

Defining Access to Undergraduate Research in Writing Studies: A Proposed Model for Increasing Support, Opportunity, and Participation

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Abstract

This article examines how to increase access to undergraduate research within the interdisciplinary field of writing studies. Drawing on experiences with this effort, the authors argue that students need a more diverse range of opportunities to participate in undergraduate research. The article presents and analyzes three case studies of undergraduate research in writing studies that expand traditional models.

Keywords: *access, diversity, equity, inclusion, undergraduate research, writing studies*

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This article examines how to increase access to undergraduate research (UR) within the interdisciplinary field of writing studies (WS). Drawing on experiences with this effort, the authors argue that students need a more diverse range of opportunities to participate in UR. Specifically, the article presents three case studies of undergraduate research that depart from the traditional apprenticeship model and engage the issue of access. First discussed is Lockett's approach to teaching critical digital research to first-year students at a small liberal arts historically Black institution (HBCU) for women. Next highlighted is Hart's mentorship of a writing center tutor at a predominantly white small liberal arts college who conducted work-based research about tutoring writers with dyslexia. Finally explored is Babcock's work with a nontraditional undergraduate woman at a Hispanic-serving regional comprehensive university.

General Higher Education Scholarship About Access

Many studies about the problem of access to undergraduate research focus on how UR improves the overall academic performance of historically underrepresented populations. This research identifies wide-ranging constraints facing these students, including: "invalidation, stereotypes, invisibility, lack of connectedness, hostility, and microaggressions" (Mendoza and Louis 2018, 19). Some studies have found that historically marginalized demographics (e.g., Black and Indigenous people and people of color, immigrants, poor students—regardless of race or ethnicity, people with disabilities) are less likely to have access to high-impact practices (Davis 2007; Finley and McNair 2013; Gregerman et al. 1998; Ishiyama 2001; Kuh 2008). These underserved students face barriers involving "a lack of advising or guidance about what high-impact practices are or why they are important [i.e., human and academic support], and an inability to commit time to these experiences due to the constraints of busy lives [i.e., temporal support]" (Finley and McNair 2013, 29). Additional research indicates these challenges inhibit the participation of historically underserved students in UR (Kinzie et al. 2008; Kuh 2008).

Indeed, demographic inclusion is already part of conversations about access to UR. However, one must critically examine how specific disciplinary contexts shape research about demographics and UR. Research about UR is disproportionately represented by science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields. Compared to the arts and humanities, STEM programs offer multiple initiatives designed to increase the number of underrepresented

students pursuing graduate degrees in STEM fields and entering the STEM workforce (Hunter, Laursen, and Seymour 2007; Hurtado et al. 2009; Lopatto 2003; Mendoza and Louis 2018; Russell, Hancock, and McCullough 2007). Analysis of experiences facilitating UR in writing studies seeks to fill a gap in research about access to UR in humanities fields.

Writing Studies Scholarship and Undergraduate Research

Writing studies, also known as composition studies, rhetoric and composition studies, and composition, rhetoric, and literacy studies, is a relatively new interdisciplinary field comprised of practitioners representing training in diverse disciplines such as communications, psychology, English literature, education, and linguistics. Since the mid-twentieth century, these teachers of writing have professionalized research about the meaning of their pedagogy, which was rapidly adapting to scaled development of writing courses, centers, and programs that were being created to address the democratization of higher education vis-à-vis desegregation mandates, government programs like CUNY open admissions, the Montgomery GI Bill, and so on (Perl 1994; Phelps 1991). The field's inclusion in the US Department of Education's "Classification of Instructional Programs" database as writing studies (CIP code 23.13) was not updated until 2010 (NCES 2020; Phelps and Ackerman 2010). This history affects some of the major challenges that have limited student participation in UR in writing studies. These include the following:

- how UR is defined and practiced across diverse academic institutions (e.g., distance education, single-sex institutions, minority-serving institutions like HBCUs), learning spaces (e.g., writing centers), and publications
- how people affiliated with WS produce, recognize, and circulate UR
- how emerging technologies affect the form and content of UR in WS
- how WS research is responded to and evaluated and how it sustains stakeholders' support.

