

## Reassessing Research: Liberal Arts Colleges and the Social Sciences

**O**BSERVERS OF THE LIBERAL ARTS COLLEGES have for some time noted their leading role in producing the nation's Ph.D.'s. This pattern occurs in the social sciences as well as the humanities and natural sciences. The question of why these institutions should have such remarkable success has not received a great deal of scholarly attention, though the figures naturally provoke speculation about the kind of instruction that occurs in the best of these colleges and the experience of their undergraduates.<sup>1</sup> The 1998 Higher Education Data Service (HEDS) figures report on the baccalaureate origins of doctorate recipients in the social sciences.<sup>2</sup> With data weighted for size of institution, the top ten Ph.D.-producing institutions are, in order: Swarthmore, Thomas Aquinas, Reed, Bryn Mawr, the University of Chicago, Beloit, Shimer, Oberlin, Harvard, and Haverford. There are only six research universities in the top thirty Ph.D. producers—the University of Chicago (5), Harvard (9), Yale (14), Princeton (17), Brandeis (25), and the University of California Santa Cruz (26).<sup>3</sup>

One explanation for this phenomenon—which is even more marked in the sciences and for women—may be the high percentage of undergraduates in liberal arts colleges who are involved in original research projects. These may be individual projects, such as an undergraduate thesis or special project in a course, or, more significantly, they may be engaged as research assistants to faculty members. This latter opportunity

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simply may not be available to the same degree for undergraduates in the research institutions. There, graduate students quite appropriately get first claim on research assistant positions. Moreover, faculty members at the research institutions undoubtedly see their first responsibility to be research training for their graduate students. That is not the case in the liberal arts colleges, where the sole focus of attention is the undergraduate and a faculty member's only real hope of getting research assistance is a well-trained undergraduate. As a result, the bright and curious undergraduate has an opportunity for firsthand experience in the intellectual life of a social scientist and potentially will experience the enormous gratification that comes from the systematic pursuit of an intriguing question. These students might more readily imagine themselves as social scientists or become interested in further work in the social sciences.

Liberal arts colleges have long been noted for their commitment to teaching and for the quality of that teaching. Recently, Robert McCaughey has demonstrated that the leading liberal arts colleges have faculties who strongly support those principles.<sup>4</sup> The faculty ranks of the liberal arts colleges more often than not hold Ph.D.'s from the leading research universities and B.A.'s from the leading liberal arts colleges. Many of these individuals intend to pursue careers that will integrate scholarly research with a commitment to undergraduate education.

Moreover, faculty members at the leading liberal arts colleges today are well aware that their reviews for promotion and tenure will include a review of scholarship as well as teaching. The balance in the formula for weighing research and teaching will vary from one college to the next; the more selective liberal arts colleges will weigh research more heavily and many more will weigh both factors equally. Thus for a young scholar aspiring to a faculty position in a leading liberal arts college, a research program will be essential. The new attitude towards research reflects another important change in the liberal arts colleges and, as I will discuss below, presents both opportunities and challenges to their faculties and administrators.

The convergence of events that led to a revaluing of research has also resulted in a new style of hands-on teaching and research training in the leading liberal arts colleges, with felicitous results for undergraduates. As the liberal arts colleges have come to appreciate their success in producing Ph.D.'s, they have also recognized the unique experience they offer to their students. The question has become, how can the liberal arts colleges maximize their special contribution? For some institutions this has led to discussions of how to reconfigure the faculty workload to encourage independent work with students on hands-on research projects. Colleges today routinely make funds available to the faculty to hire student assistants, both during the academic year and for summer research and internship projects. Many now include a faculty member's work with honors theses, research projects, or internship supervision as part of a faculty member's teaching load. Many will include "one-on-one" teaching in their faculty-development workshops, and in the future we will look to these institutions for guidance and leadership on how faculty can be prepared to take on this responsibility. All of this will redound to the benefit of the undergraduate. Thus, even as the leading liberal arts institutions have realigned themselves with respect to faculty research, they have done so in a unique fashion that relates research to undergraduate teaching.

