

A Doorway to Higher Education

Excerpts of An Article by
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Wisdom has it that only graduate students thrive in research universities. Undergraduates, it is thought, receive a better, more intimate education at a small, liberal arts college. Not necessarily. Undergraduates have a unique alternative in attending a research university and conducting instructor/mentor guided research as a part of their undergraduate education.

At the University of Utah, undergraduates have abundant opportunities to take part in discovery. “We’ve established a grad school for undergraduates,” says John Francis, Associate Vice President for Academic Affairs and Undergraduate Studies. Several departments have their own research programs, and many professors use undergraduates to help them with ongoing research. Many students use those opportunities to begin independent research projects of their own under faculty supervision. And those seeking to further their education beyond undergraduate studies will find they have a four-year head start over their contemporaries who won’t begin conducting research until graduate school.

All four-year institutions would surely hope to provide a job-preparatory education and to be able to claim that their graduating students are learned. But more importantly, any reputable institution would strive to foster critical thought on the part of their students. While knowledge is important, the thought process is essential. Any well-intended mission is lost if students simply adopt an attitude of acceptance. Students passively relying on the authority of instructors and textbooks may develop a dependence on being fed answers, rather than examining the materials and seeking knowledge beyond what is taught. Profession-relevant teachings, a dose of world-applicable social sciences and humanities, and the culti-

A research university is a center for critical thought. Researchers — both instructors and students — make it their business to solve problems and generate knowledge. When they find answers, they then look to new questions.

A research university is admittedly different from liberal arts colleges and two-year junior colleges. Sometimes a research university is simply seen as just another place to pick up a degree, and the importance of research is overlooked. There is a tendency in the public’s mind to undervalue research; to undervalue the importance of having faculty members who have the time, the equipment and the facilities available to work to the cutting edge of their disciplines to create new knowledge and new ways of applying existing knowledge. Often this knowledge can result in patents that can through technology transfer, produce new commercial enterprises, new jobs.

The U. of U. is a research university. It is a school of learning, where learning applies to undergraduate students, graduate students and instructors. If a professor is teaching here, he or she is contributing to scholarship. The U. of U.’s mission is “to educate the individual and to discover, refine and disseminate knowledge.” Discovery applies all over the campus, including the University of Utah Hospital, the Eccles Institute of Human Genetics and the Huntsman Cancer Institute. It applies to the social sciences, to the “hard sciences” and to the humanities.

From testing hard science hypotheses to defining the characteristics of early renaissance art, undergraduates are adding to the body of knowledge in their prospective fields through one-on-one research projects with their professors — doing cutting-edge research before they get their degree.