



Mentored Student Research: A Question and Answer with Michael Paul and Jeremy Lamoreaux

MICHAEL PAUL AND JEREMY LAMOREAUX

BYU-Idaho has recently emphasized research among faculty, and among students. The Research and Creative Works conference every semester is a new way for students to present their research. In addition, there are dozens of faculty-members, from all the colleges and most of the departments across campus, who have taken students to external venues to present their research. We recently sat down with two faculty members who have taken students to conferences for the past five years, and asked them about their perspective on mentoring student research.

Tell Perspective a little bit about your background. What do you teach and how long have you been at BYU-Idaho?

Michael: I came to BYU-Idaho almost six years ago to direct the TESOL education program and to teach Chinese language classes for the Department of Languages and International Studies. I have a MA in Language Acquisition from BYU and Ph.D. in East Asian Studies from the University of Arizona. Jeremy and I were hired at the same time.

Jeremy: And, I was hired to teach international politics and international studies. I received my MA in European Politics from the University of Reading, and my Ph.D. in Political Studies from the University of Aberdeen.

Why did you start mentoring students in research?

Michael: I love working one-on-one with students, so when I heard that the administration was interested in having faculty mentor students here in research projects, I jumped on the bandwagon. I called around and found some funding for a student to do some language proficiency testing for my students and statistical analysis. It was a dreadfully boring project. Since that time, we are doing a lot more interesting projects.

Jeremy: In my case, I was working on my PhD and started using my teaching assistant as a research assistant. He'd do research for me, and I'd get all the credit. Best set-up ever! Anyway, I had proposed a paper to a conference at Princeton University and asked him if he'd be interesting in co-authoring. He jumped on board, helped with the research, and did the actual presenting. We were



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able to tap into the Thomas E. Ricks funds to pay a good chunk of his costs. That was in 2009. About 6 months later, I did the same thing with a different student at a different conference at the University of Washington. I've been mentoring students ever since.

How did you begin working together in this mentoring? You guys aren't in the same department, right?

Michael: Boy, that's ancient history. Jeremy, you can correct me, but as I remember I had a student or two that I wanted to take to a conference down in LA. I wanted to put together a panel, but was short a couple of papers. I had kept hearing the name "Lamoreaux" from my students. He was everyone's favorite teacher so I picked up the phone and gave him a call. We've been working together ever since.

Jeremy: Yeah, that's pretty much how it went (except the "favorite" bit!). I found two other students, and we made a panel. We practiced presenting with them, helped hone their papers a bit (they really did the vast majority of the work on the papers) and helped them get TER funds. The panel really did awesome and, in fact, one of our student's papers was actually recommended as the best "postgraduate" paper... until they realized that he wasn't actually a post-graduate!

Why mentor students in research?

Michael: It is fun to work with students. They have energy, they love learning and have quick and inquisitive minds. I learn a lot from them and that knowledge directly impacts what I do in the classroom. My teaching is informed by the research I do with students. Finally, it is also really fun to go to conferences with students and faculty from campus.

Jeremy: Absolutely! It really is a lot of fun, and we haven't been disappointed yet. The students are really keen for opportunities like this. They do most of the work and come to us primarily just to get feedback. I can't say enough about how outstanding our students are.

How do you find students to work with?

Michael: It is a little more difficult for me. I only teach 100 and 200 level language classes. Students simply do not possess the linguistic ability to do research in Chinese linguistics. So, here's what I do, once every semester I use 10 or 15 minutes to talk about undergraduate research and some of the benefits to students here at BYU-Idaho. I show them a conference announcement and talk about some previous research projects my students have done. Then I make the invitation; if you are interested in doing research, come see me during office hours. Usually only two or three students will make the effort to come. With them I'll explain very simply how research works and encourage them to select a paper or a project that they have done for another class that they could then push to the next level. Basically I allow the students to self-select.

Jeremy: In my case, it's fairly easy because about half of my classes focus pretty heavily on individual research projects so I mentor students anyway. I keep an eye out for the best papers and projects, and nudge them toward conferences.

What if you have a student who wants you to mentor them, but you don't know anything about the topic?

Michael: I call around campus and find someone who does. I once formed a panel of five students for an I-TESOL conference and found five different faculty to mentor each paper.



Jeremy: That's what I do as well. I've nodded students in the direction of faculty all over the place. And, they've received good guidance.

What is the best way for students to share their research?

Michael: Although we've had students present at the Research & Creative Works Conference here on campus, we feel strongly that regional discipline-specific academic conferences are really the best venue. Why? Because it's a real conference, and the quality is elevated a level. Our students who have done both have remarked on the stark difference. They get to meet graduate students and faculty from all over the country. It is a great opportunity for students to network and build relationships. It also gives students a glimpse of what graduate school and a career in academia is like. For example, during the WCAAS 2012 conference, several of our students spent considerable time with the Department Chair of Anthropology at Harvard University, Theodore C. Bestor. By the end of the

conference, he offered to write one of the students a letter of recommendation for graduate school. Of those students, one is now studying at Thunderbird School of Global Management, and another is studying at Yale. We've had students present research at academic conferences at the Princeton, University of Washington, Cal State Northridge, Claremont College, Weber State University, Arizona State University, and Brigham Young University, not to mention the conference we hosted in West Yellowstone in 2012.

Jeremy: We also make sure our students are well prepared for the conferences, because their performance reflects on us and the University. So, about a week before the conference we have the students do mock presentations. We invite other students and faculty to attend and give immediate feedback (oftentimes very blunt). Additionally, the night before the actual presentation we talk with the students again and basically tell them that faculty from other universities will be there and it better be good! It usually gets their attention and helps them step it up a notch.

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What's the most rewarding experience you've had with undergraduate student research?

Michael: We were at a reception for conference board members when a faculty from the conference organization came up to us and said, "I just want to meet the guys who have the cheek to have undergraduates present at our conference." Nearly the whole board of the conference organizing committee attended our students' panel. Our students did an outstanding job and made a big impression on the faculty. At that same conference, in 2010, the board members were so impressed they asked BYU-Idaho to host the 50th anniversary conference of the organization.

Can you tell us a bit about the conference you chaired in 2012?

Jeremy: We held it in West Yellowstone. We had around 100 papers presented from researchers all over the world. People came from as far away as Turkey, Germany, Japan, Korea, England, and all over the country. BYU-Idaho faculty chaired most of the 25 panels and BYU-I students were highly involved. It was quite stressful, but really a blast! One of the things we really wanted to do was make it a complete experience for everyone attending. So, we organized a guided tour of Yellowstone (with BYU-Idaho students as the guides), a tour at a dog-sled kennel, and had a band come up from Salt Lake City. It was pretty cool because so many conferences can be just boring. Everyone loved it.

Do you have any advice for faculty thinking of working with students? How do they get started?

Michael: Working with students is fun and rewarding. Pick a regional conference in your field and co-author a paper with a student. It will scare you back into being the researcher you once were. What you learn from the experience will directly influence your teaching and rekindle your passion for your discipline. ❁

