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CCCC Position Statement on Undergraduate Research in Writing: Principles and Best Practices

Conference on College Composition and Communication
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[Bibliography of Resources Supporting UR in Rhetoric and Writing Studies](#) (October 2018, pdf)

Executive Summary

Undergraduate research is a widely recognized, high-impact educational practice that offers student researchers and their mentors unique opportunities to engage in shared, discipline-based intellectual inquiry. For undergraduate research in writing studies and rhetoric to flourish at two- and four-year institutions, whether it is embedded in curricula or located in co- and extracurricular opportunities, it must be well-defined and well-supported by relevant campus units (e.g., departments, programs, campus policies) and by the allocation of available campus resources.

Introduction

Part educational movement, part curricular innovation, undergraduate research is now widely recognized as a “high-impact educational practice”:¹ a method of teaching and learning known to substantially benefit students from a variety of backgrounds across a range of instructional contexts, including curricular, cocurricular, and extracurricular activities. On one hand, undergraduate research in all subject areas involves written communication. On the other hand, undergraduate research in writing creates unique, discipline-specific opportunities. Students who become undergraduate writing researchers obtain knowledge of writing that can be learned only through direct participation in full-fledged creative or critical inquiries. As undergraduate writing researchers, students also have the unique experience of contributing actively as subject experts to one or more communities (e.g., department or program, campus, discipline). Likewise, faculty, staff, and graduate students who teach and mentor undergraduate writing researchers gain distinctive opportunities for student-centered instruction, collaboration (e.g., coresearch, coauthorship), and professional development.

This position statement reflects CCCC members' growing commitment to undergraduate research. It also supports members' efforts to foster undergraduate research in writing at their home institutions, whether two- or four-year colleges or universities. To that end, this statement affirms undergraduate research in writing as a distinctive activity, and it outlines principles and best practices for mentoring undergraduate writing researchers, developing curricula that support undergraduate research in writing research curriculum, and building and sustaining campus infrastructure that can sustain undergraduate writing research activities.

Recognizing Undergraduate Research in Writing

At its most robust, undergraduate research includes the following elements: the formation of one or more mentoring relationships, preliminary study and project planning, information

gathering and analysis, and the feedback loop of peer review and revision associated with the dissemination of findings, whether through publication or public presentation.

In writing studies, undergraduate research reflects the breadth of available methods and methodologies developed and used by professional writing researchers, including textual, archival, and digital scholarship; quantitative and qualitative empirical research; and creative inquiry. Undergraduate research in writing also reflects the full range of students, faculty, and staff involved in college writing. Undergraduate researchers can be first-year students, two-year college students, English language learners, writing or English majors and minors, writing tutors, supplemental instructors, and/or students from any discipline who engage in Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC), Writing in the Disciplines (WID), or Writing in the Major (WIM). Mentors of undergraduate researchers in writing are similarly diverse. They can be full-time and part-time faculty members, graduate students, staff, administrators, and/or community members affiliated with relevant campus programs. Mentoring relationships, whether formal or informal, benefit from various forms of institutional support calibrated to mentors' roles and status.

No single model for integrating undergraduate research in writing into postsecondary education exists. Instead, undergraduate research in writing can be curricular, cocurricular, or extracurricular. It can take place during a single quarter or semester, over a summer, or across a period of years. Whatever the case, undergraduate research in writing follows established ethical standards for inquiries of different kinds, including archival work, community-based projects, studies that involve online or digital media, and studies that involve human participants.²

Principles and Best Practices for Undergraduate Research in Writing

For undergraduate research in writing to flourish, it must be actively cultivated and sustained through individual relationships; through scaffolding provided by campus initiatives and strategic plans; and through infrastructure provided by campus units (e.g., programs, departments), policies, and resources. Specifically

For students

Undergraduate research in writing starts with well-supported undergraduate researchers or students who have one or more opportunities during college to work formally or informally with one or more mentors on well-defined, well-scaffolded projects that align with both institutional learning outcomes and students' own educational goals.

Good mentors

- Can be faculty and instructors of any status or rank, graduate students, or staff.
- Have relevant knowledge of not only writing practices and processes but also writing research methods and methodologies.
- Are willing and able to communicate regularly with undergraduate researchers, offering guidance and feedback over time, at every stage of a project.
- Connect undergraduate researchers with available experts (e.g., librarians, statisticians) and relevant disciplinary and institutional resources (e.g., data collection and analysis software, funding opportunities).
- Help undergraduate researchers comply with ethical standards for writing inquiries, including (but not limited to) certification and project approval procedures specific to research with human participants.
- Guide researchers through dissemination in various media and offer a conduit to disciplinary and institutional support.