Unfortunately, few studies about UR in WS exist (Delli-Carpini, Fishman, and Greer 2020; Grobman and Kinkead 2010). Furthermore, this small body of work focuses little on barriers that limit access to and engagement in UR. Instead, scholarly investigations of UR in WS tend to focus on UR as a type of literacy (Delpit 1995; Gee 1996; Heath 1983; Knoblauch 1990; Street 1984; Stuckey 1990) through which students access more expansive opportunities in the academy and their local communities. Although it is recognized that UR in WS is capable of facilitating discourse competencies that can be applied in various interdependent communities and contexts, this article seeks to further investigate students' limited access to UR, including:

- demographic diversity, such as race, gender, sexuality, dis/ability, social class, age, enrollment status (part-time or full-time, online or in person)
- diverse and inclusive representations of multiple intersecting identities
- support mechanisms such as faculty-student relationships and multimodal communication systems.

Ultimately, the authors' research collaboration at the 2018 Naylor Symposium (Lockett, Hart, and Babcock 2020), and experiences attempting to improve access to UR in WS led to the conclusion that the primary goal of this work should be to enable students to perceive themselves as capable of producing knowledge. This perspective aligns with that of Palmer and her colleagues (2015), who claim that "undergraduate research, as a high-impact learning experience, [should show] learners what it means to be a person, a learner, an academic person and/or an investigator and member of a specific group" (418). Key links are found between mentored undergraduate research and identity development. UR experiences led the authors to conclude that students need early opportunities to practice research in their general education courses and WS learning communities. Moreover, they need to be mentored and taught the value of representing themselves as researchers both in and beyond formal academic spaces.

The next sections present three case studies on teaching and mentoring undergraduates about UR to frame specific recommendations for increasing access to UR in WS. These case studies show that WS offers multiple unique opportunities to engage with research.

Research Intensive Experience and the General Education Curriculum

As early as the first year, college and university students can be systematically introduced to UR. According to the National Census of Writing, 97 percent of four-year institutions and 75 percent of two-year institutions reported having "a first-year writing requirement whether explicit or embedded" (Gladstein and Fralix 2013, 2017). These statistics suggest that this mandatory WS course presents a strategic opportunity to incorporate research-intensive approaches into the curriculum. Note that the case studies and subsequent recommendations are focused on baccalaureate institutions; however, it is acknowledged that UR is a possibility at two-year institutions as well (although there may be labor complications; Kleinfeld 2020). As an initial step, instructors can help students begin to imagine themselves as researchers in first-year writing (FYW). Instructors may cite UR in course documents; assign UR in course texts such as Kinkead's (2015) *Researching Writing: An Introduction to Research Methods*, which includes UR essays, and the online journal *Young Scholars in Writing: Undergraduate Research in Writing and Rhetoric*, especially the "Spotlight on First-Year Writing"

section (Young Scholars in Writing 2021); refer students to the Council of Undergraduate Research and summer research opportunity programs; and promote some degree of public circulation of the students' own texts.

Furthermore, FYW students are probably already required to compose multipage or multimodal projects that at least partially produce acceptable outcomes of undergraduate research, as defined by the "CCCC [Conference on College Composition and Communication] Position Statement on Undergraduate Research in Writing." In the first case study, Lockett demonstrates that when students edit Wikipedia in her FYW courses, their efforts constitute "a genuine contribution, however modest, to public knowledge of writing, whether academic (e.g., disciplinary knowledge), professional, or community-based" (CCCC 2017).

First-year writing presents an invaluable opportunity to introduce first-year students to research as a fundamental part of their academic development and lifelong education. Lockett teaches the research process in this course to demystify academic writing conventions and make writing more meaningful to students. The institutional context is a small liberal arts HBCU for women. Through research motivated by the institution's mission, students are encouraged to establish a personal relationship to knowledge and connect their writing to broader public issues such as disinformation, anti-racism, or knowledge equity. To begin, students are required to read about Black women writers. For example, pieces like "Perspectives on the Intellectual Tradition of Black Women Writers" by Jacqueline Jones Royster (1990) and excerpts from *With Pen and Voice* by Shirley Wilson Logan (1995) provide students with a comprehensive set of references for hundreds of Black women writing since the eighteenth century. These readings serve two major purposes related to research.

