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An interview with faculty advisor Michael Masci

Dimitri Wing-Paul

What does undergraduate research mean to you?

Undergraduate research gives students an opportunity to sort of pull together a lot of what they know or what they've learned in different classes. It gives them the opportunity to work sort of between disciplines, and outside of classes. It also gives them, at least in my discipline, the opportunity to go through a process of writing, drafting, revising, and things of that nature. You know, for me it's a little different. I have them do two things in music here: On the one hand, writing music, which isn't really research it's sort of a creative activity, and in the other side of things, we have musicology where you write research papers. But I think the most important thing is that, it gives students the opportunity to synthesize things and draw things together. I think that is what the most important thing for me anyway.

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

At Geneseo, a lot of students are conducting research either independently or with a faculty member and I think that [it is the] norm that you are doing research, especially for the upperclassman. I think, in terms of the higher education, there's been the move to incorporate more ways in getting students to do things other than attending lectures. So, the move toward incorporating undergraduate research is sort of broad efforts nationwide to get students to actually take what they've learned and sort of apply it in some way or recontextualize it or bring it into synthesis or dialogue of something else. So, I think it's an effort to make students on one hand more active, on the one hand integrating and drawing together pieces of what they've learned which you don't necessarily always do if you're in a lecture setting. So, I think there's that effort to get students to realize what they're learning in their readings and in their lectures could actually be brought and applied more broadly. I think that's what the idea behind the move toward undergraduate research is.

What characteristics of the students' presentation [Simone Louie] you submitted made you recommend their research?

What she had originally proposed as a senior capstone project was not actually what she ended up doing. What she ended up doing for GREAT Day was a piece of music, she had started working on for a class. It was sort of a final project. We haven't had it

performed. It was basically just notated in software on her laptop shared it with me and it was actually really good. And we had gone through the proposal process. She was an Edgar Fellow so she had to propose an Edgar Fellows senior capstone project. She had proposed something, and then as we started trying to work on it, she said, "You know, I think maybe the previous piece, the previous composition that I have been working on for another class, actually I want to continue working on that." And then I said, "I think that's a good idea." So, we started. She already sort of had a head start and the product what she came up with, the composition, was I have to say it was probably the best piece I've ever had a student compose here. I've been here for seven years, which isn't terribly long but we don't have many music composition majors. But, it was a really (I would say for the lack of better words) mature piece for somebody who was just twenty-two. And the other thing that made it great for GREAT Day was that it was choral piece so we had a number of our music students perform it as well. So, it was a real collaboration between her, and then we have another senior who was a conducting major so he pulled together a choir, he rehearsed the choir, he conducted the choir. So, it was really nice. We had a composer and a conductor sort of collaborating on those projects. And the students who were involved in the performance really gave it their all and they were practicing, you know, twice a week for six weeks. I think there were even more, I don't know what it was. But so, I think on the one hand the quality of the work, then it just turned into this larger collaboration which is what GREAT Day is all about. And so yeah, I mean she was always a strong writer, she was a creative writing double major as well. So, she's a very creative person. So yeah, she is this person who you could trust to do a good job on an independent project like this, who will be motivated, who will stick it through the end. And it went off really well, the performance was well received. She's gotten it performed elsewhere off-campus. She lives in New York City now so she has it performed down in the city. So, the piece has taken a life of its own. One of the choirs here performed last semester as well. So, it's been really nice actually to see it.

Describe your mentorship role in facilitating the project.

Oooh! I mean there's the sort of day to day, week to week thing you know that you're making sure that. In this case Simone was on top of meeting deadlines and stuff. We knew we needed so many weeks to practice it and rehearse it. So, we've worked back from there and said, "Okay what if you know GREAT Day was this date. We're gonna have a dress rehearsal the week before and we need at least six weeks before that for the rehearsals." But, then you gotta get the parts to people before rehearsal starts so you need to get people at least two or three weeks before that. So, after we've done all that, we then sort of mapped out, "Okay we need this section done and this section done." So, there was that. More sort of the creative side of things, Simone has a lot of ideas, (well maybe she has too many ideas) and it's always a task of giving some of the advice as to which ideas to work with. It's just like when you write an article or paper, I mean you've read it and you've written it, you've rewritten it, read it, and re-read it so many times that you can't make heads or tails of it anymore. So, you have to give it to appear to look at with fresh eyes, right. So, it's the same thing with this.

She was sitting with this piece for so long, working on it, reworking on it so much. As a composition teacher, I provide fresh ears to hear this [piece] because she has heard it so many times, she played it so many times. But then, she will come and play it for me and I'm like, "Oohh." I'll hear things that she never heard in it or ideas that I'll say, "Oh, you might wanna explore that idea more," because she's just gotten so much used to it. So, having that pair of extra ears and that feedback [are] really important I think for any writing. So, there's that aspect of it. And you know, I had worked with her before. She's a composition major, so I was familiar of what she was capable of and everything. I think there are two things; making sure things stay on target and being that extra pair of ears. I mean as for the rest, they really took charge, her and the conductor, really took charge in sort of [running] these rehearsals, [wrangling] these singers. I was really impressed. As far as my role of mentoring or advising a GREAT Day project, that's the thing that I really wanted to twist arms to get students to perform and everything. But I just attended just a few rehearsals and then the dress rehearsals and when I went to the dress rehearsals, I felt completely comfortable putting that piece on stage, you know. And that's where you want to be. You don't want to be like, "Ooooo gosh! We cannot perform this. This isn't gonna be ready." I mean, I have had situations where you know with student work it wasn't ready. So, we had to cut that piece and performed something else. This is what GREAT Day ideally is: students taking charge and being creative.