My thoughts on this topic are formed less by hard data than by my own observation of the opportunities afforded to the talented undergraduate and the productive dynamic that arises between students and faculty in those settings. At my own institution, when a group of faculty members received a grant in the late 1970s to organize an intensive interdisciplinary research effort, they included student research assistants in the project. They designed a summer seminar with a leading scholar who cut across the disciplinary boundaries. Although the faculty severely underestimated the amount of time that would be needed to train and work with the undergraduate research assistants that first summer, the results for the students were spectacular. Early on in their academic careers they became part of a team engaged in the heady experience of "creating new knowledge" and "crossing disciplinary boundaries." Many

of those student assistants went on to graduate study and, as the HEDS data would suggest, eventually to receive a Ph.D.

For the faculty member, using an undergraduate in a research project usually means that the project must be redesigned with that goal in mind. For the new faculty member, fresh from his own Ph.D. project, that can mean a considerable investment in start-up time. On the other hand, the experience may be liberating—forcing him to stretch beyond the traditionally narrow confines of a dissertation to engage a question with a broader or more accessible focus.

To use an undergraduate effectively, that is, to give the student more than the role of gopher or xeroxer, it is often necessary to adapt the questions posed in the research design to the skills of an undergraduate. That said, even the mundane tasks of locating books and references, finding relevant articles, and conducting library and Internet searches will produce some excellent research skills. When done as part of a larger project this can be an exciting endeavor, and especially so for someone entirely new to academic life. Moreover, in the context of a liberal arts college it is possible to watch a student progress from learning basic research skills to serving as a skilled assistant to designing and completing a high-level project on her own. It is no longer unusual—though still noteworthy—for my colleagues at Smith to list their undergraduate research assistants as coauthors of articles and to bring them to professional meetings. At those meetings, undergraduates may have an opportunity to present their own work in poster sessions and receive professional responses to their work. Again, this may be an important contributory factor in the decisions of such students to pursue graduate study and scholarly careers.

The liberal arts colleges are characterized by their size—they are smaller than the research universities, and the scale of what they undertake is necessarily more limited. This can be a great advantage for their students, particularly in the institutional ethos and structure that is geared to meeting their needs. That means a faculty that must be accessible and committed to teaching undergraduates. The disadvantage for the undergraduate is that the offerings and major programs may be more limited. A faculty of 150 to 200 simply cannot offer the same range of

courses available from a faculty three or four times that size. Nevertheless, the liberal arts colleges tend to have far better student to faculty ratios than the research universities, and thus a narrower selection of courses may be balanced by greater individual attention.

For the liberal arts colleges the challenges of size are twofold. First, important choices must be made about what can be taught, what can be covered adequately so that resources are not squandered or spread too thinly. This can be a blessing in disguise, leading an institution to set priorities and focus its energies. It can also lead to interdisciplinary sharing and creativity. On a relatively small faculty the sociologists, economists, and political scientists may not all live in separate buildings or on separate floors. The smaller size of a liberal arts college may facilitate cross-disciplinary conversation, making disciplinary boundaries less rigid and interdisciplinary collaboration easier. This is, of course, not to claim that disagreements, conflicts, and disputes will be any less intense.

While scale and size may force faculty members in the liberal arts colleges to move beyond the constraints of the traditional disciplinary boundaries, there can be professional risks in such moves. Often those risks are compensated for by the intriguing questions one can pursue. Moreover, the professional risk involved has been greatly diminished by the impact of interdisciplinary work on the traditional disciplines, making the disciplines much broader. The point is to keep a faculty member part of the disciplinary conversation, and this can be accomplished through well-placed faculty-development funds.

Another consequence of the smaller size and scale of the liberal arts colleges is that if they are to maintain their quality, they must make major investments in faculty development. Recognizing that they have much to gain from a faculty that is actively engaged in scholarly research, the leading liberal arts colleges will facilitate the professional involvement of the faculty, supporting research projects as well as attendance at professional meetings. Moreover, the liberal arts colleges pay serious attention to assisting faculty members to improve their teaching—both by helping graduate students at the beginning of their careers make the transition to teaching in an under-

graduate setting and also by keeping the teaching of experienced colleagues vigorous and innovative.

The contributions of the liberal arts colleges to the social sciences go beyond what happens at the individual campuses of these institutions. They are also found in the roles their faculty members play in national professional organizations. For instance, the American Political Science Association makes an explicit effort to include professors from the liberal arts colleges in the governing structure of the association. Part of this is representational, since a great number of political scientists teach in schools that are not classified as research universities. But it is also presumed by many that some of the best teaching in political science—or the other social sciences—is likely to be found in the liberal arts colleges.<sup>5</sup>

Future Ph.D.'s in the social sciences—most of whom will be trained in the research institutions—will not all teach in research universities. They will need to be competent and inspired teachers as well as producers of new knowledge. Since teaching is explicitly not a secondary or peripheral activity for liberal arts colleges, when professional organizations look to improve the quality of teaching within the profession—in particular, the quality of programs that teach graduate students how to teach—they look to their colleagues in the liberal arts colleges.

