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Celebrating Ten Years in Publication

Brigid C. Casellini

University of New Hampshire - Main Campus

Jennifer Lee

University of New Hampshire - Main Campus

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Inquiry Journal

Undergraduate Research Journal : Spring 2014

Feature Articles

Celebrating Ten Years in Publication

—Brigid C. Casellini, Jennifer Lee

The 2014 issue of Inquiry marks the tenth anniversary of the University of New Hampshire's undergraduate research journal, published annually online each spring. Inquiry is funded out of a generous endowment from [Mr. Dana Hamel](#).

From the first issue in 2005, the journal has been unique in that it is multi-disciplinary, has a volunteer student editorial board, and aims to be informative and interesting to an audience of both academic and general readers. Over the past ten years, Inquiry has expanded its goals and content; however, its original goal has not changed: to share the research conducted by UNH undergraduates with a broad, international audience.

Over 150 authors, UNH undergraduates or recent graduates, have reported on research in more than thirty disciplines. They have described their research results and experiences in such varied subjects as studio art, physics, chemical engineering, music, history, biology and political science. They have carried out their projects on campus and in far off sites such as Japan, Australia, Africa, and Siberia.

Hearing from Readers Worldwide

The online format makes Inquiry available worldwide, and we have heard from readers around the globe as well as in the U.S. and on campus. In the first issue (2005), Benjamin R. Powers, a psychology major, explored the question "Why do Athletes Use Eye Black?" A reporter for The New York Times, researching the same question, interviewed Professor Kenneth Fuld, Powers' mentor. In a 2006 Times article the reporter referred to information from the interview and Powers' article.

"Producing Biodiesel from Jatropha in Egypt: The Research of Emmanuel Pitia," a feature article by student editor Tammy Wolf in the 2007 issue, brought responses from India, Honduras, Zimbabwe, Argentina, South Africa, and Malaysia. Pitia and his mentor Professor Ihab Farag responded, resulting in international connections for Professor Farag and his biodiesel group. Closer to home, a high school student in Pennsylvania asked for help with her science fair project of making jatropha biofuel.

That same issue carried a commentary by history major David Palange, "Reading Letters Not Addressed to Me: An

Examination of the Personal Correspondence of New England Soldiers.” Perhaps it was the connection with Memorial Day, but newspapers around the region immediately responded with feature stories and requests for interviews. The Boston Globe asked David to read letters in an online audio slideshow to accompany their story. The Union Leader, the Sunday Rutland Herald, the Times Argus, and the Eagle Tribune all carried stories. New Hampshire Public Television filmed a segment with David to run with Ken Burns’ series “The War.” David’s mentor, William Ross, professor and head of Special Collections at the Dimond Library, received many requests from teachers for scans of the letters. A 2006 graduate from Keene State College was inspired by David’s research and wrote Inquiry that “When papers like Dave’s are displayed, it gives [students] the feeling and dream that they could accomplish something.”

Many other readers have sent requests to reprint or cite an Inquiry article, to interview an author, or for more information for their own research on the same subject. It’s very gratifying for all involved in the journal to know that it is widely read.

Student Researchers Become Writers

The authors, of course, are the heart of this journal, and they work tirelessly from October through March to write and revise their articles and commentaries for publication each April. The process can be challenging, but it teaches the authors the importance of writing for a general audience. “It forced me to communicate an abstruse and scholarly topic in succinct and direct language,” stated one author. “It changed the way I thought about the editing process.”

“This process greatly improved my writing,” is the comment most frequently heard from our contributors, many of whom go on to graduate school or careers in which their ability to effectively convey topics in their field is highly valued. Learning to write for a wide audience is a skill not mastered by many until much later in their careers, and the opportunity to do so as an undergraduate sets our authors apart. “I was able to take a long research paper and transform it into an informative, reader-friendly article,” said one author. “It was a great feeling.”

The importance of word choice when addressing this broad audience is something our authors readily acknowledge, and this is where working closely with a student editor benefits them. “It was very helpful to see what some may not intuitively understand,” explained one author. “As a scientist there are so many words I use regularly without realizing that they are not part of the general public’s vocabulary.”

“I recall that my thesis was not too clear when I started,” said another author. “My editor helped me figure it out. Looking back, it’s hard to believe that something so fundamental was so fuzzy at the start. I think that many people may underestimate this important benefit of writing for Inquiry.”

For many of our authors, their Inquiry article is their first published work and also represents one of their first real research experiences, a feat not all students accomplish at the undergraduate level. This combination often inspires future research and writing.

One of Inquiry’s first (2005) authors, Douglas Holmes, published an article entitled “Controlling the Morphology of Composite Latex Particles.” Looking back, Holmes explains, “Ten years ago, I was an aspiring chemist who wanted to be a physicist doing research in a chemical engineering lab. I was studying how latex particles form. I didn’t realize it at the time, but this research experience marked the beginning of a fascination with the shape of objects.” He went on to study polymer science during graduate school at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, and now examines

the mechanics of slender structures as an assistant professor of engineering science and mechanics at Virginia Tech.

"The mechanics of these thin objects are fascinating. I get to ask fun questions like, why does a Slinky stretch and flop with such beautiful curves? Why do toy poppers jump high off the table with an audible 'pop'? How do we understand and control these shape changes to design new materials and technologies? There are wonderful questions in the world around us waiting to be answered," he says. "All you need is a little curiosity, creativity, and the courage to look for them."

