

# On Faculty/Student Research

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Every once in awhile, I am asked to give a talk about a topic that is so obviously important that I wonder what I can possibly say that would be of value. Such is the case this evening. Faculty/student research seems so obviously good, for all parties, that I have a hard time adding anything to the conversation. A good talk requires a bit of friction. You've got to address questions that people genuinely hold. But what are the questions about faculty/student research? Who is not for it? How many demonstrations have you witnessed against faculty/student research?

And yet, a great many faculty do not find themselves engaged in faculty/student research. So perhaps we don't think it's so valuable after all. Or perhaps the rhetoric has difficulty matching the reality. Why is it that we don't engage in faculty/student research more frequently - within the academy? And at Westmont College?

There are some obvious answers. In the first place, there are a great many faculty out there in the academy who aren't engaged in much research period. They don't do faculty/student research because they don't do faculty research. Something has happened along the way to discourage them, or disable them, and they have left the research task to others. That seems to me to be a tragedy, but I won't judge them too harshly at this point. I have spoken to too many faculty, at too many institutions, over too many years that have discontinued research - not because something changed in their hearts - but because the priorities set by their environment didn't allow it. Perhaps that's too harsh, since humans set priorities, environments don't.

Nevertheless, it is clearly the case that sometimes teaching loads, institutional responsibilities, low pay, family concerns, community involvements, all conspire to make research a difficult endeavor. Again, that seems like a tragedy to me. It's something like planting a palm tree in New England. It might survive, but if you were going to grow a palm tree, why not stick it in Santa Barbara, where it can flourish? That's probably a bad metaphor, since palm trees aren't indigenous to Santa Barbara either. But at least they grow well here. And we ought not to invest staggering sums of money and time, growing a heart that loves research, and then put it in an environment that doesn't allow it to flourish. I pray we will not do that at Westmont, and one of my objectives is to make sure that doesn't happen.

Another reason that faculty/student research doesn't occur, however, is that it's not always clear to the faculty member how students might actually participate in the process. That's perhaps truer in the Social Sciences and Humanities than in the Natural Sciences. I am a theoretician, for example, in the Social Sciences. Throughout graduate school, I was not encouraged nor shown how to do collaborative research. Instead, the idea was, you go off to the library, comb the literature, and come up with your own creative ideas.

Collaboration occurred in the interchange of ideas, but not in the execution of research. That was a lonely task.

It was not until my second year as a faculty member that my own students forced me to change my mind. I have told this story to a few of you, so forgive me if I'm repeating myself. But at one point, during registration for the next term, four of my very brightest students asked me if I would meet with them regularly to study a French social and political thinker by the name of Jacques Ellul. I had introduced them to Ellul earlier that year and they wanted to pursue his thinking in more depth. I quickly told them that I would go them one better - that I would create a seminar on the Sociology of Ellul and we would meet one night a week, read one of his books each week, and see what the fellow really had to say. I won't bore you with the whole story, but suffice it to say: we engaged in collaborative research on the ideas of Jacques Ellul.

Out of that seminar, came four papers, each showing the input of the other members of the seminar. I was pushed by my students (and vice-versa) to think about the relationship between religion and modern culture in ways that I had not thought about it before. My writing agenda changed because of that seminar, and the lives of each of those students changed as well. Indeed, prior to that seminar, one wanted to pursue a career in professional soccer, one wanted to meditate, one wanted to get married, and one wanted to please his parents. After that year, however, one became an Episcopal priest and chaplain at a New England prep school, one became a nationally recognized scholar, one became an attorney in Washington DC, and one wound up building ecologically-sound houses in New England.

But that misstates the case, because it suggests that research inevitably leads to social accomplishment. We know that's not the case. Research often ends up in failure. What collaborative research always does, however, is make us think better about our subject. It enables students to understand a pattern of critical thought. It's a form of apprenticeship-learning, with the student being plugged into a more experienced mentor, and feeling from the inside what it's like to take on a research project.

For the faculty member, it's an act of teaching and learning. An act, which begins with very little reward and great deal of time, but ends in expanded insights and the joy of seeing real learning take place. Sometimes it can be revolutionary in a faculty member's life, but not usually. Almost always, however, it is revolutionary in the life of a student. And that makes it worth it in the long run.

I've talked too long for someone who didn't have anything to say. Let me close by simply thanking the Faculty Research Committee for pulling this conference together and for reminding us of one of the great joys of our life as scholars. In my opinion, Westmont has already taken the lead in pursuing faculty/student collaborative research. But we can do better and that's what I trust this workshop will help us to do