

# Collaborating on Research with Undergraduate Students: A Comparative Institutional-Racial Analysis

Maruice Mangum, *Jackson State University, USA*

## ABSTRACT

This article describes my experiences in collaborating with undergraduate students on research projects, including published works in peer-reviewed outlets. The article discusses the courses and assignments that engendered the collaborations and compares the institutions and students. By describing several significant similarities and differences, I compare and contrast white students in The Midwest at Predominantly White Institutions with African American students at Historically Black Colleges and Universities in The South.

The Boyer Commission report (Boyer 1998) concluded that learning should be less reliant on traditional lecture pedagogy and conceived of as a more participatory endeavor involving undergraduate students in discovery directed by a mentor. The report argued that this would increase students' analytical and critical-thinking skills. Following the advice and guidance provided by the Boyer Commission, Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs) and Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) endeavored to make scholarship-based experiences a more common occurrence for undergraduate students.

This article describes my experiences involving undergraduate students in research and compares institutional settings and undergraduate students from two PWIs and four HBCUs. The PWIs are located in Illinois: one is a small, private liberal arts college in Rock Island and the other is a medium-sized public university in Edwardsville located in the St. Louis metropolitan area. The HBCUs—located in Houston, Texas; Greensboro, North Carolina; Normal, Alabama; and Jackson, Mississippi—are all public universities ranging from small to very large. In effect, I compare predominantly white students and institutions in The Midwest with chiefly African American students and institutions in The South. I do so from the perspective of a political scientist but also from the lens of an African American faculty member.

The following sections compare the institutions and the students. The first section describes the courses and assignments in which I involved undergraduate students in research. The second


section compares the institutions' level of resources and support for undergraduate research. The third section compares the students' backgrounds and their approach to the assignments, selection of research topics, performance on the assignments, responsiveness to feedback, overall grades, and conference presentation styles. The article concludes with a discussion of my experiences as a cautionary tale before describing the positive aspects of collaborating with undergraduate students.

## THE COURSES AND ASSIGNMENTS

At both PWIs and HBCUs, I participated in many efforts to assist undergraduate students with their research investigations. Almost all of these experiences took place as part of a course I was teaching. A scholarly research paper is a requirement in my scope and methods, capstone, and senior research seminar courses. The rationale for limiting these courses to particular students is to ascertain how well departments were educating their students. That is, the institutions required political science majors to take these courses as a culminating experience and for departmental assessment purposes.

These courses are required and offered only to seniors entering their final year and graduating seniors who are majoring in political science. Therefore, those students who are enrolled in these courses are near the completion of their college career. Presumably, they learned much about political science and developed and honed their analytical, communication, critical-thinking, and writing skills throughout the semesters. Although a scholarly research paper is still challenging for most undergraduate students, there were reasons to believe that they would be sufficiently successful to earn the credits necessary to satisfy the curriculum requirement.

In my courses, students primarily worked on their own research paper but, in some instances, were allowed to partner

Dr. Maruice Mangum  is professor and chair of the political science department at Jackson State University. He can be reached at maruicemangum@yahoo.com.

---

with one or two other students. Whether as individuals or in groups, they developed expertise in an area of American politics, learned the scientific method, gained a greater understanding of and an appreciation for what professors do outside of the classroom, and acquired and honed important skills while studying a subject matter of interest to them.

first-generation students are disadvantaged academically compared with continuing-generation students (Stephens et al. 2014). I believe that it affects their self-esteem, self-expectations, and preparedness. The HBCU students had a more diminished sense of self-worth and modest self-expectations, and they lacked the psychological and often the educational preparation to suc-

## *This article describes my experiences involving undergraduate students in research and compares institutional settings and undergraduate students from two PWIs and four HBCUs.*

Like many other instructors who supervise student research in the classroom, and to ensure completion of their research paper, I separated portions of it as individual assignments. By separating the research enterprise into a series of writing assignments, I could read them, offer feedback, and allow resubmissions so that students could earn a higher grade. The literature review was due first, followed by their theory section. Students then completed the data and methods section, followed by the abstract and the introduction. Unfortunately, students were not prepared to conduct the empirical analyses; therefore, they ultimately did not need to write a findings or a results section and a conclusion.

Although the ultimate goal was to publish the research papers, it was not feasible in the time frame of one semester. When I did publish studies with undergraduate students—all from HBCUs—it was because they sought additional time and gave extra effort to publish before they graduated.

