



Guest Editorial—“Obstacles and Opportunities in Undergraduate Research”

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A week and a half ago, I turned in a six-hundred-page manuscript to a press for peer review. It began its journey seventeen years ago as my undergraduate thesis. In fact, it is the second book to grow out of my thesis. Who knows how many more will come out of it? I will never be done with my undergraduate research.

The reason my undergraduate research has generated so much scholarship, I believe, is that its path was littered with obstacles. I had at first wanted to write on another topic, a more predictable one, and, I now believe, a far less interesting one than the books I eventually wrote. I had applied for funding to go to Europe the summer before my senior year and do archival research. I wanted to explore the technology used in stage machinery for plays at Versailles in 17th-century France. But my application was denied. I was crushed! That summer, I moped around, frustrated that I did not have the opportunity to pursue the ideal sources for my wished-for subject.

At last, I decided that if I couldn't get to Europe, then I needed to find a topic where I wouldn't be at a disadvantage in terms of sources. I had to get creative. I looked for a topic for which archival sources were not known to exist, but which were abundant in more legendary and fictional accounts that I could access. Instead of the rather mundane technology I longed to work on, I wrote about dreams for impossible, wished-for, non-existent technology. That led to my first book, a history of wish lists, a fascinating genre that, I was amazed to discover, had never before been researched. It also, eventually, led to many, many archival trips where I uncovered, not actual machinery - but actual lists full of wishes from centuries past. It has been a thrilling journey that has not yet ended.

Undergraduate research is hard. You run into many roadblocks along the way: Sources you cannot access. Languages you cannot read. Skills you lack. Writer's block. No funds for travel. Not enough time. Talk to anyone working on their senior thesis and they can tell you about these, and more. But, each of those obstacles is a chance for you to strengthen your tenacity and challenge your creativity. That denial of funding my senior year has since opened many, many doors, offering me the opportunities to exercise those crucial skills that the challenges of my senior thesis developed. Those two skills - grit and creativity- are the real prize you win from undergraduate research. They will take you very far.