Student Editors Coach their Peers

Members of Inquiry's student editorial board work closely with the authors throughout the year. They are undergraduates from many different disciplines who want hands-on editorial experience while at the same time improving their own writing. They all agree that being an editor has taught them patience and tact along with how to meet a production schedule. Above all, they have learned how to be effective and efficient writers in their own work.

For many editors the experience with Inquiry has proved beneficial in their careers after graduation. Kristin Brodeur ('10) found her three-year stint as editor very useful in successfully pursuing a career in editing and publishing. "Inquiry helped me practice and expand my skills as an editor," she said, "and made me realize that I was meant to pursue a career in publishing." Kristin finished a masters in publishing and writing from Emerson College, then spent a year with publisher David R. Godine before moving on to her current position as a digital production associate at Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

Another three-year editor, Alex Miklos ('10), found his Inquiry experience of working closely with another student useful when, after graduation, he participated in student mentoring programs in Connecticut and New York City (after a stint in Brazil with Habitat for Humanity.) What he learned about writing, he reported, "has helped me with the creation of marketing and recruitment literature for several non-profit organizations" and in his work as lead blogger for United Way. Alex is presently in the admissions office of Post University in Connecticut. He hopes someday to run a high school mentoring program and to that end is pursuing a master's in education online at Southern New Hampshire University. "My time as editor for Inquiry is still one of my most cherished memories of UNH," he wrote.

Some editors are also authors and therefore have seen the writing and editing process from both sides. Cory McKenzie ('14) wrote Inquiry articles for the 2012 and 2013 issues and, curious to see the editorial process "from the other side," became an editor in 2013. He reports, "I learned to respect the stresses that the editors have to deal with, such as getting articles completed on time and helping writers clearly convey their ideas. At the same time, I also knew what it felt like to be a writer having to write and rewrite an article . . . [or having] to cut a beloved word or sentence from the text in the final month of revisions." About to graduate in May, Cory feels that "both editing and writing for Inquiry benefited my ability to write and communicate more clearly."

Katy Sternberger ('13), a three-year editor for Inquiry, became an author for this issue and wrote an alum commentary. "I thoroughly enjoyed my experience with Inquiry," she said, "and what I have learned will always be of use to me, professionally and personally. Serving as an editor taught me the values of collaboration and communication, while serving as a writer taught me how to synthesize my own research into an article suitable for a general audience."

It is a pleasure for us, the staff, to guide the student author-editor pairs and watch them develop into close and

effective teams. Learning that kind of teamwork is one of Inquiry's goals.

Faculty Mentors and Undergraduate Research

Undergraduate research would not happen at UNH without the support of faculty mentors. They work with the students to develop research projects, write grant proposals, and then may also help revise the researcher's Inquiry article for accuracy and completeness. Over 100 different faculty members have served as mentors to Inquiry authors since its inaugural issue in 2005; some have mentored multiple authors such as Gene Harkless with nine authors, including one in this issue. We are grateful to them for their participation, guidance, and expertise, and are pleased to report that many of them value the opportunity as well.

Brett Gibson, mentor for a 2014 author, has mentored numerous students in his lab, many of whom have gone on to graduate school. Enthusiastic about Inquiry's potential for helping science students reach a broader audience in their writing, he notes, "One of the great challenges scientists have is conveying their research in an accessible form to the lay population. Even the best scientists struggle with this skill."

Jeannie Sowers, mentor for a 2014 author and frequent mentor of undergraduates, notes that this skill is equally important for students in the liberal arts. "In political science, you need to be able to make complex political issues accessible for a wider audience," she says, pointing out that "learning to present your research across disciplines and in multiple venues is an even more important skill with the spread of the internet and social media as important means of communication."

Mentors also benefit from the relationship by learning from their students. John Cerullo has mentored several Inquiry authors, including one in this issue. He commented, "In all cases when students of mine have submitted work to Inquiry, they have taken the subject matter we had initially discussed in a direction all their own, which I could not have foreseen. In all cases, I have wound up learning far more about the subject than I have taught."

Many mentors have thanked us for working with students to master the final step in the research process: the sharing of not only results but also of experiences. In 2010, to recognize faculty mentors, we began Mentor Highlights in which we interview two faculty members about their mentoring experiences.

The Next Ten Years

A fourth and last goal of Inquiry is to inspire undergraduates with examples of the wide range of research carried out by their peers. Our authors recount their successes and also the many setbacks and frustrations they encountered and how they coped. Measuring instruments fail, samples die or are contaminated, rats won't cooperate, not enough interviewees, not enough time—it's all part of research. Yet they all agree that the long hours of work were worth it. Somehow they learned a lot, grew as a person and a researcher, and are ready for more.

When researchers write about their work, especially for general readers and academics outside their discipline, they are forced to be precise and concise. They must clarify, define, and explain basic, familiar (to them) terms and procedures. They must write in a compact, efficient manner. This is as true in music as it is in astrophysics. In Inquiry's writing and revision process, they learn more about their own discipline and work.

As senior editors, we learn much during the yearlong process that goes into the articles and commentaries of each issue. We gain knowledge we never thought we would have or want, and we learn more about our own area of

research: writing, editing and publishing. We look forward to the next ten years.

All articles mentioned can be found in the current issue or in the Inquiry archives.

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