



MEMO

TO: SPARCA Project Leads (Jeffrey Potteiger and Jennifer Moore)

FROM: Undergraduate Research Council

DATE: March 17, 2025

SUBJECT: SPARCA Feedback

Fundamentally, the URC believes that GVSU's Strategic Plan to Augment Research, Scholarship, and Creative Activity should focus on providing the necessary support and resources to allow faculty to involve undergraduate students in their research. Ultimately, we believe a fundamental goal of the strategic plan should be to increase the breadth and depth of quality-mentored undergraduate research and creative activity at GVSU.

With this, we believe it is important to decide on GVSU's institutional identity. We cannot be everything at once. One of the major competitive advantages we have over universities like MSU, CMU, WMU, etc. is that students at GVSU can truly work closely with and get to know their faculty. Many students come to GVSU for the interactions with faculty and the ability to do research in-depth with faculty. We believe it is important that GVSU's SPARCA protects this competitive advantage which allows us to get high-quality students. Without careful attention to this, it would be easy for a potential strategic plan to lessen this competitive advantage, turning us into one of the many similar universities. A strategic plan that fails to protect this competitive advantage and safeguard our focus on quality over quantity would likely have large negative impacts on enrollment (both number of students and quality of students) as well as retention. Ultimately, we believe it is crucial that the strategic plan to augment research, scholarship, and creative activity recognizes the benefits of who we are as an institution and protects those for the long-term stability of the university. We are concerned that the experience for undergraduate student researchers is at risk.

With respect to the specific SPARCA themes URC has been asked to address, we have the following comments:

1. *Identifying key areas of excellence in research, scholarship, and creative activity*

- This is an overall concerning question for URC. We think it is important not to hyperfocus on one (or a few) areas. We on the URC are so excited when we see well-written proposals from less common areas, such as history. The URC believes it is important to make sure we are supporting research broadly and not isolating our focus to a few specific areas.

2. *Structuring faculty development programs to enhance productivity in research, scholarship, and creative activity*

- Enhancing productivity will happen organically by freeing up time and providing resources for faculty. Those are the two biggest barriers; there is simply limited time and limited resources for faculty to enhance their research productivity. It is simply hard for faculty to do much while on a 3/3 load and it is not reasonable to simply ask faculty to do more. The only way to enhance productivity in research, scholarship, and creative activity without it being an additional burden on faculty is by freeing up time and providing the necessary resources.

- One way to free up time while supporting student involvement in research is to develop consistent university-wide policies (that are actually honored) to give faculty workload credit for mentoring undergraduate and graduate students and teaching independent studies. For instance, some colleges have specific agreements where every X number of credit hours of enrollment in independent studies or a certain number of supervised projects counts as one course. Developing a consistent policy to ensure that those faculty running independent studies related to their research and mentoring student researchers have their efforts be recognized as a valid and important part of their workload.
- With regards to freeing up time, we also believe it's important to think not just about a 3/3 load and the number of classes taught, but also the types of classes that are taught. There is not equality across classes, for instance due to substantially different course caps. A reasonable way to approach this may be to define a load based on a "standard" class size and recognizing that those teaching larger classes should likely not be required to teach the same number of sections. We also recognize that even this does not account for the differences in workload across classes for reasons beyond merely course enrollment.

3. *Engaging students (undergraduate and graduate) in GVSU's research, scholarship, and creative activity agenda*

We on the URC believe the most effective strategies to increasing engagement of students in research, scholarship, and creative activity is to:

- Protect current institutional funding and look for ways to increase funding for student research, scholarship, and creative activity. Many of our students need to financially support themselves and cannot feasibly devote time to research unless it is paid.
- Increase student travel funding and allow recent graduates who are presenting work performed at GVSU after they graduate to make use of the travel funding. Student researchers presenting at out-of-state conferences often shoulder a majority of the cost out-of-pocket, a task that is infeasible for many and perpetuates inequity. As publications often lag behind the actual research, it is very common that the dissemination of work done while a student at GVSU occurs at conferences after the students have graduated. Unfortunately, current policies prevent student travel funding being used after students have graduated, when it would be reasonable to allow them to apply for this funding for some time (say up to a year) after they graduate, so long as the work they are presenting was done while at GVSU. Additionally, increasing faculty travel funding allows their faculty mentors to attend with them, providing the students with a more meaningful experience.

a. *How can the university best engage students in research, scholarship, and creative activity opportunities?*

- Provide faculty resources and time to work with students and engage in high-quality mentorship of student research, scholarship, and creative activity.
- The university should work with faculty to figure out what faculty need, other than funding resources which the university as a whole can provide, to remain excited about working with students. The engagement of students in research, scholarship, and creative activity relies primarily on the faculty wanting to work with and being willing to provide a quality experience.
- Ensuring that working with students is done through high-quality mentored experiences – this is one of our competitive advantages over major research universities in that students at GVSU actually have the opportunity to work closely and collaboratively with faculty in a meaningful way, rather than being one of many students who work under a faculty member, but rarely engage directly with the faculty member or rarely receive meaningful mentorship.

