

Morningside College: A Successful Model of Undergraduate Research

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Morningside College

Morningside College, located in Sioux City, IA, is a small, private, not-for-profit Liberal Arts College. Accredited by the Higher Learning Commission, Morningside is a member of the North Central Association. Morningside College is predominantly an undergraduate teaching institution and has approximately 1,400 students enrolled from 25 states and 8 counties. The college's mission statement notes the intent to promote "a passion for life-long learning and a dedication to ethical leadership and civic responsibility." With 16 academic departments, Morningside offers more than 50 undergraduate majors and a Master of Arts in Education with a variety of graduate endorsements.

The Psychology Department at Morningside consists of five faculty members, each of whom is trained in a different field of psychology (i.e., Experimental with an emphasis in Animal Learning, Industrial/Organizational, Counseling, Personality/Social with an emphasis in Development, and Experimental with an emphasis in Educational Psychology and use of Technology). A unique feature of Morningside is that students, at the undergraduate level, are allowed to emphasize their psychology major in one of four areas: General Psychology, Counseling Psychology, Industrial/Organizational Psychology, or Biopsychology. The department also offers two emphases for academic minors: General Psychology and Industrial/Organizational Psychology. These emphases allow students to explore, in more depth, a specific area of psychology by taking a tailored set of classes.

There are a variety of characteristics that make Morningside College's Psychology Department a successful model for undergraduate research: integration of research in variety of lab (research-based) courses, group research opportunities, the senior thesis requirement for all psychology majors, and student coordination of and presentation at a cross-discipline campus-wide student research symposium. In this chapter, I will outline each of these features discussing details and benefits for students and faculty.

Research involvement through the context of a course is often the most effective introduction to the theory and practice of conducting psychological research. As Dunn (2006) noted, "laboratory courses in psychology involve 'hands-on,' active learning experiences for students, an opportunity for teachers to illustrate directly the power of the empirical method" (p. 125). Morningside offers four research or lab-based courses in addition to a traditional experimental psychology and lab course. These four-credit-hour courses (i.e., Experimental Social Psychology and Lab, Brain and Behavior and Lab, Learning and Memory and Lab, and Experimental Cognitive Psychology and Lab), not only immerse students in the content, but also offer lab-based activity with a research basis. The model that Morningside uses in which content is the primary focus and research involvement as secondary is consistent with Perlman and McCann's (2005) national survey findings of psychology departments. Perlman and McCann also noted that many departments require students be of junior status before they can take these lab-based courses. At Morningside, students may begin their lab-based course experiences as early as their first year, depending on when they have completed the introductory course; however, most students begin taking lab classes in their sophomore or junior year.

Each of these lab-based courses takes a slightly different approach to integrating research, but all have the common goal of giving students further experience and exposure to the research process in psychology. For example, in the Learning and Memory and Lab course, students have hands-on experience with operant conditioning principles and techniques while training their assigned rat. In Experimental Social Psychology, students design and propose empirical research projects and then, in groups of approximately three to five students, conduct research that has a social psychology emphasis. The benefit of course-based research approach is that students experience hands-on experience with the practice of research as Dunn (2006) suggested, but they are under more controlled

and direct instructor supervision than in group or independent research projects. The biggest limitation to integrating such courses into a curriculum is that those courses often involve more prep time and grading of lab reports and/or APA-style papers for the instructors who teach them. However, the benefit to the students taking lab-based courses far exceeds those limitations.

Group research opportunities are another effective way to involve students in research who are relatively new to the research process as well as those students who may not be ready for independent research but have a desire to get involved. See the chapter by Beins in this book on “Conducting Undergraduate Research: Research Groups” for additional insight in group research. The actual practice of involving students in group-research projects is quite variable. At Morningside, when supervising group research, faculty often offer research topic suggestions, but also allow for student input on ideas for research. Regardless of topic choice, faculty expect students to be equally involved in the project from beginning to end.

Although some of the group projects may stem from previous class-based projects, students conduct group research projects outside of the classroom context, and the process may or may not involve students receiving academic credits for their participation. As is the case at most institutions, Morningside offers a generic catalogue listing of “Research in Psychology.” Students can register for one to four credit hours, as approved by their faculty research advisor, and then repeat this course for up to a total of six credit hours. However, not all students choose to register for the academic credit when they participate in group research. Frequently, group research projects take place over a two-semester sequence. Students spend the first semester designing and conducting the research, and in the second semester they present their findings and write for publication. Our students can get involved with group research as early as their sophomore year, but ideally they have taken both Statistics and Experimental Psychology and Lab courses to have an academic grounding in theory and practice.

