In my earliest foray into undergraduate research, I think I learned as many lessons about what not to do as I did what to do. At my suggestion, a student in my General Studies course planned to turn her semester research paper into an article-length manuscript suitable for publication. The article, now under consideration at a leading undergraduate research journal, is exemplary. In the process of writing it, the student made tremendous intellectual progress, expanding the scope and depth of her argument and quadrupling her literature review on top of mastering the conventions of the discipline of German Studies. I am impressed by and proud of her effort.

While it was highly rewarding to help the student move through this learning process, in retrospect it’s clear that mentoring her project was an add-on. To mentor her project effectively required time away from my classes, my service activities, or my own scholarship. It also did little to advance my growth as a scholar: although the topic lies within my general area of expertise, the specific text chosen by the student has been well-studied by professionals and is of more interest to me as a teacher than as a scholar. There is still plenty for undergraduates to learn by reading and studying the text, but there will be few major scholarly advances here.

Midway through this process, I read a commentary in a teaching blog or listserv—I no longer recall the source—explaining that faculty in the STEM disciplines regularly integrate undergraduate research students into their (the faculty members’) research agendas, as opposed to “directing” their students’ topics, as I was doing. The commentary suggested that we in the humanities emulate our STEM colleagues and plug students into our own projects. The benefits are clear. We as faculty members gain research productivity: not only are we not distracted by someone else’s project, we also have a committed, intelligent brain helping us move our project forward. Meantime, students may in fact gain more than they would writing a single-author project mentored by a faculty advisor. By working shoulder-to-shoulder with an expert in the field, students not only learn research methods up close and personal, but also engage in the type of investigative, inquisitive dialogue that characterizes academic research and the pursuit of knowledge. In short, mentoring/teaching and scholarship are combined into one effort that benefits both parties.

Selecting Projects
After reading that listserv commentary, I decided to take on undergraduate research projects only
if I can merge them with my own research agenda. Two possibilities have emerged:

In some cases, I seek students willing to participate in my ongoing research. For example, I have been working slowly on a project on Judgment at Nuremberg, a socially critical film about the trials of German war criminals in the late 1940s. I actively sought out students based on their semester research papers in a General Studies course I teach on Holocaust perpetrators. These students have contributed major sections of the manuscript and, during our regular project meetings, have helped me think through interpretive problems and questions about the direction of the project. The additional hands on deck, the fruitful bi-monthly discussions, and frankly, the knowledge that I had to write my quota of pages prior to the next meeting, meant that the project moved forward much more quickly than in those semesters when I work solo.

In other cases, I take advantage of students’ expertise in a particular area in order to pursue a project I couldn’t handle on my own. A recent example involves a student in Communications who has studied abroad in Germany and has a minor in German Studies. Together with a faculty member in Communications, this student undertook a multi-semester research project, supported by Elon’s Summer Undergraduate Research Experience (SURE) funding, to analyze the ways in which Germany and the Germans are portrayed in English-language social media. Midway through that project, the student approached me about a related project in German Studies, essentially making accessible to a German Studies audience the data gathered during the Communications research. The original project used the analytical tools of Communications; the follow-up project in German Studies weighed the same data set from a completely different disciplinary perspective, for a completely different disciplinary audience. In contrast to the first project I mentioned, which did not hold much promise for me as a scholar, this project afforded a new opportunity for me and the discipline. I should make clear that this project is not a significant departure from my prior work, since I’ve long been interested in the ways Germans are portrayed in literature, film, and theater. Working with this student has given me access to a body of knowledge outside of my discipline that can be brought to bear in my discipline.

A second example involves an advisee of mine, an International Studies major with minors in German Studies and Middle Eastern Studies. This student helped me launch a project on the ways Muslim immigrants to Germany are portrayed by “native” German authors and filmmakers. The student, who speaks Arabic and studied in Jordan during the Arab Spring, brought to bear knowledge of the Middle East that I do not have. He also contributed particular research skills that are outside of my discipline: as an International Studies major, he was familiar with social sciences research methods and the top scholarly publications in Political Science, enabling him to provide knowledge and analysis outside my scope of expertise—for example, analyses of demographic trends and developments, immigration patterns and government-sponsored integration efforts, and surveys of perceptions and attitudes. Again, this project doesn’t represent a significant departure from my prior work. Rather, it allows me to combine my discipline-specific knowledge and research methods with the knowledge and methods specific to another discipline.

In both of these cases, I gained access to a field of inquiry where I have little expertise. Let me be clear: without the students’ help, I would not have been able to conduct this research. The students, in turn, gained an understanding of analytical tools and research methods in the humanities, which are quite different from the social sciences methods used in International Studies or Communications. Each participant in
the project brought to bear our own disciplinary perspectives and tools.

**Identifying Students**
In those cases where I actively seek out undergraduate research students, there is the question of identification and selection. The task is somewhat easier in my General Studies courses than in my German courses, since my General Studies courses are structured around the completion of a semester research project. Here, the selection criteria are simple: students who consistently demonstrate superior critical thinking, a solid command of the fundamentals of humanities research, and an excellent work ethic are good candidates for a multi-semester research project with me.

