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An interview with faculty advisor Maria Lima

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An interview with faculty advisor Maria Lima

Dimitri Wing-Paul

What does undergraduate research mean to you?

Ah; it's interesting that you wanted to start with...of course, since this is mostly an undergraduate school. Maybe we could start with what research means to the students, right? Because I do not know what undergraduate research means to me because unfortunately, when I went to college a hundred years ago, there was no such thing. When I went to school, the system was the banking system: The teacher knows; they lecture, you take notes, and then you vomit the notes back in the exam. Paulo Freire, a brilliant Brazilian educator, writes in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* that everything is wrong with the banking system because number one, students are passively consuming someone else's knowledge and that is not real knowledge. He wants knowledge to be consciousness raising. So for me, undergraduate research I cannot speak from that angle because I learned then what education should *not* be like. I tell my students here that I was very bored between 1970 and 1974.

What I consider crucial for my students is their ability to identify areas of real interest, things that they really want to know and pursue on their own. You know, find their questions and find their own answers, which is what education should be all about. Even my regular classes, I do not give prompts for papers because I tell them the paper has to find you. So, each student writes a different paper; they write three papers and all the papers are different from each other because they choose the text, they choose the argument. We meet if they are insecure to try out an idea or a focus for the paper. So, research should be at the core of true and real learning. So, for me, it's good to do it every time I teach. But what GREAT [Day] does and how students benefit from learning to present at a conference and eventually publish their work takes their knowledge a step further. I am already contacting students who wrote the best research papers for my Black Atlantic Novels course last semester to get a panel together for GREAT Day. "Research" is the term that kind of disguises what is really true ownership of knowledge. When I say let the paper find you, we always get interested in different things. So yeah, that's what research means to me. It's kind of my way of looking at it; it's called true learning.

Describe your mentorship role as a faculty sponsor.

I have been mentoring many students—both English and Comparative Literature majors—for their honors theses or capstone projects. It is a year-long process, and most of the time, the capstone becomes a GREAT Day presentation. I make the GREAT Day presentation a requirement for both the Women and Gender Studies and the Black Studies capstone projects. Presenting in GREAT Day is part of the picture, it's part of the grade, it's part of the requirement because I tell my students you can be a great writer, but unless you are able to present your ideas, to make people understand the argument and where you are coming from, entertain questions at the end, you did not get it yet. Because in the real world, you have to be able to successfully argue, make a presentation even if you work for the World Bank, you have to be able to make your ideas understood. And most of the time, the best writer would persuade other people to see with them. So, the mentorship is a year-long process. Once they identify a text that they are interested, you know, in the first semester they are doing research. They are looking at the existing conversations on the author, right? And then they will go into the research, they only have to do an annotated bibliography at that point because you need to see what the existing conversation on the author [is] to actually decide what is you want to argue that is different from the existing conversation. I mean if it has been published before, what is the value of doing it? They research in the first semester [with] an annotated bibliography at the end and then they'll write the paper the second semester. The second semester is usually in the Spring with the GREAT Day presentation as part of the requirement. And then if they are lucky, they will get to publish it.

Some students are scared to be published because they are going to apply for graduate school, and want to save the publication for later. And some students they are English majors and they are brilliant but they do not want to get into grad school; they want to go Peace Corps or something, you know what I mean. So, I guess some of them choose not to get published.

What characteristics about the presentations do you believe makes it successful?

I see the value in a panel, when there is a formal, either a PowerPoint presentation with the full argument [and] with research backup, at least [there is] a twenty-five minute interaction between the presentation and a question and an answer period. You know, a student reads a paper or presents a PowerPoint or whatever it is, and then there is some kind of conversation at the end.

What impact does undergraduate research have on Geneseo culture and on higher education in general?

It is true that Geneseo students are driven. They really work very hard, and we do have the reputation of “The Ivy” of the SUNY system. I've been the University Faculty Senator for Geneseo for many years. So I know we do have a reputation that is really

important for the college, now getting grants, getting recognition, and even SUNY really listens when Geneseo speaks. That is part of the picture, but most benefit comes to the individual students to be empowered early on to be a knowledge producer. Rather than the banking system that I told you about; rather than banking on someone else's knowledge, the students see themselves as knowledge producers.