

# A Global Endeavor: Honors Undergraduate Research

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## INTRODUCTION

Like many other universities of its kind, the University of Maine has a centralized body, the Center for Undergraduate Research (CUGR), charged with engaging motivated students in independent learning and in the creation of new knowledge. UMaine furthermore has an honors college that is likewise committed to fostering undergraduate research, particularly research that is rooted in active learning under the guidance of a faculty mentor (University of Maine Honors College Mission Statement).

Consistent with national trends, UMaine highly values the work that both CUGR and the honors college do in promoting undergraduate research. UMaine's current strategic plan lists the advancement of cutting-edge undergraduate research as one of its twelve primary objectives, and CUGR received a three-year, \$300,000 presidential stimulus grant in spring 2012 that funds a number of research fellowships for students and faculty. The same strategic plan also articulates a commitment to strengthening the honors college,

recognizing its similar importance in the development and implementation of novel models of undergraduate research that include preparing students for “meaningful jobs and for life” (University of Maine Blue Sky Plan 31).

Though CUGR and honors both advance undergraduate research in significant ways at UMaine, we would like to argue that honors is especially well positioned to fulfill the strategic plan’s goal of preparation “for life.” On its website, CUGR contends that participation in undergraduate research will make individuals more “competitive” in a global society, which is an important objective. However, what we found through a recent honors undergraduate research experience was that honors research can make individuals more decent as well as competitive in a global society.

## **DEFINING HONORS UNDERGRADUATE RESEARCH**

For our definition of honors undergraduate research, we blend several sources and ideas. In a 2010 article on “50 Best Colleges: Undergraduate research/Creative projects,” *US News and World Report* defined “undergraduate research/creative projects” as independent or small-team experiences led by a faculty mentor in which “students do intensive and self-directed research or creative work that results in an original scholarly paper or other product that can be formally presented on or off campus” (qtd. in Grobman 29).

We agree with this characterization but would add two components that we find essential in honors undergraduate research. The first is the development of critical-thinking skills over the course of the research endeavor. In their article “Helping Honors Students Improve Critical Thinking,” Julie Fisher Robertson and Donna Rane-Szostak describe critical thinking as “the power to do something under circumstances in which there are no constraints to thinking critically and the individual possesses the appropriate background knowledge to apply these abilities” (41). We found unconstrained thinking, along with comprehensive background information, to be crucial to the undergraduate research project that we will describe. Further, Robertson and Rane-Szostak cite arguments that certain individuals have a disposition for thinking critically. According to the authors, natural critical thinkers tend to be truth-seekers who are open-minded, analytical, systematic, self-confident, inquisitive, and mature (42). Through our experience, we found such critical-thinking qualities to be indispensable for both honors undergraduate researchers and their subjects, preparing them for scholarship and “for life.”

The other component that we would add beyond critical thinking is that the honors undergraduate research project ought to be an integrative

learning experience. Integrative learning is about connection, reflection, and then action, enabling students to put their knowledge to use through responsible application of lessons learned and skills developed, particularly in new settings involving complex issues (López-Chávez and Shepherd 58). A 2007 Report by the National Leadership Council for Liberal Education and America's Promise deems integrative learning a main objective of higher education for the twenty-first century (López-Chávez and Shepherd 57), and we believe that it should likewise be a primary objective for honors undergraduate research.

We would further argue that honors, as a community of dedicated and diverse scholars, has a particularly well-suited disposition toward the sort of meaningful undergraduate research that is intensive and self-directed, that spawns critical thinking, and that results in integrative learning. The UMaine Honors College espouses the motto *Studium eruditionis ardescens*, “Igniting a passion for learning,” as the college works to inspire—through community and honors undergraduate research—better scholars and better global citizens.

Employing language such as “better” and “decent” suggests a moral component to honors that we have found embedded in various aspects of our program. The UMaine Honors Civilizations courses explore how cultures have developed, how they have interacted with each other, and, most importantly, what it has meant to be human in the midst of it all. As students and faculty question the impact of development and the character of cultural interactions over time, we inevitably discuss ethical notions such as honor, justice, and values, in turn assessing issues like rightness, fairness, and equality.