Identifying potential research students in my German courses is somewhat trickier. Because language is so closely tied to cognition, the scope of the research projects in my German courses is necessarily more restricted. Of my four most recent research students, only one came straight from the German program; the others had also taken General Studies courses with me. Based on the intellectual difficulty of his research topic, the quality of his work (both from a linguistic perspective and a content perspective), and my conversations with him outside of class, I had a hunch that he had the skills necessary to engage in this sort of project. In a way, I took a calculated risk and it paid off.

Another factor that must be considered is expertise. Earlier I mentioned that working with students can give me access to the research methods and knowledge of other disciplines. But let’s not confuse this with true expertise: although these are remarkably accomplished undergraduate students, they are still undergraduates without the benefit of decades of study. They are emerging experts, but not yet experts, and working with undergraduates (no matter how talented) is not the same as working with other professionals. I therefore take care to frame the projects not as truly interdisciplinary projects, but as projects rooted in my discipline that also incorporate knowledge and approaches from other disciplines.

**Research Teams**
In my experience, it is not imperative to work exclusively with one student on a project; research teams are also possible and productive. For instance, in the above-mentioned project on *Judgment at Nuremberg*, I worked with different students at various stages in the project. One student worked for a year on the project, went abroad for a semester, then rejoined the project when she returned to Elon. The other joined midway through the project and stepped up her contribution while the first student was abroad, so that the project did not lose steam.

That first research team was not seamless because I had inadequately considered how each of the students would react to a team effort. Discussions with the undergraduate research program director, along with the training videos required by Elon’s institutional review board, led me to design a project contract. I now share the contract with participants the moment they begin a project with me.

In essence, the project contract lays out roles and responsibilities. It designates me lead investigator and primary author, and makes clear that I will be responsible for establishing the direction of the article, setting deadlines, determining who researches and writes which pieces, writing major portions myself, writing the transitions between sections, and standardizing...
the writing style so that the article “reads” the same from beginning to end. The contract also makes clear that students will contribute specific, substantive sections of the article, ranging from 1-2 paragraphs (to be added to existing text) all the way up to 5-6 pages of new text (constituting a significant portion of the final article). It points out that in a research team, different people can be brought into the project at various times, depending on what the project needs and who is available when. Finally, it clarifies authorship (granted to anybody who contributes significantly to the project’s moving forward) and states that any procedural questions or conflicts will be decided by me, consulting as needed with the undergraduate research program director. The reason for this blunt stance on my part is not only that my scholarly reputation is at stake with everything I publish, but also that good mentoring requires clear leadership, guidance, and decision-making authority. In the contract, I pledge to treat students respectfully and fairly should any disagreements or questions arise.

As our colleagues in the STEM disciplines have known for some time, research teams are highly productive once the ground rules are established. Since my role is to oversee the project as lead author, I am able to integrate students at various stages of any project. As long as the principal researcher stays in place, the project can thrive even if not all of the team members are physically together for all stages of the project.

**A Note on Scheduling**

Our undergraduate research office is wonderfully flexible and supportive. It places deep trust in faculty mentors and eschews micromanagement. In fact, I would be comfortable if our UR office required greater accountability and reporting. The only disagreement I have with our UR office has to do with the frequency and length of meetings. Although they do not enforce this rule—thankfully, or I would often be in violation—the UR office recommends more frequent and lengthier meetings between student and faculty member than I have found necessary. This may be due to the fact that UR originated in the STEM disciplines, where frequent meetings may be needed to keep the research on track.

In place of weekly meetings, the following schedule has worked well for me. My students typically enroll for partial course credit rather than full course credit. (At my institution, students earn academic course credit for research, and faculty are compensated via additional pay or release time once they accrue a certain number of research hours.) Let’s assume, then, that I meet with my research student or team twice monthly on a Wednesday for an hour to an hour and a half. The Monday prior to each meeting, each team member (faculty mentor included) has a major writing deadline. Team members read each other’s work in time for the meeting on Wednesday, in which we discuss problems, the direction of the project, and research and writing strategies for the next stages of the project. Each of us then has a week and half to complete the next assignment, which is just enough time to research and write a few substantive pages. More frequent meetings or lengthier meetings would not hasten progress and might actually be a counter-productive interruption of our workflow.

**On Balance, a Productive Experience**

On balance, working with undergraduate research students has been productive, helping me move my research agenda forward while also benefiting students’ intellectual growth. Since I treat my research students as partners in the venture—unequal partners, to be sure, since the project is an intellectual apprenticeship rather than a true collaboration—students have the excitement and intellectual satisfaction of contributing to a substantive project targeted for a “real” disciplinary journal, and they gain research skills that can help them in other coursework or in graduate school. Frequently enough, I have to heavily edit or rewrite their
contributions; students are not middle-aged scholars with decades of experience, and even the very best undergraduates typically don’t write or think in the same ways as professionals in the field. (I admit that there has been one notable exception, a student whose writing and thinking is actually superior to mine despite the 20 year age difference.) Nonetheless, I am able to build large sections of research articles around passages that students have written, sections that frequently contain insights I would not have achieved working solo.

Overall, my experience with undergraduate research in the humanities has been positive for my research agenda and for my students’ cognitive development. Because these students write well, are capable of thoughtful commentary and discussion, and frequently have disciplinary knowledge outside of my area, working with undergraduates has allowed me to manage more projects, at a faster pace, and with better results than I would achieve on my own.