Involving students in group research is an efficient strategy for getting a large number of students involved in research without a huge time commitment for the professor. Morningside College is a teaching college that supports research endeavors, but not at the sacrifice of teaching quality. Also, as is the case at a small college, our faculty often find themselves heavily engaged in service to the college through various committees. If you are at a similar institution, but still desire to engage undergraduates in research, group research projects

can be an ideal approach. Group research is also an effective tool because students within the group often mentor each other through the process and practice of conducting research. Preferably, you will have the opportunity to include students with a diverse background in skills and abilities, and have a transfer of student experience from semester-to-semester and even year-to-year. This transfer promotes greater student autonomy and fosters students to mentor each other and new recruits. One of the many benefits of doing research in a group context is that students do not feel as anxious or nervous about the research process because they have peers (in addition to the professor) to rely on for support. This reliance occurs throughout the design and execution of the research and during the presentation and publication of the research as well.

In addition to group research opportunities, all Morningside College psychology majors have a requirement to complete a senior thesis that is either empirical or non-empirical. The senior thesis has multiple purposes. This requirement serves as a means for a capstone-type experience, integrating the knowledge, skills, and abilities they have developed during their four years at Morningside. The thesis requirement is also the Psychology Department’s means for meeting the college-wide writing proficiency requirement. Students at Morningside, regardless of major, must complete a writing proficiency requirement to graduate. Departments have different strategies for meeting the requirement (e.g., course writing, portfolios of writing across classes and academic years, etc.), but for Psychology, a research-based thesis project is the most logical fit. Also because assessment is an important topic for departments and institutions of higher education, our Psychology Department has seized the senior thesis as yet another opportunity to assess the outcome of student learning.

Early in the fall semester, we advise seniors to select one of the psychology professors as the major advisor for their senior thesis and to begin working on their projects. Again, we designed the senior thesis project as a two-semester project. Students can finish their thesis within one semester, but most students prefer to take both semesters. Also, students have the option of enrolling in the generic research course for academic credit while completing their senior theses.

The senior thesis project takes on the style of an independent research project supervised by faculty, whereby students and their project-advising professors meet on a regular basis discussing the design and execution of the project. As is the case in group-research projects most of the design and execution of data collection occurs during the fall

semester, and the completion of the writing process and presentation of their project is in the spring semester. In addition to completing the formal write-up of their senior theses, students must also present their research either in oral or poster form at the annual Morningside College Palmer Student Research Symposium. This symposium is a campus-wide cross-discipline celebration of students' involvement and achievements that have a research basis. This outlet for students to present their research in a campus-designed convocation is not uncommon and offers great benefits to students (Rosenberg & Blount, 1988).

The final event that makes Morningside College a successful model of student engagement in research is student coordination of and presentation at our cross-discipline campus-wide student research symposium. During the 2003-2004 academic year, I challenged the group of students who did research with me to develop, under my guidance, the first annual Morningside College Student Research Symposium, a campus-wide demonstration and celebration of students' research across disciplines. Each of the students involved on the student steering committee have an assigned a position to delegate responsibility (i.e., Chair, Co-Chair, Volunteer Coordinator, Publicity Coordinator, Submissions Coordinator, Presentations Coordinator, Facilities Coordinator). The student steering committee members not only coordinated the conference, but they met with the College's President and the Dean requesting their moral support, attended at a general faculty meeting, and requested the support of the faculty to make this research event a success on our campus. In addition to their assigned duties, the students, as a group, must review and evaluate the submissions to this symposium. As Rosenberg and Blount (1988) suggested, having an outlet for student presentation of research encourages students' participation in research at the undergraduate level. Rosenberg and Blount described a departmental-based convocation, but Morningside has had success with a similar campus-wide outlet.

Each year, the symposium has grown in the number and variety of disciplines represented. Additionally, because of the success of the program, the Morningside College administration decided to fund our symposium in its second year and then secured an alumni donor to grow the symposium. We now have a budget that allows us to bring outstanding keynote speakers, to publicize the event on campus

and within the community, and to cover expenses of an accompanying luncheon for presenters and their faculty sponsors without any cost to those in attendance. Because this symposium is student-led, students have an ownership and pride for their hard work, but they also have accompanying vita entries acknowledging their role in the coordination and implementation of a successful undergraduate research symposium.

Summary

There are several different ways that psychology departments, small or large, can encourage student involvement in research. Professors at smaller colleges, like Morningside, have the luxury of getting to know students on a more personal level than professors at larger research institutions. Nevertheless, professors at smaller colleges often have the constraint of heavier teaching loads and service requirements to the college/university and thus may not have an ample amount of time to actively develop a program of research or engage students in multiple and diverse research projects. However, having said all of this, I firmly believe that Morningside College offers a model for how, even at a small college, faculty can find ways to involve students successfully in research through lab-based courses, group projects, senior thesis projects, and development and implementation of campus-based symposia as an avenue for students' presentation of their research.

References

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