

GUEST EDITORIAL

A Historical Context for Undergraduate Research: The Contribution of Wilhelm von Humboldt

Contemporary America has sometimes been characterized as having at its heart a kind of “culture of amnesia”, one in which historical precedents are often ignored in favor of the demands of the present. This narrow viewpoint can be extended to the images of “research” that people often have in this country — these are of men and women performing experiments while wearing white coats and goggles in a shiny laboratory with elaborate instrumentation of various kinds. Yet, research is more than just an activity that takes place under certain prescribed conditions — it is also a type of cognitive and educational process that can express the ideals of learning. For persons interested in understanding this larger context of research in the environment of higher education, the perspective of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century “Renaissance Man”, Wilhelm von Humboldt, is of paramount importance.

Wilhelm von Humboldt (who should not be confused with his naturalist/scientist brother, Alexander) contributed to several fields of knowledge, but it was in his role as head of the section for ecclesiastic affairs and education in the Prussian ministry of the interior in the early nineteenth century that he had perhaps the largest practical impact. As difficult as it is to imagine now, many European universities of that time period were in a state of relative decline in terms of conveying important intellectual developments to the students who were enrolled in them. Von Humboldt believed that although teaching was of central importance to the mission of the university, it could only be truly effective if the activities and results of research informed what was conveyed to students. Hence, there are two entwined intellectual goals for universities: teaching and research.

Simply asserting the importance of research in the activities of an effective university was not enough for von Humboldt. The cognitive effect of this amalgam of research and education upon the individual student is also important. The effect that is identified with the end, or purpose, of university education is expressed in what von Humboldt called “Bildung”. The meaning of this word, as has been often noted, is not easily rendered into English, but it is often translated as “self cultivation”. At a surface level, without making further inquiry into the deeper cultural significance of this term, “self cultivation” can refer to the autonomous development of an individual’s mind.

Now, how can the thoughts of von Humboldt that were meant to articulate the ideals for early nineteenth century education help with appreciating the importance of research — particularly for undergraduates — in the twenty-first century context? On an obvious level, von Humboldt saw the important singular role that research can play within the workings of institutions of higher learning. But, more importantly, the combination of research with teaching was to have a fundamental influence on the minds of students. Through engagement with research, either indirectly by listening to a professor’s lectures or directly by engaging with the work of creation, interpretation, experimentation and analysis, the student’s mind would develop its independent and critical capacity. Without research, this essential developmental aspect of a person’s education could not be completed. But beyond the individual student’s intellectual growth, the process of cultivation involves the role of faculty, since “cultivation” can involve “enculturation” (through the agency of instructors who combine teaching and research) into the collective enterprise of learning.

Our society needs, for so many different reasons, to have students develop independent, critical and creative minds. Two centuries ago Wilhelm von Humboldt saw the importance of learning about the latest intellectual trends — and also the act of doing research — as central to this educational process. Today, undergraduates need to continue the legacy of von Humboldt in order to not only fully develop their own minds, but also to achieve their full potential as persons in the human community.

— David Vampola, Guest Editor

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