GUEST EDITORIAL

Going the Extra Mile: The Rewards of Publishing Your Undergraduate Research

SHEILA BROWNLOW
Catawba College

Although most psychologists are naturally curious and truly enjoy conducting and publishing their research, many "must" do so for job security. On the other hand, publishing your research as an undergraduate is not necessary for graduation or to meet class requirements, and there are few immediate rewards for the endeavor. Moreover, publishing your work is not an easy thing to do, and even the best scientists and most prolific researchers will acknowledge the difficulty and frustration inherent in the process. For example, you might start out with an interesting empirical question and find that it mutates into a monster that controls your life. You will put in more time, energy, and effort than could possibly be fairly compensated by course grades or independent study hours. You may miss countless social events and instead come to know librarians on a first-name basis. You will be subject to the whims of research participants and the even more capricious dictates of computer data analysis programs. Constant meetings with your advisor might leave you shaking your head and feeling as though you will never get things right. And then you might take that last step to send your work out to a journal, carefully following a multitude of (overly) picky style and format directions. And the worst is yet to come ... you will receive the reviews of your work, and you will discover that a number of people have poked holes in your ideas, critiqued your writing, and generally found that your research is not as important as you thought. Your self-esteem will tumble, and you will wonder how these "experts" could be so ignorant of the clear points you were trying to make. After changes to your approach in your paper, rearrangement of thoughts and writing, further data analysis, more trips to the library, increased business for the postal service as you send and receive manuscripts and letters, and many, many months ... your work just might be published.

Frankly, this does not sound like anyone's idea of fun. So why do it? Why take the extra step to get your research published?

Publishing your undergraduate research provides two types of rewards: The first reward is the acquisition and refinement of skills and traits that will aid you in your pursuit of graduate training and employment and in your understanding of daily events. The

Author note. I thank Kathy Walter for her ideas and review of this editorial. In addition, I am grateful to all of my students, past and present, who have helped me better understand the rewards of undergraduate publications and who have shown me firsthand the benefits of such endeavors.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Sheila Brownlow, Department of Psychology, Catawba College, Salisbury, NC 28144. Electronic mail may be sent via the Internet to sbrownlo@catawba.edu.
second type of reward is intrinsic and comes from doing meaningful work, the value of which cannot be measured with a course grade. You will find inherent satisfaction in doing—and publishing—your research.

Both practical and practicable skills for graduate school come from publishing your undergraduate work. A firm background in statistics and methodology is desired more than any particular course for most graduate programs (Lawson, 1995) because of the usable skills that emerge from having taken these courses and because the research and writing experience in psychology signals an understanding of the empirical values to which the discipline is committed (Madigan, Johnson, & Linton, 1995). Moreover, research experience as an undergraduate is as important to graduate school admissions committees as is a personal statement (Landrum, Jeglum, & Cashin, 1994). For doctoral programs, the importance of research experience is on par with the personal interview and generally outweighs work, clinical, and personal activities. Given that most (87%) PhD programs and many (58%) master’s programs offer research assistantships to graduate students (Norcross, Hanych, & Terranova, 1996), but that there may be competition for these slots, your research experiences will provide you an advantage in obtaining these positions, which will help fund your education. Thus, a publication as an undergraduate quickly tells graduate schools that you have extensive experience with research, which sets you apart from those candidates who do not.

In addition, most graduate schools train their students to be researchers, and therefore desire students who understand from experience basic research design, methodology, statistical procedures, and computer uses. One difficult lesson learned in a graduate program is that “conducting a study” does not mean one design conceptualized, one set of participants, one pass through the data analysis process, and one final draft of a paper. In graduate school you will learn that a research design will be changed and critiqued, the data collection process is not quick, data analysis is not a one-shot deal, and that a draft of a paper is merely a first pass, as rewriting and editing will take far more time than the original writing. These lessons often defeat even the best of students, and having experienced all of these will signal graduate programs that you have the skills—as well as the mettle—to do research. Adjusting to the demands of graduate school is difficult enough, but is made easier by familiarity with certain computer programs, extensive experiences with literature searches, and practice with APA style.