Most professors from the leading liberal arts colleges stay professionally active and engage in research, and thus they make regular varied contributions to national debates in the social sciences. McCaughey's study of the select liberal arts colleges demonstrated that faculty at these leading schools often have records of scholarly productivity that are comparable to, if not exceed, those of many research institutions. Furthermore, his study suggests that this is not done at the expense of good teaching; rather it appears to be linked to it. In the social sciences, it is not unusual to find academics from select liberal arts colleges with the respect and visibility that allows their counterparts from the leading research universities to regard them as peers.<sup>6</sup>

Continued success for the liberal arts colleges, as well as their role in the social sciences, is intimately tied to maintaining their ability to attract the best graduate students for their

faculties. Candidates for jobs at the leading liberal arts colleges must be certain that they wish to make a major professional commitment to teaching. And they must have the confidence that they will be able to combine effectively a healthy research program with their teaching. If they are graduates of liberal arts colleges (as many of them are, according to the HEDS data and as McCaughey confirmed), they are already aware of the attractiveness of these institutions.<sup>7</sup> On the other hand, the HEDS data are weighted, so there are many social science Ph.D.'s who lack such experience. If their graduate training did not emphasize teaching, or if it was communicated that the preferred position is in a research institution, then many talented young social scientists will not become candidates for positions in liberal arts colleges. In my experience, this has been an especially acute problem for us when approaching highly sought-after candidates with no prior experience in a college setting. Often research institutions could offer packages that we could not touch, for example, a two-year postdoctoral research position, followed by a tenure-track position. The comparable offer at a liberal arts college would have been a four- (or five-) course load with student research support. If you are not already committed to a liberal arts college environment, or even familiar with it, there is no comparison between the two offers.

Graduate programs often emphasize research to the exclusion of teaching, without explaining the synergism between the two. And it is still the case that too few of the leading liberal arts colleges make clear their commitment to facilitate both research and teaching for their faculties. Perhaps in the current climate of renewed attention to teaching and accountability, it is time for the public to be more fully apprised of the benefits for students of this combined emphasis.

ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Pathbreaking work on the role of liberal arts colleges has been done by M. Elizabeth Tidball and Vera Kiskiakowsky, "Baccalaureate Origins of American Scientists and Scholars," *Science* 193 (20) (August 1976): 646-652 and "Women's Colleges and Women Achievers Revisited," *SIGNS* 5 (Spring

1980): 504–517, and Robert A. McCaughey, *Teachers and Scholars: The Faculties of Select Liberal Arts Colleges and Their Place in American Higher Learning* (New York: Conceptual Litho Reproductions, 1994).

<sup>2</sup>Social sciences in this classification scheme include economics, political science, international relations, anthropology, sociology, and other social sciences—not history.

<sup>3</sup>The 1998 HEDS data reports on “the total number of Ph.D.’s received by the baccalaureate graduates of institutions from 1986–1995 and the ratio of Ph.D.’s earned from 1986–1995 by these graduates to bachelor’s degrees conferred by the listed institutions from 1980 to 1989.” McCaughey found a similar pattern using the HEDS data from Ph.D.’s earned from 1980 to 1989. McCaughey, *Teachers and Scholars*, 94.

<sup>4</sup>McCaughey identified and studied the faculties of two to three dozen liberal arts colleges that included Amherst, Barnard, Beloit, Bryn Mawr, Carleton, Colgate, Haverford, Hobart, Grinnell, Knox, Lawrence, Mount Holyoke, Oberlin, Pomona, Reed, Smith, Swarthmore, Vassar, Wellesley, Wesleyan, and Williams. He labeled these the Select Liberal Arts Colleges and noted that they had undergone transformations since the 1970s that made them the intellectual homes of a new category of scholar-teacher: faculty members committed to both research and undergraduate teaching.

<sup>5</sup>My thanks to Catherine Rudder, executive director of the American Political Science Association, for this observation and for other insightful comments on the contributions of liberal arts colleges to political science.

<sup>6</sup>McCaughey, *Teachers and Scholars*, 65–88, 105–116.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, 51.