

From: Teaching Toolbox - Center For Faculty Innovation <TEACHING-TOOLBOX@LISTSERV.JMU.EDU> On Behalf Of Center for Faculty Innovation
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To: TEACHING-TOOLBOX@LISTSERV.JMU.EDU
Subject: Teaching Toolbox: The Benefits of Mentoring Students through Undergraduate Research

The Benefits of Mentoring Students Through Undergraduate Research **by Peter Eubanks**

During my sophomore year of college, I successfully applied for an undergraduate research grant that allowed me to pursue an independent research project with a faculty mentor in the French Department during the summer before my junior year. Instead of working a traditional summer job, I spent my summer studying various portrayals of Joan of Arc, from French medieval literature to Mark Twain, and from right-wing political movements to contemporary cinema.

I couldn't believe my luck.

I learned about important journals in the field, about the names and works of scholars relevant to this kind of project. I learned to read and process mountains of information, and to organize and analyze that information in new ways that would represent my own (very meager) contributions to this corner of the [Great Conversation](#). The thesis I completed that summer made clear that graduate school and the life of the mind needed to be in my future, and I have to give credit to my mentor, [Amy Ogden](#), for her patience, encouragement, and high expectations for that summer, which significantly altered the course of my life, for the better. I wouldn't be a French professor today without her guidance and mentorship.

Naturally, I have wanted to pay it forward. Fortunately, there are many opportunities to mentor undergraduate students in their own independent research projects at JMU, from independent study courses to capstone seminars and supervised theses, and from laboratory work to our excellent [First-Year Research Experience program \(FYRE\)](#), which pairs a freshman or transfer student in their first year with a faculty mentor during the spring semester.

The benefits of undergraduate research experiences for college students [are clear](#), and include an increase in critical thinking, analytical ability, and problem-solving; an increased capacity to navigate ambiguity; and [increased retention](#) (particularly of students belonging to underrecognized groups), among many, many benefits.

And what of the benefits of undergraduate research to faculty? Research shows that faculty who mentor students pursuing undergraduate research [benefit from a more productive research agenda, maintain a more balanced and symbiotic relationship between their teaching and research responsibilities](#), and [improve the quality of their own scholarly output](#). [One study \(2010\)](#) also noted the "interpersonal gains" that faculty members enjoyed from working with undergraduate research students, including establishing professional and collegial relationships with these students, enjoying observing students

grow and develop, and seeing students pursue graduate education. This same study also described the “socio-emotional” aspect of the mentor-mentee relationship, which could lead to more rewarding, long-term professional relationships.

In my own experience as a faculty mentor in the FYRE program for the past three years, as well as a faculty member of record in numerous independent study and thesis courses at JMU since 2011, I have found significant benefits from working with undergraduate research students. These students have helped me to gain a better understanding of undergraduate perspectives and attitudes: I recall one student whose independent project on French short films gave me insights into what kinds of materials and subject matter would be most appealing to their fellow students. This information proved helpful to me when building syllabi in several courses, offering insights into what films to assign and what kinds of activities to use in relation to those films. Independent study courses have also given me a better, more up-close view of what kinds of preparation or [scaffolding](#) may be necessary to help students complete a lengthy project such as a research essay, which has helped me to know how better to set up similar assignments in my regular classes.

Furthermore, the energy and enthusiasm that students bring to the classroom during or immediately after the completion of a research project invariably affect the classroom dynamic and bring an increased vigor to the learning experience that is contagious. As I’ve worked with students one-on-one, I’ve also learned a lot about their expectations, their challenges, and their mentoring needs— insights that are more difficult to gain when interacting with students in a classroom setting. I’ve learned, for example, that some students may feel intimidated by the “independent” nature of undergraduate research, unsure of their own instincts and hesitant to move forward without “permission” from an authority figure such as a mentor. This insight provides an opportunity for me to make sure that I encourage students to trust their own instincts and proceed with confidence, whether in a mentoring or classroom setting.

Limited time [is cited](#) as one of the reasons why faculty may be hesitant to get involved in mentoring undergraduate researchers. But mentorship can be flexible and suited to individual needs—there really is no one-size-fits-all model that faculty must follow in terms of time commitment. And time spent on mentoring undergraduate research can also be seen as an investment in a faculty member’s own research agenda and teaching preparations.

My hope is that by pointing out the benefits of undergraduate research for faculty members—to say nothing of the benefits to students— faculty may be less hesitant to serve as mentors, if only initially for a semester. Whether through an independent study course, a capstone project, or JMU’s relatively new FYRE program, a variety of opportunities exist to encourage and support faculty members as they participate in this important work. While some of these programs simply require that faculty make themselves available for undergraduate students already eager for independent work, faculty can also be proactive in offering such opportunities to students who may stand to benefit from them. Has a student’s active and engaged participation in class stood out to you? Has a perhaps quieter student completed written or other work that suggests that they may benefit from working independently on a

research project? Faculty members might also announce or advertise to their students that such research opportunities abound at JMU and that they are happy to work with students in that space. By actively making students aware of these resources, faculty also encourage first-generation and other underrecognized populations who may otherwise be hesitant to reach out. Numerous faculty development resources outlining the qualities of a good mentor can also be found through the [National Center for Faculty Development and Diversity](#) and [Council on Undergraduate Research](#), among numerous excellent sources. Through the CFI, you can also request a [consultation](#) to discuss various mentoring strategies that you and your student(s) may find helpful.