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An interview with faculty sponsor Lee Pierce

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An interview with faculty sponsor Lee Pierce

Dimitri Wing-Paul

What does undergraduate research mean to you?

I think about undergraduate research as putting containers around things. So, part of the reason that you go to college is to learn containers. Containers can be interpersonal communication theory or immediacy theory or a certain model of communication for us. And your job at the stage one of the research is, I think, to go find something that fits that model and putting a container around the thing. What I like to see in the second stage is the container and the thing are pushed back against each other. So, instead of just taking an idea and saying, "Oh, I found an example of that," I would like you to say, "Well, this example would not quite fit," and so how does that then make us have to rethink about the container or rethink about the model. And I think that is what research comes from because you just do not take research and say, "Okay, this works perfectly and I found it!" You have to also say, "Oh, there is a shortcoming to this research," and then that's when you actually now contribute something original to the process.

Describe your mentorship role in facilitating the project.

I am a very deep editor. I have worked draft after draft after draft of students' projects. There were three types of projects that I have sponsored. They were panels and there were projects that I have cherry picked from different classes that I have taught over the year, just for the students to come and bring their projects out to the world. One was a research project that we are hoping to get published in [another] journal. Another one was a film that one of my students made about microaggressions. My hand in the process was really to dig in to their work. I know a lot of people were like, "Oh, I have to stay hands off because I really like students to work independently for their projects." But for me, I do not think that my editing, revising, and suggesting research and sending the students into different directions and wanting them to do different things are taking the project away from them. I just think that the students are new to the process. Since students are in undergraduate level, they are being asked to work at a level that is so far above where they may naturally be. Without me as a silent co-author on the work, I do not see how they are supposed to get it to the next level.

What characteristics about the project do you believe made it successful?

I think taking something from research that everyone knows about and putting a twist on it, so that you go, "Oh, I have never thought about it that way." Erik Buckingham's project was on the horror film *Get Out*. Erik read everything that anyone had written about the film. There are tons of stuff! I sat down with him and said, "Show me something about this film that would not occur to me just by watching it." I call that kindergarten: any six-year-old could watch the film and be like, "Oh, this paper is really good at critiquing white, liberal racism. I do not need to be a scholar to get that." It is about finding something in there that would not be immediately visible to someone who did not have the training. The same thing is true in SK's work on microaggressions [*Mosquito Bites*]. If he not done in-depth interviewing, I am not sure if he would have been able to find something different about understanding microaggressions.