Honors thesis work similarly calls for ethical considerations, above all in the communication, collaboration, and respect necessary for a successful student-advisor relationship (University of Maine Honors College Thesis Handbook 14). The handbook requires that students, as they engage critically in their research and form their own insights, continually ask themselves key questions:

- Why am I writing this thesis? (8)
- What are the assumptions, biases, and ethical considerations I must address? (59)
- What is the “value” of my thesis and the “significance” of what I have discovered? (60)

Thesis writers are also required to understand “the big picture” and to develop a thesis idea that recognizes a problem and then proposes causes as well as possible solutions (Handbook 62).

The UMaine Honors College steers students toward thesis projects rooted in academic arenas that focus on moral concerns, such as the Margaret Chase Smith Center for Public Policy, the IDEa Network of Biomedical Research Excellence (INBRE), and the UMaine Sustainable Food Systems Research Collaborative. The honors college also holds an annual Rezendes Ethics Essay Competition that explicitly invites students to reflect “on moral principles, right and wrong actions, virtues and vices, moral values and moral goods” (University of Maine Honors College Website).

Finally, the honors college encourages students to think globally, stating on its website, “We want you to go away!” Students are urged to use a study abroad experience as a substitute for the Junior Honors Tutorial, and the honors college offers a Charles V. Stanhope ’71 Study Abroad Fellowship Award and a Rezendes Global Service Scholarship for students “who wish to make a difference, both locally and globally . . . [and] to take part in a service opportunity far from America’s shores”; past recipients have travelled as far as Ghana, Tanzania, and Peru. We also send a student each year to the Conference on World Affairs in Boulder, Colorado.

Students who are informed and inspired by honors lessons and opportunities often generate honors undergraduate research with an ethical thrust. A former Stanhope Study Abroad Fellowship awardee is currently writing her honors thesis on the importance of *organipónicos* (organic farms) in Cuba; a 2014 graduate and inveterate traveler wrote his mechanical engineering honors thesis on “The Finite Element Analysis and Optimization of a Circumcision Device for HIV Prevention in Sub-Saharan Africa”; another 2014 honors graduate and attendee at the Conference on World Affairs wrote a thesis titled “What Shapes Our Attitudes Toward Outgroups?: Measuring Implicit and Explicit Homosexual Prejudice.” These honors students are thinking critically and learning in an integrative, global way that indicates sensitivity to the character and quality of human interaction, to decency, and to betterment in their scholarly preparation for life.

## THE HONORS UNDERGRADUATE RESEARCH PROJECT

We would like to offer a recent example of an honors undergraduate research project that broadened, deepened, and shaped two honors scholars in critical, integrative, and ethical ways. In the fall of 2013, I (Mimi Killinger)

served as the faculty advisor to UMaine honors student Kate Spies as she applied to the Elie Wiesel Ethics Essay Competition. Kate, an English major and pre-med minor, wanted to address a topic that had concerned her for several years: the plight of women in the Democratic Republic of Congo. I suggested that Kate meet honors student, Daniella Runyambo, who immigrated to Maine from the DRC, is also pre-med, and will be graduating with Kate in 2015. They began an oral history research project based on Kate's interviews with Daniella. These interviews informed not only Kate's Elie Wiesel essay, "How I Helped the Women of the Congo," but also her winning submission to the 2014 Honors College Rezendes Ethics Essay Competition, "Voices: Morally Addressing the Conflict in the DRC through Kantian Ethics," and her honors thesis, "On Becoming a Butterfly-Wrangler: A Narrative of Two Voices."

What follows are some examples of a "Narrative of Two Voices," each illustrating a benefit of honors undergraduate research.

