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Nurturing Undergraduate Research: Reflections on the Moravian Undergraduate Conference in Medieval and Early Modern Studies, 2006-2021

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Abstract

Reflecting on sixteen years of organizing an undergraduate conference in medieval and early modern studies, Professors Bardsley and Black of Moravian University highlight several patterns. First, using both quantitative and qualitative data, they celebrate the vibrancy of the field among undergraduates. They note particularly the transferable skills learned in medieval and early modern studies and the ways that these are appreciated by undergraduates, their parents, and teaching faculty. Second, they note the correlation between undergraduate papers and cutting-edge work in medieval studies as particular topics have risen and fallen in popularity. Finally, they note the challenges to the field that have accompanied changes in administrative and student cultures.

By happy coincidence, we found ourselves hired in the History and English departments at what was then Moravian College in 2003 and 2004 respectively.¹ Two years later, we organized a one-day conference in medieval and early modern studies for undergraduates at this small liberal arts college in eastern Pennsylvania. Fifteen conferences and 1,202 student presenters later, we have reluctantly realized that we can no longer support it. This moment of transition, however, affords a good opportunity to reflect on medieval and early modern studies at the undergraduate level as seen through the prism of an undergraduate conference. Several patterns have stood out over the past sixteen years: the vibrancy of interest in medieval and early modern studies, the extent to which students' topical interests reflect trends within the disciplines, and the challenges to medieval and early modern studies resulting from changes in both administrative and student cultures.

First, interest in medieval and early modern studies is strong among both students and faculty! When we first sent out a call for papers, we had little idea of what to expect. We thought that if perhaps twenty students participated, then we'd be satisfied. We were shocked and delighted when eighty students, from twenty-three schools, delivered papers or participated in performances. While most came from within a two-hour driving radius (the area we had targeted most directly by emailing faculty), some came from a considerable distance. Posting the Call for Papers to faculty listservs resulted in participation by students from Louisiana, Virginia, Maryland, Massachusetts, and Delaware, as well as closer colleges in Pennsylvania, New York, and New Jersey. Not having budgeted for so much interest, we scrambled!

The conference program cover was printed in color on Sandy's little desk jet printer, and the insides were photocopied and stapled in our basement copy room. Sandy had a six-month-old daughter who was yet to crawl and could still be plonked safely enough in one spot. She remembers stacking the photocopier to print on the back of pages (these were the days before double-sided copying became standard) and glancing over to see that the baby had found a sizable dust bunny and was lowering it into her mouth. The larger-than-expected crowd meant that we needed far more panel moderators than planned, but Moravian's faculty and staff responded wonderfully to our increasingly desperate pleas. In fact, colleagues from throughout the campus—including the library, campus facilities, information technology, and dining services—rose to the challenge of supporting this unexpected influx of visitors.

We made all kinds of mistakes in our haste to accommodate so many people, but those who attended were very forgiving. As we quickly learned, undergraduate conferences attract not only students and their faculty but also students' parents and in some cases their friends and extended families. We had imagined this initial conference as a one-off, but by the end of the day, it was clear that the demand for an annual conference was strong. Exhausted and delighted, we dusted ourselves off and began preparing for the next year. Another college expressed interest in sharing the conference with us, alternating years, and inadvertently did us an enormous favor. The dean of the time pivoted immediately from his reluctance to commit funds to declaring, "Well, they can't have it! It belongs here!" And thus, with further support from future administrators and from our local consortium of colleges (the Lehigh Valley Association of Independent Colleges), the conference stayed at Moravian.

¹ Moravian College became Moravian University in 2021.

Levels of student and faculty interest in the conference remained high. In the years that followed, we expanded our database of email contacts and mailing addresses so that Calls for Papers could be disseminated more widely. Several faculty worked the conference into their syllabi and brought entire classes. The largest conferences, each with just over 100 student presenters, came in 2010-2011, a period in which “undergraduate research” were among the most common buzzwords in higher education. Despite the Great Recession, deans from a wide range of schools seemed able to find funding to send students to conferences. Indeed, students seemed to come from further afield in these years, including California, the Pacific Northwest, the Midwest, Puerto Rico, and Canada. We included a broader range of exhibits and demonstrations (for example, a calligrapher, a spinner and weaver, an icon painter, and an expert in medieval weaponry). We also partnered with a local faith community to provide an evening concert of early music, the proceeds of which supported their food kitchen. The festive post-concert reception brought together musicians, presenters, parishioners, and other members of the community. Although we had been expanding our database of faculty contacts each year, we made a conscious decision at that point not to grow any further, since we were nearing maximum capacity in terms of logistical support and available spaces for conference sessions.

