

# Laboratory for the Investigation of Mind, Body, and Spirit at Luther College: Developing Undergraduate Scholars in Psychology of Religion, Spirituality, Health, and Medicine

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This article provides my reflections on how to promote research in the psychology of religion and spirituality in the context of a liberal arts college. As a starting place, I provide a descriptive background of Luther College, the liberal arts college at which I have been an associate professor of psychology for seven years. The teacher-scholar model provides the rubric under which my professional duties as instructor and researcher are carried out. I consider the benefits of this model for the students that I teach. Recruitment, engagement, and retention of student lab team members are discussed along with some of the strengths and challenges of coordinating a lab at an undergraduate liberal arts college. The extent to which the lab team members are involved in presentation and publication of our work is considered. Finally, I offer some suggestions on how to develop and nurture a lab team that is committed to sound science and deep inquiry in the area of psychology, religion, and spirituality.

I am delighted to contribute to this special issue of the *Journal of Psychology and Christianity* and am honored by the special issue editor's invitation. I am an associate professor of psychology at Luther College in Decorah, Iowa, where I have been on the faculty for seven years. I direct the Laboratory for the Investigation of Mind, Body, and Spirit and teach introductory psychology, health psychology, stress and coping, statistics, and psychology of forgiveness. In this article I reflect on the evolution of my research program and what I consider key ingredients for establishing and developing research in the psychology of religion and spirituality at a Christian liberal arts college.

## Luther College

Luther College is a residential, liberal arts college of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. The college was founded by the Norwegian Evangelical Lutheran Church in 1861. The Norwegian Lutheran influence was a strong force in the growth of the college and remains so in the present. I was attracted to the strong Christian tradition at Luther College. I expected that my scholarly work in the psychology of religion and

spirituality would be encouraged and supported, and this has been so. As the needs of my laboratory, my lab team, and me have grown, and support for our scholarly work has been needed, the response from departmental and administrative directors has consistently been affirming. I think this reflects a good fit between the Luther College mission and my research program.

## The Teacher-Scholar Model

As an exclusively undergraduate, liberal arts college the first priority at Luther College is teaching excellence. Issues of pedagogy are a constant part of the conversation as are discussions of design, development, and delivery of the liberal arts curriculum in the new millennium. Nonetheless, teaching excellence is not the *only* priority. At Luther College there is a strong symbiosis between scholarship and teaching. The term we use is "teaching-scholar." As a teaching-scholar my philosophy on the mission of the professorate is summed up in the words of former Occidental College president, John Slaughter, who stated that, "Research is to teaching as sin is to confession. If you don't participate in the former, you have very little to say in the latter" (personal communication, January 11, 2012). This approach drives my passion for research because it offers not only a contribution to the scholarly literature, but also so many applications in the classroom.

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Teaching takes center stage at Luther College. As the former Dean of the College put it to me in a pre-tenure preparation meeting, “You will be evaluated first *and* last on your teaching” (personal communication, October 15, 2004). On the face of it, this intense focus on teaching may all but disregard the importance of scholarly work, but the clear expectation in the faculty handbook is that active involvement in one’s area of scholarship is *not* an option. Although the requirements vary from department to department, scholarly contributions to peer-reviewed publications and conferences is a *requirement* for a successful tenure candidate. The philosophy of this model is clear. Active involvement in research makes for better teachers.

### **The Laboratory Research Team: Recruiting, Engaging, and Retaining Undergraduate Members**

#### **Recruitment**

I work with undergraduates with an age range of 18 to 22. Potential lab team members have typically had the introductory course in the psychology major and are in the midst of a 200-level survey course in development, health, or personality psychology when I encounter them for the first time. For me, this means that recruiting these students into my laboratory requires that I am open to their ideas but also clear with them about what they are getting into. I tell them what our laboratory has been doing, what general directions we are currently headed in, and what things are probably beyond the scope of our expertise. Furthermore, I make clear to them that my expectations are quite high and that they should treat their involvement in the lab like an additional musical or sports co-curricular commitment. Students at Luther College, like at many other institutions no doubt, are overwhelmed with co-curricular opportunities and many struggle to balance these commitments with their academic work. I emphasize to them that participation in our laboratory is a commitment to me, a commitment to the lab team, and a commitment to the department and college. In a few cases, this probably scares off some students, and that is probably just as well. I expect high investment in the lab, and I typically get it.

#### **Engagement and Retention**

Psychology has been described as a hub discipline (Cacioppo, 2007), and our lab at Luther College is a hub of intellectual, experiential, peer-mentoring, and social support and development. Let me consider each of these in turn.

**Hub of interest.** First, our lab acts as hub of interest for students from psychology, biology, health, religion, and many other major fields of study. We are an equal opportunity laboratory, and bright students with good ideas, whatever their major or interest area, are welcomed, in fact, urged to apply. I would estimate that for about half of our students intellectual curiosity is the sole driver of their engagement and continued interest in the lab.

**Gaining experience in psychology.** Second, the other half of the students who participate in the work of our lab seem to be interested in gaining concrete experience. These are the resume and vita builders. Experience in our laboratory offers students a variety of very marketable skills for both the working world and graduate school. In a sense, our laboratory is a microcosm of the broader liberal arts model where students gain experience with critical analysis, thinking, writing, oral and written communication, and quantitative analysis. For these students, the topics of religion, spirituality, forgiveness, and health are not always the most scintillating intellectual endeavors, but they see the value in learning the scientific method, developing certain skill sets, and practicing and honing the skills they will likely use upon graduation and entry into the job market or graduate/professional programs.