Well-defined projects

- Have exigence, addressing a research question of pressing interest and importance to the student researcher and the field.
- Make a genuine contribution, however modest, to public knowledge of writing, whether academic (e.g., disciplinary knowledge), professional, or community-based.
- Fit into students' schedules over a set period of time.
- Follow relevant ethical standards.
- Have concrete and realistic goals for dissemination.

Well-aligned projects

- Reflect relevant learning outcomes, whether for a single course or course of study.
 - Advance students' individual college-level educational goals.
 - Are eligible for support from available sources (e.g., course credit, travel funding).
- Reinforce students' post-graduate plans.

For mentors

Whether mentors work one-to-one with undergraduate researchers, in small groups, or in teams involving multiple mentors and mentees, mentoring undergraduate research in writing can enliven teaching, enrich research and scholarship, and enhance professional development in alignment with mentors' own job responsibilities and career goals.

Pedagogically, mentors

- Draw on and expand existing instructional expertise to focus holistically on mentees' interests and needs.
- Draw on and expand existing scholarly expertise to help students move through the research process from identifying a research question through to relating project findings to the larger scholarly, professional, or community conversation.
- Promote knowledge transfer by helping undergraduate researchers recognize how they are using previously acquired knowledge and how they are building skills and abilities they will be able to apply subsequently in their academic, professional, and personal lives.
- Help students build networks of connection on campus and within broader local and disciplinary communities through relationships forged in conjunction with their projects.

As researchers and scholars, mentors

- Draw on existing disciplinary expertise in rhetoric and composition/writing studies and adjacent fields.
- Expand their disciplinary knowledge to engage student researchers' interests and needs.
- Develop research and workflow protocols for effective and ethical collaboration with undergraduate researchers.
- Collaborate with students on the coconstruction of knowledge and the coauthorship of scholarly publications and presentations.
- When appropriate, draw from existing scholarship on undergraduate research and also contribute to it.

As members of campus, local, and disciplinary communities, mentors

- Foster and contribute to the development and ongoing delivery of curricula that support undergraduate research in writing.
- Participate actively in building and sustaining campus capacity for undergraduate research.
- Identify opportunities for undergraduate researchers to collaborate with community and workplace partners.
- Connect campus efforts with regional, national, and international initiatives for undergraduate research.

For institutions

To build and support a culture of undergraduate research that includes writing studies, individual colleges and universities must provide infrastructure, scaffolding, and sustaining resources.

Infrastructure consists of

- Campus leadership informed about how writing, as a discipline that draws on humanities, social sciences, and fine arts methods and methodologies, fits into the larger campus picture of undergraduate research.

- Inclusion of writing scholars on campus committees related to undergraduate research.
- Attentiveness to the needs of undergraduate researchers in writing by relevant campus units (e.g., IRB, libraries, stats centers).
- Policies (e.g., hiring, annual evaluation, tenure, and promotion) that recognize and reward involvement in undergraduate research.

Scaffolding comprises

- Support for lower- and upper-division courses that incorporate research or elements of research and thus require special accommodations (e.g., equipment, location, credit hours).
- Professional development opportunities for mentors.
- Inclusion of undergraduate researchers and their mentors in relevant campus events and publications.
- Awards that recognize and celebrate excellence in undergraduate research.
- Mechanisms for assessing the impact of undergraduate research on campus.

Resources include

- Funding to support undergraduate researchers through the full arc of undergraduate research, from data collection and analysis to dissemination.
- Funding to support undergraduate research mentors' involvement in all stages of their mentees' work, regardless of mentors' ranks and campus roles (e.g., adjunct, non-tenure-track, and tenure-track faculty members; staff; administrators).
- Access for spaces and tools for completing undergraduate research, including software licenses, storage for physical and virtual data, poster printers, and so on.

Endnotes

1. See George D. Kuh, *High-Impact Educational Practices: What They Do, Who Has Access to Them, and Why They Matter* (Washington, DC: AAC&U, 2008). Kuh's analysis of data from the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) demonstrates that high-impact practices, including undergraduate research, not only improve retention and graduation rates but also promote deep learning and gains in general, personal, and practical knowledge. Kuh traces the value of high-impact practices to the ways in which they require students to invest considerable energy in purposeful intellectual activities; to be engaged with faculty and peers in substantive work and to receive feedback on that work; to connect with people from diverse backgrounds; and to transfer their developing knowledge and skills across contexts, including classrooms, campus organizations, the workplace, and the wider community.

2. See [CCCC Guidelines for the Ethical Conduct of Research in Composition Studies](#).

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