

Toward a Model for Undergraduate Research in Psychology at the Two-Year College

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Research at the community college level is a nebulous concept. Clearly, faculty members are expected to remain abreast of the current research in their respective disciplines, and yet the pressure to conduct original research and publish is generally not present for tenure or recurring contracts. In addition, a number of structural differences between community college and university environments, such as student body composition, approved courses and funding, make programs of research by community college faculty and students particularly challenging, but not impossible, to achieve.

The first concern stems from the profile and transient nature of the community college student. Currently, community colleges serve approximately half of all incoming freshman students, and while overall 29 percent of freshman require remediation courses (Hansen, 1998); this figure is often over 50 percent at the community college level (Collin County Community College, CCCC, 2006). Attrition is another significant concern. Whereas major universities may experience 20 percent attrition of freshman, these figures are significantly higher in the community college environment. Finally, consider that the mission of the community college is to have students who ideally leave within two years, either as transfer to four-year campuses or with a terminal degree or certificate. Thus, the timetable for student preparation at the community college means programs of research must be both accessible and structured.

An additional significant difference between the two-year and four-year campus is that the two-year approved curriculum in psychology does not generally include courses in statistics or research methods. These are often the very undergraduate classes from which university faculty may draw their more promising prospects for mentoring. This limitation also means that a two-year program will need to provide external and informal instruction in these critical areas.

Finally, there is the hurdle of funding. Although there are certainly advantages to faculty at community colleges in terms of not being tenure-

dependent on grant funding, there is also concomitantly a less grant-friendly culture on two-year campuses, and faculty pursuing such interests may have little in the way of institutional support and most likely do not have the prestige associated with a university campus that can be an integral factor in external funding. Thus, not only is the ability to conduct research compromised by a potential dearth of resources, but the monies for travel to professional meetings may be quite difficult to access.

Though the above challenges can be daunting, research with undergraduate students can be a very rewarding experience. The sections below outline possible avenues for community college faculty considering sponsoring a program.

Formation

If possible, found the research group through a legitimate organization. For example, an avenue open specifically to psychology programs is through an honor society, such as Psi Beta, the sister honor society to Psi Chi (the National Honor Society in Psychology for four-year college/universities). Psi Beta National Honor Society provides "professional development of psychology students in two-year colleges through promotion and recognition of excellence in scholarship, leadership, research, and community service" (Psi Beta's National Council, June 9, 1996).

Typically, honor societies at two year colleges serve the purpose of recognizing students for academic commitment and high grade point averages, as mentioned above, but true research opportunities remain elusive. Although a founded honor society of any campus will function in the standard manner befitting an honorary society of this nature (e.g. providing a venue for community service and social interaction), it is through the research component that the organization will excel in affording students opportunities less frequently encountered by undergraduates, particularly those attending community colleges.

Mentoring

Although not all students involved in the research program will be psychology majors, the majority will be. Therefore, affording available research opportunities under the supervision of a skilled researcher is especially crucial for those students who wish to pursue psychology as a career. A majority of admissions requirements for graduate study in psychology emphasize undergraduate research, and yet opportunities in the university environment may be less available to underclassmen than graduate students. Thus, community college faculty represent a conduit for future student success not only by promoting an awareness of the expectations for further study, but also by facilitating research activities.

Community college professors with a desire to provide mentoring to undergraduate psychology students face unique challenges in trying to engage students actively in research. Often, students do not acknowledge the necessity of accomplishment beyond their coursework, of devoting more than the bare minimum time in their education. When combined with heavy commitments to their off-campus work, families and regular course work, the outcome is that many students do not connect with each other, get to know their faculty or even participate in professional organizations. These eluded development opportunities are also exacerbated by the transitional nature of the two-year college community.

Despite these adversities, research reiterates the positive effects of mentoring for this population. Community college students who are mentored report increased self-esteem, motivation, academic performance and also self report significant increases in measures of internal locus of control (Hoffman & Wallach, 2005). The authors want to underscore the salience of mentoring to the success of the research program proposed.

Proposed Structure

Recruiting of Students

Begin by recruiting students who are active honor society or psychology club members, psychology majors, as well as those who exceed expectations in courses and would particularly benefit from the enrichment opportunities afforded by research.

Orientation

Students who commit to the program are first introduced to an overview of research and its significance to the foundation of the science of psychology by faculty sponsors. The relevance of research in expanding psychological knowledge is emphasized, followed by a discussion of the importance of research in admissions decisions to graduate education, as doctoral programs consider research experience as one of the top criteria for selection- following the personal interview (Norcross, Hanych, & Terranova, 1996). An overview of realistic time obligations to the program and the significance of student commitment to the success of the overall experience is also suggested.

Topic Selection

Several broad categories of interest are introduced typically at the meeting following orientation. Students are encouraged to self-select into groups by subject of greatest interest. For example, topics may include: sports, sexuality, dreams, memory, and other areas that engender the interest of undergraduate students. By keeping the categories broad, a mentor both facilitates a small degree of focus while allowing students the latitude to craft a specific research design. Occasionally, an enthusiastic student will suggest a novel topic that is cultivated and invested in either as a group or individually.

Group Formation & Research

After topics are selected, natural small groups of two or three are usually formed. The fundamentals of behavioral science methods are covered at this time, and then students are mentored through the actual research process. Specifically, students generate original research questions and conduct literature reviews to enable the formulation of appropriate research hypotheses. Where applicable, students then devise research instruments, gather data, analyze results and organize findings for presentation.

Planning a Timeline

Emphasize to students that in order to complete a project, a weekly commitment will be critical, and then have students compare schedules to determine an optimal weekly meeting time. By setting this at the beginning, the nontraditional student is able to make arrangements as necessary to be able to commit to the group. Next, set a reasonable timetable.

