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Learning Contracts: Background and Rationale

Undergraduate research (UR) involves an interesting pedagogical paradox: While UR assumes that students benefit from articulating and executing independent research projects, it also requires close collaboration between student and mentor. Academic independence stems from working closely with another, more experienced, academic partner. A successful UR experience for both student and mentor requires that the mentor be intentional about maintaining this balance, creating space for the student to develop her own ideas, and providing guidance so that the student can accomplish her desired outcomes. Maintaining this balance is further complicated by the fact that UR projects often require some form of assessment, as they generally are part of a program that asks the mentor to grade or evaluate the product and the process.

One tool for balancing the element of independence and student empowerment that characterizes UR with the need for direction is a learning contract. Useful within a wide range of learning settings (see Knowles for an indication of its breadth), a learning contract provides the context of UR a learning contract provides guidance for the student as she moves through an independent research project and a guideline for the mentor to assess the student's research process. In fact, without a contract for assessing a student's research process, separate from

the final product, assessment is quite difficult and potentially arbitrary. In this article, I discuss elements that might be included in a UR learning contract, as well as attending to some of the pedagogical benefits associated with this tool. I approach this from the perspective of someone involved in directing multise­mester UR projects within the context of my university's various UR programs. These programs are part of a university-wide commitment to UR that involves educating faculty across the disciplines on strategies for mentoring successful research experiences. Much of what I discuss reflects what I have learned from other faculty at my institution.

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