### **INSTITUTIONS COMPARED**

Resources and a commitment to the Boyer Commission report vary by institution. Although the PWIs had resources, they tended to neither encourage nor support involving undergraduate students in research. The small, private college focused heavily on teaching and the faculty did not publish articles. Although they engaged in scholarly activities, publishing original research did not occur. The HBCUs lacked resources and they were divided in their encouragement and support of undergraduate research. The Texas and Mississippi HBCUs were supportive; the North Carolina and Alabama HBCUs were not. Beyond STEM research, the North Carolina HBCU did not understand why disciplines in the behavioral sciences and

ceeded in college. As a result, I spent much more time with the HBCU students than with the PWI students to motivate them, serve as a cheerleader, and help them cope with the challenges and rigors of college life. The additional time spent with the HBCU students allowed us to get to know one another and engage in conversations that I did not have the opportunity to do with the PWI students. The positive outcome of these interactions with the HBCU students is that we are still close and maintain regular communication.

Students from PWIs and HBCUs differed in how they approached the research paper. PWI students were more confident that they would perform well but they did not want to write the paper. HBCU students were less confident that they could write a scholarly research paper, but they were excited to study subject matter that they found interesting, which usually was not the case in their other courses.

The students also differed in the topics they chose to study and the research questions they aimed to answer. Because of my research focus as an American politics scholar who specializes in public opinion with an emphasis on race, my list of suggestions was mostly about public opinion on race-based policies, testing race-based theories, and topics that addressed inequality and differences among the races. However, I made it abundantly clear to all of my students that they were not required to select one of those ideas. The only conditions were that their selection must be possible to complete within one semester and that they must use the American National Election Study as the source of the data. Students at the PWIs avoided my list of research topics. Instead, they wanted to write about public opinion on the environment, finding the correlates for believing in the American dream, and other topics that relegated inequality and gender to a low priority.

## *Students from PWIs and HBCUs differed in how they approached the research paper.*

humanities would conduct research, especially with undergraduate students.

### **STUDENTS COMPARED**

My direct experience in conducting research with undergraduate students at PWIs and HBCUs has yielded several observations. An overwhelming number of HBCU students were first-generation college students; some of the PWI students were as well, but most were not. The discrepancy between HBCU and PWI students in terms of generational experience in college is important because

Most unexpected was the number of PWI students who wanted to write on and confirm the conspiracy theories that they heard from right-wing media. Several wanted to write pro-Trump, anti-Hillary Clinton, or anti-Barack Obama papers. A few topic suggestions were especially disturbing because they seemed to justify white supremacy. Students at the HBCUs were thrilled that they could write about political and social matters of social justice, inequality, and gender. They were excited to be able to discuss racial issues. It seemed as though they were eager for an opportunity to research topics that were relevant to their lives. Therefore,

the HBCU students and I wrote papers on affirmative action, immigration, structural racism in law enforcement, and the African American sociopolitical experience.

Some professors may not think it a good idea to include undergraduate students in their research. They may believe that research requires a level of thinking that undergraduates are not capable of doing—or that scholarly activities are too time consuming for which students will make neither the time nor the effort. These professors may be correct in some instances; however, when the course is required and the assignments are spaced throughout the semester, students can meet the challenges. Moreover, there are aspects of the research paper that undergraduates can do well. For example, students at both PWIs and HBCUs were exceptional in writing their introduction and the data and methods section. Where they differed most notably was in writing the literature review and theory sections; PWI students were more proficient. Although neither PWI nor HBCU students did enough reading, the former were more likely to read and comprehend the research articles than the latter. Perhaps this was the case because the PWI students were more familiar with the writing styles of the articles because the articles they used to write their literature review and serve as the foundation of their theories were written by scholars who likely share the same worldview, vocabulary, and background.

Accepting guidance, feedback, and criticism was another area of contrast between the PWI and HBCU students. Students at the HBCUs tended to take direction, accepted my comments, and followed instructions well; the PWI students balked at virtually every turn. The HBCU students were coachable, willing to do what

studies and be disciplined when necessary, and possessed the educational skills to succeed in writing a scholarly research paper for an undergraduate course.

Since this experience of collaborating with undergraduate students on research in the classroom, I have had the great joy of traveling with them to disseminate our scholarship. At one of the PWIs and two of the HBCUs, I chaperoned trips to conferences to present our research. Although some students participated to take advantage of an all-expenses-paid trip, they nevertheless met the challenge and delivered their papers like seasoned presenters. Of course, we prepared and rehearsed for many hours before embarking on these trips. Even when presenting their research, I found differences between the PWI and HBCU students. The HBCU students had a folksy and charismatic style whereas the PWI students did not stray from their PowerPoint slides, even sometimes reading verbatim from them. It appeared that the HBCU students were not as nervous as the PWI students; they likely found their self-confidence and voice during the writing process. The PWI students simply were not as dynamic or engaging with the audience as the HBCU students.