First, they show students a wide scope of notable Black women who are not typically included in their formal education before undergraduate study. For example, they learn about the first American poets of African descent, Lucy Terry and Phyllis Wheatley Peters; slave narratives composed by authors like Harriet Jacobs (Linda Brent) and Asa Biggs; the first Black woman to give speeches in public, Maria Stewart; great educators and activists like Francis Ellen Watkins Harper, Fanny Jackson Coppin, and Anna Julia Cooper; and journalists such as Victoria Earle Matthews and Ida B. Wells. This comprehensive representation of Black women's intellectual and cultural contributions is provided in FYW for the purpose of motivating students to learn more about what they do not know about their herstory.

Second, Royster and Logan are affiliated with WS, which puts students into contact with its disciplinary methodologies and methods. Rarely, if ever, do first-year students

engage their assumptions about terms like *literacy*, *intellectualism*, or *citizenship*. Royster's critique of these terms, as they relate to the complex herstories of Black women's exclusion from mainstream public discourse, encourages students to think about how Sojourner Truth and Harriet Tubman wielded non-written literacies. Truth gave powerful speeches, actively participating in political life. Tubman could read the stars and utilized owl calls to help lead the enslaved to freedom. This broader conception of literacy opens students to the possibility of seeing their own mothers' journals, grandmothers' quilts, and ancestors' spirituals as critical archives. Seeing these women as makers of knowledge enables them to disassociate "Western civilization" from their dominant image of who and what counts as worth remembering and documenting.

Students compose brief summaries of scholarly texts like those of Royster and Logan, craft critical discussion questions, and reflect on their personal relationship to academic work during the first half of the course. These activities prepare students to begin recognizing their own voices through the mastery of writing in active voice. When students write about what authors and texts *do* instead of focusing solely on what they think or feel about texts, they tacitly prepare for the kind of source-driven neutrality performance required in both scholarly writing and Wikipedia editing.

During the latter half of the course, students are introduced to research strategies using public archives and the institution's library databases. In particular, the politics of citation are taught by showing students the existence of thousands of Black historical newspapers in online databases like Readex, ProQuest, and Digital Schomburg. *Freedom's Journal* (1827–1829), the first US Black newspaper, as well as *The Woman's Era* (1894–1897), the first paper for and by Black women, were explicitly political, advocating for better representation and treatment of Black people. These sources and hundreds of other Black newspapers offer a glimpse of the emergence of Black social life and citizenship. Their coverage demonstrates that colonization, sexism, and racial segregation influence source selection and fact-making, which enables students to further research intersections between race, class, gender, media, and authorship.

After examining how racial and gender segregation affect research and reporting, attention is turned to Wikipedia. Although the use of Wikipedia is typically discouraged throughout nearly all K–12 education (and beyond), it should be credited for being the most successful effort in human collective intelligence of all time. This free living digital archive leverages open-source software to showcase the enormous scope and scale of global multilingual human knowledge. Unfortunately, Wikipedia's coverage contains major race and gender gaps. Furthermore,

Western cultural perspectives are privileged over those of Eastern, African, and Indigenous societies. Consequently, Wikipedia underrepresents Black people's culture and herstory. By midterm, students are seeking ways to meaningfully address the marginalization of Black women in scholarly communities. Thus, research immersion leads them to experience the processes of building knowledge that they can share with the public. It focuses on their interest in a particular, notable, Black woman who lacks adequate coverage in Wikipedia.

For several weeks, students learn more about their subjects' lives and the contexts surrounding them. In lieu of a traditional culminating activity such as a research or argument paper, essay examination, or take-home test, students spend at least two full hours editing Wikipedia as their final exam. This is a flexible final—students choose from several time slots during which they can work with the instructor and their peers and utilize their completed research immersion worksheet. They also are required to do a final examination activity, in which they summarize their edits and compose a critical reflective analysis about their research and editing experience (Lockett 2018). With the support of the Wiki Education Foundation's tutorials, Dashboard, and technical assistants, student work is managed, and they are shown the impact of their contributions.