## **HONORS UNDERGRADUATE RESEARCH AS ORIGINAL SCHOLARSHIP**

### **Kate**

Working independently with Mimi and Daniella gave me a significant and powerful gift: an ownership and independence regarding my interests. There's something so special about engaging in a learning opportunity that's not assigned to you, that's outside of the classroom. I think this sort of research is akin to the experience—though on a bigger level—of taking a trip to the library and searching through all the spines to find THE book, the personally provocative book. I go home and crack open this book and learn more about a topic that interests me, and I also gain a personal connection to the topic because I explore it on my own and in my own way.

Having the opportunity to delve into a project about the Democratic Republic of Congo, whose people and history interested me personally, was similarly energizing, and having the chance to talk with Daniella, who possesses a powerful soul, connected me to this topic also on a personal level. Accordingly, I felt a deep ownership of my research and of my presentation of Daniella's story and what I had learned. The process was rousing, waking me up to the importance of honoring this kind of engagement and of acting upon personal interest and connection.

As I worked with Mimi, she always honored my thoughts and wonderings and encouraged me to explore them. Her guidance was perceptive and instructive. Additionally, with the creative nature of my initial piece, “How I Helped the Women of the Congo,” I think I was able to explore several different questions: not only “How do we understand a global conflict like the issue in the DRC?” but also “What can we learn from a person like Daniella?” and “What is the role of voice in engaging with communities in conflict?” Thanks to Daniella’s thoughtful time and help and to Mimi’s oversight, we were able to grapple with a few different topics.

In the process, I became more skilled at crafting questions, asking about certain stories or moments in order to learn about a deeper issue. Memories and anecdotes can be powerfully illustrative. I learned the importance of note-taking and recording while collecting an oral history. I also learned to value and collect small details; some of the small details Daniella shared with me ended up being integral to my pieces.

## **Daniella**

When I was asked to help Kate with her project, my assumption was that it was going to be one of those interviews where people want to know a few things about my country and move on with their lives. I did appreciate that at least someone out there thought about my country enough to do a little research on it.

When I met Kate, though, she was different. She looked very timid and quiet, which is the opposite of my personality, so I got interested in her as a person. Then we started with the interview. Her initial research was about women in DR Congo. I told her after our first meeting that I could give her general information about the area where I am from, but if she had more questions, my parents would be the perfect people to help her. They both had done a lot of work with women in South Kivu, DR Congo.

Kate had more questions, however, and these questions started shifting from women in DR Congo to me and my views, to my experiences as a girl from DR Congo, to my family, my values. These interviews became more personal, and that’s where I can say that my life started changing. I started opening up to Kate and to myself without noticing it. I started saying out loud many things that had been kept inside of me because no one had cared enough to ask. I started finding a voice that I never thought I had.

## **HONORS UNDERGRADUATE RESEARCH AS CRITICAL THINKING**

### **Kate**

I expected to learn about the Democratic Republic of Congo—about how to craft an essay that would combine facts with my personal voice, about how to pull from secondary sources as well as from an individual’s story—in order to write a piece that, I hoped, might offer insight into a complex issue and how one could address it. But I also began to understand the power of listening in conducting my research. I discussed the importance of story-sharing in engaging with a global conflict like the one in the DRC in both of the essays I produced as a result of my research. Through my fact collecting, investigating, and article crafting, I also found that open ears are good ears. Throughout our series of interviews, the moments when I could simply listen to Daniella were the most informative and would invariably end up being the moments that yielded the most relevant data for my articles.

### **Daniella**

I have been through so much in life, and I always thought that it was normal because that’s all I had known. Talking to Kate made me question myself. One of the subjects we talked about was finding a voice. I had never thought about finding my voice because it wasn’t an option given to me in the life and the place where I grew up.

I would compare myself with other kids who went through worse things than I did, and this comparison had always stopped me from saying much. I would ask myself, “Who am I to say anything when I still have both parents and my whole family, when others have lost all?” Talking to Kate made me realize that finding my voice wasn’t just for me but for all of the women, men, and kids who still suffer.