**Learning and transmitting psychological science.** Third, the lab is a place where students learn psychological science and also learn how to pass it on. The typical student in the lab will enter sometime during his or her sophomore year of college and will stay on through graduation. That means we develop a fair amount of experience and expertise on the lab team. Advanced students are expected to mentor newer students. New students get a good deal of their training and skills from other students, and as a result they are happy to return the favor when it is their turn. Some of the best advanced students quickly become known not only in the lab, but throughout the major, for their expertise with technical analyses, design experience, or thinking and writing

ability. For these students peer-mentoring only begins in the lab and quickly extends well beyond its boundaries.

**A place to hang.** Fourth, surprisingly to me, college students like to hang out in the lab. Upon acceptance to the lab (after a not too threatening interview with me), students get keys to the department and the lab. I'm surprised at how many times I leave the office and members of the lab team are still in the lab working. Or, for that matter, how often I come in on the weekends only to find that they have beaten me to the lab. There is a real sense of camaraderie. Conversations about food, fashion, pop-culture, and all things Luther College are quite common. That is, when we are not working.

The careful reader will note that this sub-section is entitled, "Engagement and Retention," and I have not said one word about retention. This is because retention in the lab is all about engagement. Because I don't work with graduate students who are guaranteed to be around for two to five years, I work very hard to recruit early and retain students for the long term. Retention pays dividends in productivity for our lab. But, instead of aiming to retain members of the lab, I work to engage them. Students who are deeply engaged in our work stick around, can be relied on, and develop a kind of junior colleague-like relationship with me. They commit to me and the lab, and want very badly to represent the lab, department, and college well in their contributions to the science of psychology. In short, engagement is sufficient to yield good retention.

### **Presentation and Publication**

From the moment students walk into my office with an interest in working in our lab, I have my mind set on what scholarly product they can count as their own upon leaving or "graduating" from the lab. This means different things for different students, but for the modal student this means he or she will participate in the design, execution, analysis, and write-up of a study and will participate in presenting the work at a professional conference. Attending and presenting at a conference is sometimes a little stressful for me. For undergraduates, I think it can be all but completely overwhelming. I let them know early that the expectation is that they will present or co-pre-

sent a study before they graduate. This is often met with enthusiasm but also some trepidation. As a result, we often have co-leaders for projects who then develop into co-authors of presentations. In an ideal world, these co-authors would present their work and return to the college to methodically go about the task of incorporating feedback from the presentation and moving the work along to an eventual publication. In reality, this is the case for only a few of my best and brightest students. I would love for all of my students to publish something with me, but realistically, the increase in expectations for peer-reviewed publication are something only the top 10% of my students can meet. I don't let this often unattainable goal weigh down the lab. Instead, I publish with students when I can and invest in other publication opportunities with professional colleagues. For the lab, the more achievable goal is for the majority of students to present something at a professional conference. Generally speaking, we succeed in accomplishing this goal.

### **Things I'd Recommend (Or At Least Consider)**

#### **Lab Meetings**

It seems like it should go without saying, but hold regular lab meetings. Lab meetings offer time for students to interact with you and other students. The agenda is set by you and the lab members. You only talk about what you think is important, what you're doing, and what is next. In short, lab meetings are the life-blood of the lab. I see this as sacred scholarly time. Absences are by approved excuse only. Everyone is in one place at one time with nothing else to do. That means at our lab meetings we talk about research in psychology, religion, spirituality, health, and medicine. What could be better? It is the best 90 minutes of every week.

#### **Know Your Expertise**

We study a variety of religious and spiritual phenomena, but we mainly focus on studying forgiveness. In fact, we are informally known around campus as the "forgiveness lab." We can support several different perspectives and fields of expertise or interest, but it all needs to in some way or another address the issue of forgiveness. When a student approaches me

about a thesis on a divergent topic, I respond with, "That's a really interesting research question, but it's not really what this lab studies. If you'd like to work in this lab, is there a way you can connect that to forgiveness?" Usually there is. Then it becomes a win-win situation. The lab gains a new perspective and the student does an interesting thesis.

### **Be the Match that Lights the Fire**

Early in my time at Luther College I grew concerned about student interest in doing research with me. I shared this concern with a senior colleague, who assured me that, "If you're excited about it, they will be too." In the seven years since that conversation more than 50 students have passed through the lab and dozens of conference papers and posters have been presented, and a few journal articles and book chapters have been published. We've even been awarded a couple of small grants along the way. My colleague was right. When students see the fire in your eyes and the flame in your heart, your enthusiasm becomes infectious. With infectious enthusiasm, it seems virtually anything is possible.

### **Get by With a Little Help from Your Friends**

Good colleagues are invaluable. I go to my campus colleagues for support and guidance on matters of lecture style, student engagement, faculty-student mentoring, and pedagogy. There are none better than my close colleagues on campus for these discussions. However, off-campus colleagues can be an important source of support too, and conferences are fertile ground for initiating these relationships. With tight budgets and difficult teaching schedules, conferences can be difficult

to get to, but developing a network of off-campus colleagues is crucial for nurturing your scholarly life in a liberal arts environment.

### **Conclusion**

Developing and maintaining a research program in the psychology of religion and spirituality at a small, Christian, liberal arts college has its distinct advantages and disadvantages. These institutions can offer sufficient resources, bright and motivated students, and strong support. However, careful attention must be paid to recruitment, engagement, and retention of a committed lab team for successful research and scholarly contributions to be made. Clearly defined, but realistic, expectations for conference presentation and publication are also important. Nurture your passion for research, cultivate good relationships with on- and off- campus colleagues, and remain steadfast in your commitment to offer research experiences to undergraduates that will challenge, enlighten, and inspire the next generation of Christian psychological scientists and practitioners.

### **References**

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