Onboarding of students as Wikipedia editors illustrates the potential for contemporary educators to move beyond the "five- to eight-page academic essay" (Lundin 2008; Montez 2017; Rault and Cowan 2017; Thorndike-Breeze, Musselman, and Carleton 2020; Vetter, McDowell, and Stewart 2019). Through a womanist, anti-racist pedagogical approach to research, students find themselves situated in a very specific ethical context, in which they see how research and knowledge is produced and see themselves as capable of entering that process to make a difference.

Research Intensive Experience and Writing Centers

Writing centers (WCs) are key learning communities that sponsor significant research in the field. These research sites exist at all four-year institutions (Gladstein and Fralix 2017). At WCs, "undergraduate research in writing can be curricular, co-curricular, or extracurricular. It can take place during a single quarter or semester, over a summer, or across a period of years" (CCCC 2017). In addition, WCs network with various institutional domains. These sites bring a diverse range of students, staff, and faculty into contact through tutoring, courses across disciplines, workshops, social events, public lectures, fellowships, and professional development initiatives. Such interaction presents organized and casual occasions to discuss WCs' relationship to opportunities that can be utilized to conduct and compose research. As Hart's case study demonstrates, campus working and learning spaces like WCs can both facilitate and serve as rich sites of observation about culture

and communication. At WCs, tutors can "take advantage of the access they have to other students' learning and writing both to apply the knowledge they have gained from their training and ongoing tutoring experiences, and to locate gaps in this knowledge that suggest possibilities for research" (Fitzgerald 2014, 98). Integrating research in pedagogical and workplace practices can cultivate citizen humanists, similar to citizen scientists, who produce knowledge for the purposes of widespread circulation. Such an approach presents opportunities to engage UR by contributing to data gathering and analysis for the purposes of benefiting the learning community or general public, as described in the narrative below.

Soon after completing a tutoring session with a student writer who disclosed dyslexia, an undergraduate peer writing consultant approached Hart seeking guidance. Although the director of Disability Services had facilitated a professional development discussion about learning differences, the consultants lacked in-depth training on dyslexic writers. To further her understanding, this consultant had chosen to conduct her own research. After providing her with a brief initial bibliography, Hart recommended that she apply to the Naylor Workshop on Undergraduate Research in Writing so she could meet and receive mentoring from other experts in the field and discuss tutoring experiences and strategies with other undergraduate writing tutors. It also was recommended that she apply for funding for summer research.

Motivated primarily by her concerns and interest as a practitioner, not as a scholar, she applied for and was accepted to both programs. For her summer research, she completed an IRB that allowed her to survey and interview dyslexic writers and fellow writing tutors, and she presented her research methods and initial findings to an interdisciplinary group of faculty and students on Allegheny's campus. At the Naylor Workshop, she received direct mentoring from coauthor Rebecca Babcock and other writing studies researchers with expertise in WCs and disability, collected additional literature recommendations, and compiled a list of strategies for assisting dyslexic writers. She put her research into action by producing professional development materials for the WC staff and leading a series of professional development meetings (first to present the findings of her research and then to guide her fellow consultants through scenarios and case studies). She also drew on her research to request funding from the director of the Learning Commons to purchase materials for dyslexic writers that adhered to principles of universal design (Ryan, Miller, and Steinhart, 2017).

The outcomes of this UR project were not traditional: the undergraduate researcher did not publish her findings in a scholarly journal or present them at an academic conference. However, her research had an impact on the

entire writing center staff and the writers with whom they engaged, because it produced professional resources for improving access in the learning space. The student also honed her proficiency as a writer, speaker, and researcher by initiating her own research process and directly communicating with her intended audiences.

Expanding definitions of UR to include such practical, local, and relatively small-scale projects can result in increased access by providing students with opportunities to leverage their work experiences and apply their findings more directly. The scope and scale of such projects also may reduce some perceived barriers for historically marginalized students, such as those from low-income backgrounds, who may have less experience with the standard literacies of academic writing culture and practice.