## **HONORS UNDERGRADUATE RESEARCH AS TRUTH-SEEKING**

### **Kate**

I had arrived at my first meeting with Daniella armed with questions, and some questions had multiple parts. I wanted to be fully prepared to be an active researcher, never to let the conversation wane. By the time of our

last scheduled interview, though. I asked Daniella maybe three or four of my planned questions, and that was all. We spent the rest of the time in back-and-forth conversation, or—best of all—Daniella talked as I simply listened. As a result, I was privy to Daniella’s anecdotes, biographical details, and insights in a way that my string of pre-planned questions would not have allowed. Moreover, as Daniella shared stories and thoughts, I could follow up with responsive questions according to what I wanted to learn more about; simply moving over and making room for her to speak spontaneously enabled me to reach specificity in my research.

## **Daniella**

After talking to Kate, I started thinking about what I could do to help my own people and myself. I started thinking about my education and where I was going. One question that I began asking myself was, “How I can use my knowledge, the education and opportunities that school is providing me, to influence people’s lives?”

## **HONORS UNDERGRADUATE RESEARCH AS INTEGRATIVE LEARNING**

### **Kate**

My research experience has made me feel the possibilities that pulse all around me as an undergraduate, the underground heartbeat at UMaine. There are other stories like Daniella’s to be heard—from the neighbors in my apartment complex, from the other students in my classes, from the professors and staff, from my honors friends. Listening and staying aware of the importance of these stories lead to learning and research opportunities.

Inspired by Daniella, I went to an on-campus charity banquet hosted by the African Students Association and sat at a table with two sisters from Argentina, a graduate student from Nigeria, and a Fulbright Scholar from Egypt. We talked about our different backgrounds, our varying interests, and our common love of cheesecake as dessert was served. Because of Daniella and Mimi, I ask more questions, and by the time Daniella and I reached our last interview in the fall of 2013, wheels were turning in our heads.

We decided that we needed to share the importance of engagement and of listening that we had both come to recognize. We also thought that it would be a meaningful next step to provide our campus community with

an opportunity to learn more about the DRC's conflict, as we agreed that research and education through simply listening and learning lead to personal connection and to action. To that end, we invited Georges Budagu, a Congolese asylee who now lives in Portland, Maine, to visit our campus and to give a presentation on his experiences and on current issues in the DRC.

Mr. Budagu is the author of the memoir *Ladder to the Moon: A Journey from the Congo to America*, and in October, 2014, he spoke to a gathering of about fifty UMaine students and faculty, delving into his experiences in the Congo and in the States, sharing the history of his home country and its current conditions. Daniella and I also spoke at the event about our collaboration and the lessons it taught us.

## **Daniella**

I had just become President of the African Students Association when I began meeting with Kate, so I decided to use this leadership role to better myself and to create educational events that could be beneficial to the student body. Kate and I, with help from a woman I consider a mentor, Mimi Killinger, put an event together that featured an author from DR Congo, George Budagu. This event was very successful. I had invited members from Partners for World Health (PWH) to attend, and, inspired by our speaker, they decided to raise funds that will help take a container of medical supplies to the DR Congo, specifically to the region my father is from.

## **HONORS UNDERGRADUATE RESEARCH, GLOBAL SCHOLARSHIP, AND DECENCY**

### **Kate**

I feel that conducting this undergraduate research was most beneficial to me in that it taught me important lessons about how to operate in and interact with the communities around me—not just my campus community but the larger global one that we all belong to. Not only did this project push me to recognize my role in both of these communities, but it also taught me how to engage with them. In particular, I've learned the importance of story-sharing, of validating and learning about individual experience, of listening, of educating myself about conflict, of waking up and recognizing the connections that tie each of us to one another.