Consider the particular needs of the campus population and outline a schedule that allows time for brainstorming, library orientation and use of online databases, refinement of the research question and the steps of the research process.

Networking/Conference Opportunities

Students attend various professional conferences to present the results of these research endeavors, atypical for community college students. For example, many of our students have presented at regional psychological association conventions, local psychology conferences and undergraduate research conferences (see Figure 1).

Publishing Research

Ultimately, publishing student research is a goal/outcome of the program. Psychology journals, typically those journals designed specifically for undergraduate research are pursued, which include, but are not limited to: *Undergraduate Psychology Journal*, <http://www.studentgroups.ucla.edu/upj>, *The Psi Chi Journal of Undergraduate Research*, *Journal of Psychological Inquiry* and the *URC Undergraduate Research Journal*.

Institutional Support

One of the primary concerns with a program of research at a community college centers on the question of funding. Unlike university psychology faculty, who often have access to start up funds or established labs, community college faculty must create funding streams in an environment in which research costs may not yet be part of the campus culture. Successful funding under these conditions entails diligence, innovation and accountability.

It is unlikely that administrators will wholeheartedly and unreservedly agree to fund faculty and student research and travel expenses without an assurance of positive program outcomes. Thus, faculty must be creative in considering possible avenues for expenses related to research and professional presentations. On some campuses, faculty may petition student services for allocation from accounts generated by a student activity fee.

Another possible source of revenue is through self-published materials. If a department is using a campus-based lab manual or other ancillary material, often the proceeds are directed to the department in a discretionary account. Consider enlisting support from departmental colleagues in having monies employed to this end. If this is not possible, general fundraising activities may be needed to provide initial resources.

No matter the source, a clear and detailed budget is essential, as it is a justification for research and travel expenditures. Pare down the budget to include only items necessary to complete a project (e.g., copies of surveys, assessment tools, or statistical software, and keep travel expenses limited to modest transportation, lodging and registration fees). Good recordkeeping will make the program more attractive as a line item in a department after the efficacy of the program has been established.

Once the program is underway and there are positive student outcomes, such as presentations at student conferences, consider developing a proposal for departmental or division support. Provide concrete measures of success similar to the chart below that assure the dean and other administrators of the prudence of supporting student research. Be sure also to highlight recognition for the institution brought by the student's successes, such as newspaper articles or any awards. By stressing the positive reflection on the college, the proposal can legitimize the costs by demonstrating the exchange for both students and the institution.

Conclusion

Despite the unique difficulties inherent to conducting student research at the community college level, the challenges are in no manner insurmountable. Indeed, overcoming some of these barriers can promote an even more gratifying experience and sense of accomplishment for both students and faculty. With institutional support, an organizational umbrella, adequate pre-planning and structure, community college faculty can offer their students the opportunity to explore the process of research or even to begin their research careers. Faculty, simultaneously can enjoy the benefits brought by these academic pursuits, which serves to enhance their teaching and professional development.

References

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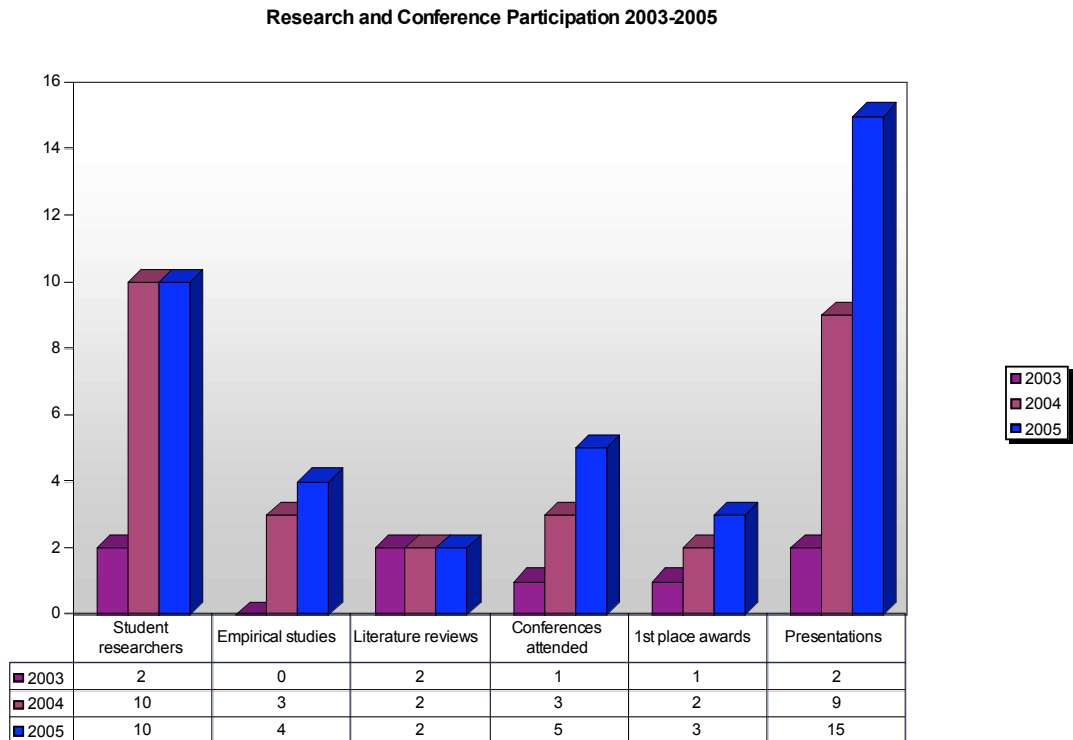


Figure 1: Collin County Community College Students' Research and Conference Participation