Research Opportunities and Marginalized Students

First-generation and low-income students may face multiple obstacles that negatively affect their participation in UR. These students often have extensive job and home responsibilities. Unfortunately, as WS scholar Jane Greer (2010) argues, "Too often, both the needs and the aptitudes of nontraditional students have been absent from discussions about the place of research in the undergraduate curriculum" (30). The requirements of these students should not inhibit mentors and instructors from creating flexible, meaningful UR opportunities for them.

Babcock shares the story of a nontraditional student in her early 40s, Aliethia Dean (name used with permission). She is a full-time mother of four who decided to come back to school when her youngest was a teenager and old enough to not need her care. Aliethia had dropped out of high school while pregnant to get married. She came from a white working-class family that did not value education for girls. She recalls her father asking her why she needed to go to school.

After a rocky start at the local community college at age 18, Aliethia started undergraduate study again at age 40. She seemed very engaged when the instructor discussed dialects in an English language class and eagerly volunteered when the instructor sought students for undergraduate research. The instructor's enthusiasm for the subject and open call for volunteers facilitated Aliethia's access to UR. Drawing upon the lived experiences of her friends and family, Aliethia produced a folk linguistic study of dialects in the oil field. She presented her research at the institution's yearly undergraduate research symposium. She followed up on the instructor's recommendations about ways to cultivate her research in WS, applying to and obtaining acceptance to the Naylor Workshop, the CCCC UR poster session, and the annual CCCC Research Network Forum. Although she had not intended on pursuing graduate studies, these experiences changed her mind. Aliethia realized that she could do serious intellectual work, so she applied

and was accepted to graduate school for an MA in English, with an assistantship and full tuition waiver. She wrote an excellent research-based thesis on writing centers and currently attends a prestigious PhD program. A single-author chapter based on the oil dialect study appears in an edited collection from a university press (Stief, Babcock, and Figgins 2021). After identifying with and being inspired by Elaine Richardson's (2013) story of overcoming life challenges to succeed educationally, she is in the process of writing her own memoir.

Recommendations

Integrate Research in Writing-Intensive Courses Across Curriculum

In addition to FYW courses, upper-level writing major and minor courses or writing-intensive courses as well as independent studies can offer students opportunities to observe the value of their knowledge and express themselves as capable, credible researchers. As Babcock's narrative demonstrates, UR also enables students and faculty to develop relationships driven by their mutual interests in making knowledge. In fact, students bring rich lived experiences to the classroom that can benefit faculty development. In their reflections about conducting a collaborative research project with undergraduates in an upper-division course, Toth, Reber, and Clark (2015) note that they lacked "the local knowledge" and "technological know-how" that their undergraduate coauthors possessed and thus could not have completed the project without the students' expertise (197–199). Their observations reinforce recommendations from the Boyer report, which suggests that scholar-teachers should involve all levels of students in their research (Boyer Commission on Educating Undergraduates in the Research University 1998).

Prepare Mentors to Support Any Student

Undergraduate research mentors in WS should seek ways to support any student by developing pipelines of opportunity across demographics and communities. Faculty mentors may need to explicitly identify their roles in facilitating UR. This is particularly important given recent findings from the Strada-Gallup Alumni Survey showing "that recent graduates who were first-generation undergraduate students or members of minority groups were substantially less likely to identify a professor as their mentor" (Fain 2018). Through WS courses, WCs, and other collaborative venues like the Naylor Workshop and CCCC poster sessions for UR, students can locate potential mentors.

Additionally, research sites like WCs can sponsor both faculty and peer mentoring. However, these experiences would be more widely available to students if WC directors hired more historically underrepresented students. Valles, Babcock, and Jackson (2017) recommend that writing center directors actively recruit a tutoring staff and directors that are "diverse in regards to race, language, and

able-bodiedness/disability.” UR faculty mentors should follow this practice by not assuming that a “certain type” of student does UR, such as traditionally aged, white, middle- and upper-class students with average GPAs of B+ or better. They should communicate the processes, opportunities, and benefits of UR to *all* of their students to recruit prospective scholars from culturally diverse backgrounds. Ideally, these students will enter the field, contribute to inclusive scholarship, and potentially become mentors to future undergraduate researchers.