#### CONCLUSION

Consider this article a warning and a cautionary tale intended to describe what to expect when conducting research with undergraduate students at PWIs and HBCUs. One factor that is beneficial is to be excited to work with students. If you are excited, then they also will become enthusiastic. Bring your energy and your patience, and students will respond positively.

*Consider this article a warning and a cautionary tale intended to describe what to expect when conducting research with undergraduate students at PWIs and HBCUs.*

I suggested, and easy to work with on the research papers. However, the PWI students questioned my credentials, tried to fact-check me on the spot by Googling my statements, and referenced how assignments were done in other courses. A few weeks into the semester, the PWI students ceased being so difficult. My suspicion is that they became more agreeable because the assignments were coming due and the midterm evaluations were looming. They also likely realized that an overall grade would be forthcoming at the end of the semester, at which time the research papers were completed by both HBCU and PWI students. It took more time to win over the PWI students but, ultimately, we all enjoyed the experience.

Notwithstanding the differences between the settings and the students, the grade outcomes were similar for both the PWI and the HBCU students. A significant minority received an A grade; most students received a B grade for the course. Because a minimum C grade was required for the course credits to count toward graduation, almost all of the students worked diligently to fulfill the requirement. Very few students received a D or an F grade. This grade distribution should not be surprising. Because they were seniors entering their final year or graduating seniors in their final semester, these were experienced college students who had taken several political science courses and completed many semesters. They had established study habits, could focus on their

Collaborating with undergraduate students on research projects is exhausting and time consuming. With all of the knowledge that they have acquired and the skills that they have developed during their education, undergraduates still need a significant amount of guidance to write a scholarly research paper. This is true for students who attend a PWI or an HBCU. From their perspective, they are asked to do what they are not yet qualified to do. They have not obtained their bachelor degree, yet they are undertaking an activity that individuals with PhDs are doing. Understandably, they are insecure. Therefore, it is imperative to set their mind at ease with encouragement and support throughout the entire semester.

Why do I stay in the foxhole with undergraduate students when it can be so challenging? I will continue to teach scope and methods, capstone, and senior research seminar courses because of the benefits for my students. The students undoubtedly will hone valuable skills and a lifelong friendship can be established as a result of our collaboration, but there is much more at stake. The ultimate goal is for us to publish as coauthors. Imagine the rewards that undergraduate students will reap when they publish an article. They will be sought after for advanced degrees in political science and secure admission and funding more easily amid great competition from other students with similarly high—if not higher—standardized test scores, GPAs, and pedigrees.

---

Publishing an article is even more of a bonus for HBCU students, where the reputation of their institution is sometimes a barrier. Typically, HBCUs are not held in high regard. To be able to demonstrate the ability to conduct original research will help them overcome the obstacle of structural racism in higher education.

Despite its challenges, I relish the opportunity to work with undergraduate students on research for several reasons. First, I believe wholeheartedly in the benefits that students will reap. They will become more confident in their abilities and grow in self-esteem because they are undertaking unique activities, creating knowledge, and providing insight and answers to political phenomena. Second, I want students to develop and hone their analytical, critical-thinking, and writing skills. It is my belief that they will become better students, more attractive in the job market, and lifelong learners as a result of the writing experience. Third, I enjoy encouraging and mentoring students. I believe that I have more to offer in terms of mentorship and advice than lecture notes. More important, my background and life experiences are similar to the many African American students I have taught at HBCUs and PWIs. Fourth, I love interacting with students, and collaborating on research provides another opportunity to engage with them. The added benefit is that we build a

rapport based on matters that are more aligned with my research agenda. Also, it was fun to travel to conferences with them. Fifth, I want more of my students to enter academia because being a professor is a great occupation, molding minds and creating knowledge. Moreover, students from various backgrounds—especially HBCU students—are needed in the profession because they will ask different research questions and explain phenomena in a different manner. In other words, they will bring something to the table and potentially contribute greatly to the body of knowledge.

#### CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The author declares that there are no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research. ■

---

#### REFERENCES

- Boyer Commission on Education of Undergraduates in the Research University. 1998. *Reinventing Undergraduate Education: A Blueprint for America's Research Universities*. Stony Brook, NY: State University of New York.
- Stephens, Nicole, Stephanie Fryberg, Hazel Markus, Camille Johnson, and Rebecca Covarrubias. 2012. "Unseen Disadvantage: How American Universities' Focus on Independence Undermines the Academic Performance of First-Generation College Students." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 102 (6): 1178–97.