On the practical level, publication of your research increases your marketability in the work world. The job market is glutted with college graduates, any of whom may be qualified and appropriate for a given job. However, few college graduates can show actual proof of having the skills and qualities that employers seek. It is one thing to say in a cover letter or during an interview that you can think clearly and analytically, that you can communicate, and that you can write. But it is quite another to demonstrate that you have the ability to think and communicate effectively by providing a publication. Even if employers are not cognizant of the nature and quantity of work that went into getting that publication, they will recognize that there is something different about you and that you are capable of employing the skills necessary to effectively execute most job tasks.

More important than showing employers you have learned computer skills, can think analytically, and can communicate with others, a publication at the undergraduate level shows potential employers you have the personal characteristics necessary for success. In fact, such qualities may be far more important than skills, which can be acquired in training programs. However, the fortitude to tackle and complete difficult tasks, a proclivity for challenge, perseverance in the face of criticism, and the ability to learn from others and revise your thinking when necessary together indicate a professionalism and maturity that all employers seek. Such qualities cannot be learned in training programs and few organizations have time to wait for these traits to develop on their own.

Beyond graduate school and the world of work, research will sharpen your understanding of the world around you. Indeed, to think logically and avoid dogma, and to know how it is that empirical facts shape ideas, solve problems, and increase knowledge will help you become an informed citizen, astute consumer, and scientifically literate person (Miller, 1992). Consideration of the ethics involved in conducting research (particularly research that involves human participants) affords a sense of values and consideration in dealing with others. Finally, critical thought, higher-order analysis, and integration and synthesis of information are all necessary in life—whether you are buying a car, choosing a career, or standing in a voting booth. These abilities are honed through research and publication.

In addition to the development of skills and character traits, a second type of reward comes from publishing your undergraduate research. Research and publication can be intrinsically satisfying in and of itself, and there is, indeed, joy in knowledge for the
GOING THE EXTRA MILE □ Brownlow

sake of knowledge. There is a sense of pride and satisfaction that comes from pursuing and answering an empirical question and then communicating that information to others. Pick up a textbook in nearly any discipline, read a few sentences or a paragraph, and look for the cited name. What if that name were yours? In addition to the pride and inherent value your research will bring, your research may clarify an existing question, start or continue work that solves problems, stimulate the interest of others, or propose more questions for us to ask and answer. Most importantly, publishing your undergraduate research increases your appreciation of scientific endeavors and allows you to be part of a select group of people—a company of lifelong learners, a community of people who have made a permanent and recognizable contribution to the body of human knowledge. For this reason alone, the extra mile is not a particularly long distance.

References


Instructions for Contributors to the Psi Chi Journal of Undergraduate Research

The *Psi Chi Journal of Undergraduate Research* encourages undergraduate students to submit manuscripts for consideration. Submissions are accepted for review on an ongoing basis. Although manuscripts are limited to empirical research, they may cover any topical area in the psychological sciences.

1. The primary author of a submitted manuscript must be an undergraduate student who is a member of Psi Chi. Manuscripts from graduate students will be accepted only if the work was completed as an undergraduate student. Additional authors other than the primary author may include non-Psi Chi students as well as the faculty mentor or supervisor. Membership verification information for the primary author must be included.

2. Only original manuscripts (not published or accepted for publication elsewhere) will be accepted.

3. All manuscripts must be prepared according to the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* (4th ed.).

4. What to submit:
   a. Four copies of the complete manuscript. Near-letter-quality print is required on all copies. Should you desire a masked (blind) review, make sure that identifying names, affiliations, etc., appear only on the title page and nowhere else on the manuscript; i.e., manuscripts should be reasonably free of clues to the identity of the authors. Footnotes that identify the author(s) should appear on a separate page. You must request masked review.
   b. A self-addressed, stamped postcard to acknowledge receipt of your manuscript.
   c. A self-addressed envelope with sufficient postage for the return of your manuscripts when an editorial decision has been reached.
   d. A sponsoring statement from the faculty supervisor who attests: (1) that the research adhered to APA ethical standards; (2) that the supervisor has read and critiqued the manuscript on content, method, APA style, grammar, and overall presentation; and (3) that the planning, execution, and writing of the manuscript represent primarily the work of the undergraduate student.

Submit all manuscripts to:

Dr. Stephen F. Davis, Managing Editor

*Psi Chi Journal of Undergraduate Research*

Department of Psychology

Emporia State University

Emporia, KS 66801

Psi Chi Journal of Undergraduate Research □ Fall 1997

85