Offer Avenues to Circulate Research

Writing studies faculty and UR mentors are encouraged to think expansively about the venues in which students might publish their work. Numerous models of public circulation exist, and readers are urged to imagine international and online spaces for future research. In the US context, these include:

- undergraduate conferences
 - *Local*—campus-wide research days or departmental programming (e.g., fourth-year conferences, poster sessions, thesis defense)
 - *Regional*—state-affiliated (e.g., Capital of Texas Undergraduate Research Conference); and regional writing center conferences (e.g., Mid-Atlantic, Southeastern, Pacific Northwest)
 - *National*—disciplinary events (e.g., National Conference on Peer Tutoring in Writing, CCCC UR poster sessions); interdisciplinary programs (e.g., National Honors Conference); and programs dedicated to the advancement of marginalized students (e.g., Ronald E. McNair Research Conference)
- undergraduate online research journals
 - *Local*—e.g., UTPB Journal of Undergraduate Research (2018)
 - *National*—e.g., Young Scholars in Writing (2021); The Dangling Modifier (2021); TheJUMP+ (2021).

The cost and admissions requirements of participating in these traditional venues varies widely. Local conferences may be free and invite interdisciplinary participation, whereas regional and national events likely require sponsorship for travel, lodging, and registration costs. Faculty mentors can help students access funding through academic departments, UR offices, and conference travel scholarships.

Underrepresented students need to be given opportunities to recognize their potential as researchers and encouraged to believe they are able to do research and should share it (Greer 2010; Hensel 2018; Kinzie et al. 2008). Through mentorship and other support, faculty and other researchers can give students opportunities to participate in disciplinary research cultures as “insiders” (Mendoza

and Louis 2018, 20). For example, Babcock’s student research partners are her official publication coauthors, and she acknowledges them that way on websites like ResearchGate. Similarly, by teaching Wikipedia editing Lockett offers a route of access to collaborative knowledge-making and circulation that students can do as part of her course and beyond. Students can edit anytime, independently or as part of online global community events like edit-a-thons sponsored by organizations like Art+Feminism, AfroCrowd, and Black Lunch Table. Similarly, Hart reduces barriers for distributing work by encouraging students to expand their understanding of suitable venues and genres for sharing applied research. Given public digital sites like Wikipedia and practical needs for knowledge resources in learning communities such as WCs, the circulation of UR in WS should not be restricted to academic publications.

Create and Support Research Centers for the Humanities

WS scholars should seek opportunities to create local and regional research centers, similar to the Pearce Center for Professional Communication in the Class of 1941 Studio for Student Communication at Clemson and the Noel Studio for Academic Creativity at Eastern Kentucky University. Also needed are institutes for UR in writing studies, like the Naylor Workshop for Undergraduate Research in Writing Studies at York College in Pennsylvania.

Conclusion

Writing studies colleagues are recommended to:

- Increase opportunities to engage in mentored UR in writing studies beginning in a student’s first year.
- Maintain and support the field’s broad conceptions of where research can happen (varied sites of research: archives, communities, writing centers, “everyday life” as a lab) and how research can be circulated (oral, written, multimodal, peer-reviewed and not).
- Recognize that contributions of undergraduate researchers to knowledge may be personal, local or institutional, disciplinary, or public.

As access to UR continues to be discussed, the complexity of factors that impact these recommendations is acknowledged. Institutional support for UR clearly depends on disciplinary value, recognition of UR as a high-impact practice (HIP) across disciplines, and whether the demographics of the institution are more likely to increase or decrease student access to HIPs. Conceptualization of access, then, is reliant on human, temporal, and academic support (Lockett et al. 2020).

Finally, remote and distance education students also should be included in UR recruitment efforts. The global pandemic has massively increased participation in online learning, but as the world returns to “normal” or continues

the pivot to remote instruction as COVID-19 cases and deaths increase from further contagious variants, the flexibility of virtual platforms should be leveraged. Although a detailed discussion of the current context is outside of the scope of this article, readers are invited to creatively imagine how the past two years have introduced freely accessible content and workshops that model the potential for more inclusive knowledge production.

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