During the first year of the Covid-19 epidemic, 2020, we canceled the conference. The numbers were down in 2021 (forty-four presenters), and all participants wore masks. Given the uncertainties associated with the virus during the time faculty drew up syllabi (summer 2021), it made sense that several of our frequent faculty attendees chose not to bring students to the conference that year. Had we held a conference in 2022, we expect that numbers would have been back to their pre-Covid levels: an average of eighty student presenters and 200 to 220 total attendees.

Quantitatively, then, conference participation suggests that interest in medieval and early modern studies is healthy. This is confirmed qualitatively by the atmosphere on the days of the conferences. Invariably, the day was abuzz with excited nervousness and pride. While our advisees may sometimes tell us that their parents worry about them taking classes that do not lead directly to a prescribed vocation, parents who came to the conferences consistently expressed admiration of their children’s achievement and appreciation for the conference as a vehicle for it. Many seemed to see the conference as validating the work that their children had done. Not once did we hear concerns about future employment; instead, they spoke of pride in seeing their children as presenters, regardless of the subject matter they were presenting. Some commented that they knew little about the Middle Ages and Early Modern era but were appreciative of the transferable skills that students were developing, nonetheless.

Indeed, this feedback from parents helped us shape messages to our own advisees: you can tell your parents that your major is training you to scrutinize material, identify patterns, and present your findings clearly, both in written and oral forms. Most conference presenters did not go on to graduate school in medieval or early modern studies, yet the conference both reflected a genuine interest in the subject matter and helped validate that interest. The conference was not explicitly envisioned as a path to graduate school per se, certainly not graduate school in medieval studies. That said, some presenters did head to graduate school: we heard anecdotally from more than one director of graduate programs in medieval studies that they saw presentations at our conferences listed frequently on applications. As practitioners of medieval and early modern studies, we find heartening both the interest in graduate work and the recognition that our field provides a good context for developing transferable skills.

Second, student interests within medieval and early modern studies usually correlated quite neatly with overall trends in the field. While many paper topics may have been somewhat limited by the conventional courses most likely to be offered by smaller programs (that is, Chaucer; see below), special interests of faculty could also result in quite specific and rich papers. Many excellent presentations on medieval eco-criticism, for instance, came out of a Bucknell course taught by Paul (Alf) Siewers. In other cases, students clearly had broad choices of subject matter but gravitated toward those of particular relevance or interest. Chaucer was a perennial favorite, although his popularity among undergraduates presenting papers may have peaked: in 2014, papers on Chaucer accounted for 27 percent of all presentations, but the overall average throughout the period was 13 percent. The number of papers dealing with Chaucer declined over the last 5 conferences to 8.7 percent of all presentations, although this may reflect the absence of some schools in which courses focusing on Chaucer were typically taught. Among papers dealing with Chaucer, those on women and gender were especially frequent, although here too the numbers declined over time. Of the sixty-five papers on Chaucer between 2006 and 2010, thirty (forty-six percent) explicitly dealt with gender. This fell to thirty-one of seventy-five papers (forty-one percent) between 2011 and 2015 and ten of twenty-seven papers (thirty-seven percent) in 2016-21. Shakespeare came in second among papers focused on literature (seven percent of all papers during the lifetime of the conference), and his treatment of women was also a frequent topic, accounting for about one third of Shakespeare-related papers.

As popular culture drew on medieval themes, more papers addressed medievalism explicitly. Particularly during the last few years of the conference, students seemed eager to make connections with media such as the Harry Potter books and movies, *Game of Thrones*, representations of the medieval era in video games, and misuse of medieval symbols by the far right. Papers in recent years also increasingly addressed queer theory and transgender studies. A few dealt with race, ethnicity, and Otherness in the Middle Ages and early modern eras. Since the number of papers on race, ethnicity, and Otherness was not high, we were glad of the opportunity to broaden student and faculty interest through the annual plenary lecture. This session, immediately after lunch, consisted of a forty-minute talk by an invited faculty member. Over the past four conferences, three plenaries dealt in some way with race or ethnicity (and many faculty, including ourselves, took copious notes, suggesting that it will make its way back into classrooms!). Perhaps the newness of the field is responsible for the delay and students will become more interested in questions of race and ethnicity as they hear about them in classrooms.

