rigorous research, and well-structured argumentation to undergraduates poses a unique set of challenges to faculty whose research agendas are grounded in tools and skills tied to specialized training. Faculty in the humanities who seek to mentor and train students may confront student limitations in intellectual development, knowledge-base, and language competency. Mentoring students in the humanities often means teaching them the steps of the process – designing a research project that begins with a rigorous and meaningful research question, securing and weighing evidence, surveying the existing scholarship in the field, finding their voice, and taking a position.

This process mirrors the nature of inquiry in humanities disciplines. As humanities faculty know well, research in these disciplines addresses questions of meaning and value in ways that acknowledge the ambiguity that frames human experience. Exploring this ambiguity and the complexity of human experience necessitates employing multiple methodological approaches from a variety of disciplinary lenses. Just as the lenses of art, literature, music, religion, history, theatre, philosophy, language, and culture allow scholars to examine the complexity of human experience, this very emphasis on “meaning making” is also at the center of what is valuable about UR for students in our disciplines. Undergraduate Research in humanities disciplines provides students with a unique opportunity to develop the art of interpreting human experience under the mentorship and guidance of scholars who have made this their life’s work.

Overview of Contents
While this book is written by Religious Studies professors who are mentoring UR in our discipline, many of the observations, insights, and arguments presented in the book cross disciplinary boundaries. This is true for at least two reasons. First, the field of Religious Studies (and these authors) crosses disciplinary boundaries in ways that allow for developing conversation across these boundaries. Second, the similarities in many of the issues that humanities faculty face as we mentor UR are transferable across these boundaries as well.

In particular, Part I of the book is focused on Defining Undergraduate Research in Religious Studies, but the discussions and questions raised here about how (and whether) our undergraduate students are able to “contribute to the discipline,” about how to mentor students, and about methodological frameworks for student work are all issues that are relevant to conversations in the humanities about UR more broadly.

Part II, while focusing on the experiences of Religious Studies faculty and students, is oriented around five different methodological approaches to research (archival, religion and culture, ethnographic, historical, and textual) that faculty in our fields and disciplines encounter as well. As such, much of this material can serve as a starting point for ongoing conversations about how humanities students navigate method and develop more sophisticated methodological approaches in their UR work.

The final section of the book, Part III, highlights the need to develop broader institutional benchmarks for excellence and how this pertains to both disciplinary standards and institutional supports for

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Undergraduate Research. The final chapter in this section is written by a former student who reflects on the importance of engaging in UR and how this helped to shape and form her educational experience and to prepare her for both the work world and for her future graduate studies. The value of the experience, as she narrates it, is something that could be shared with humanities students across disciplines as they consider whether or not to engage in UR as part of their undergraduate programs.

Criteria for Undergraduate Research
One of the ongoing contributions of this Working Group and this volume is to promote rigorous dialogue about the standards and requirements of Undergraduate Research, not only in the field of Religious Studies but in the humanities more broadly. To this end, the Working Group developed a statement that we intended as a starting point for these conversations. While these standards were designed from the perspective of the field of Religious Studies, we offer them here for broader debate in the humanities as a starting point for helping all of us to think about questions of quality and rigor as we shape our collective expectations for what makes UR in the humanities a distinctive contribution to higher education.

Religious Studies Statement on Undergraduate Research
The location of Religious Studies within the Humanities raises important issues concerning epistemologies, social locations, and student formation and development within UR. The significance of contextual influences upon a student means that one’s location within the broader world impacts the questions one raises, the approaches one uses, what one sees as a meaningful research agenda, and the goals and means through which one conducts and evaluates research. Questions and commitments concerning the origins, formation, and validation of knowledge necessarily shape one’s interpretation of an “original intellectual or creative contribution” in Religious Studies. In addition, the multidisciplinary nature of Religious Studies encourages a variety of methodological approaches to the study of religion. Each approach, in turn, provides distinctive understandings of the nature of knowledge, including its recognition, adjudication, appropriation, application, and significance. While all disciplines within the Humanities foster attention to how UR shapes the student, the distinctive subject matter of religion connects the student to his/her research in unique ways.

Given these considerations, we recommend that Undergraduate Research in Religious Studies be defined by the following criteria:

1. Selective. Undergraduate Research is selective insofar as it is most appropriate for those students who have the capacity and the desire to envision, sustain, and complete a complex, high quality, and nuanced analysis.

2. Collaborative. Undergraduate Research is collaborative as faculty and student(s) work together in their formulation of the research project. This collaborative effort represents a unique relationship between faculty and student(s) in which both parties contribute to the research agenda and the final product. The extent of collaboration exists along a continuum. At one end, faculty assign a topic and together with the student(s) cooperate in developing the research process; at the other end, faculty and student(s) are in a collegial relationship in which they work together on a common research project resulting in a co-authored final product.

3. Public. Undergraduate Research is public insofar as it is of such quality that its public dissemination is warranted and expected. Public dissemination can assume a variety of

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2 The Council on Undergraduate Research defines UR as “[A]n inquiry or investigation conducted by an undergraduate student that makes an original intellectual or creative contribution to the discipline.”(http://www.cur.org/about_cur/fact_sheet/ )
4. **Original intellectual or creative contribution to the discipline.** The heart of UR centers on the criterion of “an original intellectual or creative contribution to the discipline.” “Original intellectual or creative contribution” can be understood as

- encountering/uncovering new data which is incorporated into existing frameworks
- discovering new insights or new data that alter the boundaries and/or contours of the field
- drawing novel comparisons or making heretofore unrecognized connections within the field
- making new assessments of current knowledge/interpretations based on such standards
- creating new visions or interpretive structures that re-integrate/reconfigure what is already known or accepted
- applying existing interpretive structures in a new way or in new contexts in order to unfold distinctive integrations/configurations within the field.

Some approaches that produce original and creative work within UR in Religious Studies include the following: archival, ethnographic, textual studies, historical studies, cultural studies. The multidisciplinary character of Religious Studies means “original” or “creative” contributions will vary depending on the specific project at hand.³

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³ Statement drafted by the members of a Consultation on Mentoring Undergraduate Research (April 2007) and revised by the members of the Working Group on Undergraduate Research in Religious Studies (September 2007). Members of the Working Group on Undergraduate Research in Religious Studies include: Jeff Brackett, Mark Gstohl, Lynn Huber, Nadia Lahutsky, John Lanci, Bernadette McNary-Zak, Carolyn Jones Medine, Paul Myhre, Maggie Odell, Rebecca Todd Peters, David Ratke, and Robin Rinehart.