I think about my identity as a global citizen. I am a part of this complex and interconnected community that stretches across our globe, and working with Daniella and grappling with the DRC's conflict helped me to understand what that means. I became more serious about studying abroad and living in a different cultural context (Ireland) for the spring of my junior year. I also enrolled in a public health class abroad; I learned about the zoonotic and communicable diseases that have a major impact around the world and that need widespread attention from health officials in all areas. I was pushed to think about the role I envisioned for myself were I to attain my goal of becoming a veterinarian, and I started to learn more about the "One Health" initiative, which promotes collaboration among experts in human, animal, and environmental health. To that end, I applied to the Washington State University College of Veterinary Medicine, which operates under One Health and offers their veterinary students the chance to complete a certificate program in Global Animal Health. I've recently been accepted and am grateful for the stirring that started with Daniella and Mimi, the idea that one should engage as part of something bigger.

## **Daniella**

After the Budagu event, I became more involved with Partners for World Health; now we are preparing to go to Senegal in May to do a medical mission, and in August I will be going to Rwanda on another medical mission. I will be taking the founder of PWH to visit Minebwe, South Kivu, DR Congo. We are working on putting together "Project 10,000," where we will be working with women in South Kivu, giving them maternal birth kits and educating them on maternal care. We are hoping to start this project in January 2016. I am also working with faculty in the International Affairs Department at the University of Maine to see how they can help me with all of these projects.

## **HONORS UNDERGRADUATE RESEARCH AS OPPORTUNITY FOR MORAL GROWTH**

### **Kate**

This undergraduate research shaped two different versions of me: the researching, writing student and the emotion-filled, moral human being.

As a researcher, I learned how to collect an oral history, how to develop interview questions, and how to better store and organize data. As a writer, I

learned how to make choices surrounding all of this material, how to develop unity among varying anecdotes and ideas within a piece, and how to combine my personal voice, Daniella's voice, and secondary sources in a single work.

Simultaneously, as I read and typed and scrawled notes while interviewing Daniella, I gathered insight related to my place as a human being who is part of many communities and ultimately of a single giant and important one. I learned that listening to the stories of the people who make up our social environments can be a reciprocal experience; both people have the opportunity to learn more about themselves and about something new. Engagement in this way can lead to recognition of the connections that tie all of us together—from Maine to Kinshasa.

## **Daniella**

I have always known that I was born to serve and help. Then I moved to the United States, and I lost myself. Although I found refuge and peace, my drive and dreams were lost. Kate came to my life at the right time. She gave me hope and helped me find myself. During our interview, I realized many things that were wrong with my past life, and it was hard to re-visit those memories. But Kate's urging was all that I needed; I felt like something heavy was lifted off my shoulders. I have been invited to a couple of events and classes here at the University of Maine to talk about my country. Now I am living, I am doing what I love, I am hoping to go to medical school and live my dreams, which is to dedicate my life to serving others.

I learned many things from Kate, not only that I could find my voice through her but also that I was listened to, and that's as powerful. I will be forever grateful to Kate but also to Mimi for believing in me and for sending these opportunities my way.

## **CONCLUSION**

Their undergraduate research project clearly ignited a passion for learning in both Kate and Daniella, and honors seemed the ideal hub for their collaborative work. The mentoring role mostly entailed connecting two natural critical thinkers who listened and learned from each other and who created the kind of intellectual exchange an honors community hopes to provide. Kate initiated an oral history project that gave voice to herself, to Daniella, and, more broadly, to women of Congo. Kate and Daniella integrated their collaborative learning into action by organizing the Budagu event at UMaine

and by continuing their efforts: Kate in her work on global veterinary issues and Daniella in her medical volunteerism with Partners for World Health. Both describe transformative aspects of the research experience that empowered them to apply their knowledge, to give voice to their concerns, and to bring about change as they embodied the ethic of care and global sensitivity that honors works to instill in its students, demonstrating a marked preparedness for “meaningful jobs and for life.”

The University of Maine and other institutions of its kind are justified in supporting undergraduate research given the potential intellectual and personal benefits it affords students. The experience of Kate and Daniella illustrates that an honors community may be especially well-suited to advancing student-driven, independent projects that foster critical thought and active learning. Honors colleges offer a special niche as interdisciplinary communities of scholars in which students are encouraged to engage with one another in novel ways, to think and act and change as citizens who are passionately preparing for life in a complex, global world.

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