Topics of student presentations generally reflected the cutting edge in medieval and early modern studies, but they also highlighted a place in which undergraduate pedagogy has perhaps faltered. While we know anecdotally that papers often drew on interdisciplinary perspectives, what we glean from paper titles and brief abstracts suggests that disciplinary approaches were the more common. Literature, especially English, was invariably dominant, averaging fifty-nine percent of all papers presented over the 15 conferences. History-based papers came a distant second, averaging twenty-one percent of all programs, with disciplines such as art, religion, philosophy, and music putting in an occasional showing. This is not to suggest that a paper written in an English class, for instance, might not explicitly include perspectives from other disciplines. Rather, we mean that we saw only a few papers that seemed interdisciplinary from their very conception rather than stemming from courses or honors projects within an identifiable department. And while we tried to group papers into

interdisciplinary panels, the specificity of many paper topics (and again the preponderance of papers stemming from English departments) often made it hard to find points of connection. As general education programs are reconsidered (and in some cases pared down), we may want to think about the contributions that medieval and/or early modern studies can make in terms of interdisciplinarity. In fact, the example of medieval studies has been a useful rejoinder for us at Moravian to those who have critiqued the so-called “silos” that allegedly develop within liberal arts curricula.

Our Medieval Studies minor requires students to take courses in at least three departments and to write a capstone paper that “must draw explicitly on methodologies of more than one discipline.” We may not always have been successful in convincing our colleagues, but we have at least been able to argue that studies of the Middle Ages, with its paucity of documents, force students to develop broader skills that transcend departmental boundaries. Perhaps this commitment to interdisciplinarity needs to be renewed. The New Medievalism in literature is no longer new, but its grounding in social and cultural contexts still holds lessons. Likewise, historians have sometimes been slow to move pedagogy from lecturing about “what happened” to pushing students to engage meaningfully with texts, whether literary, artistic, archaeological, or documentary. As reflected in conference presentations, the potential for truly interdisciplinary student research in medieval and early modern studies seems not yet to have been fully realized.

Finally, the challenges associated with the conference, while by no means insurmountable, highlight some ongoing changes in tertiary education. The conference came about in part because the two of us arrived at Moravian within a year of one another, and because we had the energy and freedom to try something new. Both of us were untenured, and—while we did not expect the conference to become nearly so large nor time-consuming—we did not fear that it would hurt our chances at tenure. Nor did it: if anything, the conference was welcomed and helped our respective tenure portfolios. We garnered the benefit, too, of widespread faculty and staff support after we sent out SOS emails seeking moderators and other forms of assistance. Today’s tenure-track faculty may not be so fortunate as we were, at a time when facilitation of undergraduate research was appreciated rather than seen as a distraction from one’s own research. And as tenure erodes throughout the United States, contingent faculty often lack access to the kind of institutional support that is required for staging a conference. With the trimming of humanities departments, too, premodernists are often the first to go. We count ourselves fortunate that our university of approximately 2,500 students still employs medievalists in both the English and history departments and know of all too many places where this is not the case. At Moravian, as elsewhere, preprofessional programs are shifting resources from traditional liberal arts disciplines. We were thus lucky (and are grateful) that the university continued to provide conference funding. The conference costs were low—approximately \$8000 per year—but this modest sum could still have been cut in various budget shakeups over the years. Were we starting from scratch, we would have more trouble acquiring ongoing support.

Changing student notions of commitment provided another challenge, albeit one we could mostly handle. After a couple of conferences in which multiple presenters did not show up, we emphasized more emphatically in our materials that signing up for a conference presentation was a commitment that presenters must take seriously. We also asked, when students submitted abstracts, for the names of faculty mentors, hoping to make the students aware that failure to follow through would be communicated to those who sponsored them. These measures seemed to stem the tide. Occasional

last-minute cancellations and no-shows were inevitable, but they were fewer than before. Much has been written elsewhere about the challenges faced by college students whose high school careers were disrupted by Covid; it is possible that we would have faced a renewed challenge with last-minute cancellations as this generation reached the stage of conference paper presentations.

While an array of reasons mean that we can no longer host the conference at Moravian, we're much hoping that the torch will be taken up by colleagues at another college or university.² We hope that it has provided a worthwhile service to students and faculty. Certainly, it has proven highly rewarding for us. The best part was the charged atmosphere of pride and nerves on the day of the conference itself. Students are interested in medieval and early modern studies and are excited to communicate that interest to others. As medieval and early modern studies face challenges from within and without, we are encouraged—and sustained—by this interest and excitement.

² Our reasons for discontinuing the conference are multiple. While we have both enjoyed the conference a great deal, we have each been burdened by other departmental and university responsibilities. Increasing administrative and logistical frustrations also played a role: it was easier to make the conference happen in a smaller environment with fewer rules and databases! Two things did not, however, play any role in our decision to discontinue: first, Moravian University continued to provide funding for basic conference operation; second, we are fortunate to have maintained an excellent working relationship with one another.