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2011

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Extra Breadth and Depth in Undergraduate Education: The Institutional Impact of an Interdisciplinary Honors Research Fellowship

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The Brackenridge Summer Undergraduate Research Fellowship, a program administered by the University Honors College (UHC) at the University of Pittsburgh, is one example of the combined tradition and innovation that Scott Carnicom describes in his lead essay for the Forum on “The Institutional Impact of Honors.” By locating traditional disciplinary research projects within an innovative interdisciplinary context of students from all undergraduate majors, this summer research program demonstrates that tradition and innovation are not just compatible but symbiotic. The program also demonstrates that, in providing greater breadth as well as depth in the undergraduate experience, an honors-sponsored program can have a significant impact on the success of the institution as a whole.

The UHC at Pitt is unusual in its institutional context and impact because it is not a membership organization; that is, it has no separate admission or application process by which students gain access to what it provides. While students can participate in UHC in identifiable ways (coursework, advising, intellectual community, and a bachelor of philosophy degree), the overall mission of UHC is to promote extra breadth and depth in undergraduate education and to help those inclined toward such goals find each other. For these kindred spirits, “good enough” does not suffice. They share a willingness to work harder than necessary simply because they enjoy it. The intrinsic curiosity of students sought by and drawn to UHC opportunities does not show up via quantitative measures; there is no SAT score for inquisitiveness. It takes a lot of hard work within the larger institution for us to find these students and for them to find us, but the university as a whole benefits from the mutual quest.

The Brackenridge is one way that students find us. It is a highly competitive fellowship that promotes depth in the form of disciplinary research and breadth in the form of interdisciplinary community. While the Brackenridge selection committee is concerned with the content of what applicants write, we are at least as concerned with how they write it. All Brackenridge applications include a letter of support from a faculty sponsor; thus, we rely on faculty to oversee the content of the proposal. Perhaps in contrast to other research programs, though, content mastery is not our only goal; we also stress interdisciplinary community. We select applicants for how well their proposals indicate an awareness of people who are not specialists in their academic areas. The basic expectation is that they will do work that would impress specialists in their fields, but applicants who set themselves apart show an ability and willingness to reach out to the non-specialist, reflecting the goal of intellectual breadth appropriate to undergraduate education without compromising the disciplinary depth that exhibits expertise.

Historically, forty students, or roughly one third of the typical pool of applicants, are awarded Brackenridge Fellowships each summer. Weekly meetings begin in mid-May, usually with three students presenting their research at each meeting. The presentations last around thirty to forty minutes, followed by question and answer periods usually lasting at least that long. The spirited nature of the discussions helps presenters grapple with fundamental issues in their fields and helps audience members representing many majors learn what the fundamental issues are in fields other than their own.

What distinguishes Brackenridge is that the community of researchers includes students across the disciplines. Since fellows address an audience composed of students from a wide range of majors, we tell them, "This could be the most challenging audience you will face: a room full of smart people who don't know what you're talking about!" Presenters cannot hide behind jargon; any technical terms must be articulated in a way that is comprehensible to an intelligent non-specialist. Presenters, therefore, must understand their projects at a fundamental level.

An annual four-day retreat at Pitt's Johnstown campus is a highlight of the summer. On top of research presentations, participants enjoy additional forms of fun, intellectual and otherwise, enabling them to get to know one another and benefit from one another's diverse intellectual interests. We also hold discussions based on a common reading about the role of research in undergraduate education. Students are often surprised to learn that the program administrators could take a skeptical view, raising the question of whether the prominence of research in the modern university might be detrimental to undergraduate education. Does faculty attention to research mean teaching suffers? Ideally, we have concluded, the relation between research

and teaching mutually reinforce each other such that students and faculty benefit from complementary intellectual ventures.

Considering the institutional impact of Brackenridge on the University of Pittsburgh raises interesting issues since the impact UHC has on Pitt more broadly is especially complex. Given that UHC has no separate admission, any effects Brackenridge has on UHC will necessarily impact Pitt more broadly. For example, UHC at Pitt cannot drain off the best students from the broader community since honors students here are not sequestered into their own exclusive community; therefore, UHC opportunities cannot subvert larger Pitt values. Brackenridge, in keeping with UHC's broader mission, promotes extra depth and breadth in undergraduate education.

A striking feature of the interdisciplinary community created by Brackenridge is that it enhances the disciplinary depth of those who participate in it, as we see in the great number of Brackenridge participants who go on to complete departmental theses or the bachelor of philosophy (BPhil), a degree that also promotes extra breadth and depth. For the BPhil, students must complete a broad program of study that they propose and that UHC must approve. As the capstone of the BPhil, students conduct their own research culminating in a piece of independent scholarship: an undergraduate thesis, evaluated by a committee of faculty experts, that students defend at a public event.

Roughly fifty students per year from a relevant population of about 10,000 undergraduates participate in Brackenridge, and Brackenridge students earn approximately forty percent of BPhils conferred, a degree earned by fewer than one percent of Pitt undergraduates. Further testimony to the success of Brackenridge is the number of its participants who have gone on to win prestigious national and international scholarships. Since 2003, fifty Brackenridge participants have gone on to win such awards, including twelve Fulbrights, eight NSFs, seven Goldwaters, three Humanity In Action Fellowships, two Mellons, two Udalls, a Churchill, and a Gates Cambridge.

Thus, we see that innovative and interdisciplinary approaches to traditional research and specialization create the kind of honors experience that Carnicom advocates. The values of extra disciplinary depth and intellectual breadth, fostered by an interdisciplinary community of undergraduate researchers in Brackenridge, are alive and well at Pitt. These values enhance not only the educational experience of participating students but also the reputation and success of the whole university.

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