- Identify flexible ways for students to be involved in research, for instance by:
 - Allowing students to accumulate research credits across semesters.
 - Ensuring research experiences are a valued, feasible options for meeting capstone and experiential learning requirements in programs.
- Investigate and encourage creative approaches to scale mentorship of student research, while ensuring the students receive a high-quality mentored experience.

b. What strategies can be employed to increase student involvement in meaningful in research, scholarship, and creative activity particularly in fields outside the STEM disciplines?

- This, particularly outside of STEM, is one of the reasons that the idea of focusing on certain areas is concerning. The best we can do is ensure there is support and funding for student research, scholarship, and creative activity, both during the summer and during the academic year, for a variety of disciplines.
- Free up funds to support paid, interdisciplinary research opportunities. Funds provided to support interdisciplinary groups of 2-5 students would both help encourage activity from a wide variety of disciplines and with the proper faculty mentoring support (by for instance requiring these “group grants” to require co-mentoring by faculty in different disciplines) would also allow faculty to more feasibly scale involving students, but doing so in a meaningful, intentional way.
- Develop international research collaborations and create and support research-based study abroad programs and virtual exchange programs. This would allow students to collect cross-cultural data and compare findings globally.

4. Identify infrastructure and resources needed to support high-quality research, scholarship, and creative activity

- To enhance productivity in and support high-quality research, scholarship, and creative activity, it is crucial to double-down on support and funding for the libraries. These activities cannot meaningfully occur without a well-funded library system.
- It is important to protect sabbatical and ensure that taking sabbatical is supported as soon as faculty are eligible. This is not always the case; faculty are not always encouraged to try for sabbatical right away.

a. How can the university invest in state-of-the-art research facilities, labs, and technology platforms that enable cutting-edge research, scholarship, and creative activity?

- Ensure that there is adequate research lab space for students to work. There is a shortage of space, but providing students the opportunity to work in close proximity to their faculty members will enhance both productivity and the quality of the students’ experiences.
- Ensure that lab space is used effectively given the limited lab space. Some labs are active whereas some are dormant, meaning some lab space is going unused. There is duplicated equipment across labs which may not be necessary. One idea would be to consider shared equipment spaces which may eliminate the need to duplicate expensive equipment.

b. What administrative support (e.g., research coordinators, grant management teams, project managers, grant accounting) is needed to help faculty navigate the logistics of research?

- The administrative burden of actually processing the hiring of students, ensuring student’s paperwork has gone through to get paid timely, etc. is overly high, with too much of this work/burden placed on faculty. There is an unsustainable amount of bureaucracy at GVSU, including the bureaucracy simply to hire students. Processes need to be streamlined to be efficient to ensure that the benefits outweigh the administrative burden.

- It is also important to improve efficiency of other related processes, for instance by streamlining processes such as IRB review and IT purchasing to ensure they are not unnecessary barriers to carrying out research, scholarly, and creative activity.

5. *Identifying metrics to measure research, scholarship, and creative activity success*

We feel it is important to recognize that simple metrics, such as publication counts, citation counts, etc. fail to address the differences between fields and capture quality. We also believe it is crucial to capture the involvement of undergraduate students in research and creative activity, for instance through volume of student dissemination (presentations, publications with student co-authors, student first-author publications creative works created by students, etc.). Similarly, efforts to assess the short- and long-term impacts of involving undergraduates in research and creative activity should be undertaken, recognizing that success of involving students in research is about far more than the research output. For instance, this could be measured quantitatively and qualitatively through examination of rates and locations of graduate school matriculation, graduate degrees attained, and employment for students participating in research, scholarship, and creative activity.

Overall, we believe that the most important efforts should be focused on:

- Ensuring the strategic plan protects the experience for undergraduate student researchers and GVSU's focus and recognition for quality education. Attempts to enhance productivity in research, scholarship, and creative activity will have little meaning if it has negative effects on enrollment and retention of high-quality undergraduate students. This is particularly crucial given the uncertain research funding landscape. We need to protect our competitive advantage which brings us high-quality students to ensure long-term fiscal stability.
- Freeing up faculty time and providing necessary resources to organically enhance research, scholarship and creative activity productivity. Limited time and limited resources are the biggest barriers. Without addressing these, efforts to enhance productivity will likely have limited effect or be seen as forced, rather than an organic, self-driven progression.
- Ensuring that mentoring student research is valued in promotion and tenure. GVSU embraces the teacher-scholar model, which means there are not clear divisions between teaching, research, and scholarship. Mentoring student research does not cleanly fit into one of service, research, and teaching – it can be simultaneously all of these. It is important that processes, such as personnel documents and criteria for promotion and tenure, recognize that working with students cannot cleanly be pulled apart and should be looked at from its holistic benefit as part of the teacher-scholar model. We need to ensure that prioritizing quality mentorship of student research and the integration of research with teaching is valued in official requirements.
- Safeguarding and increasing internal university funding for supporting undergraduate student research. While we recognize the value of applying for external funding, we believe it is crucial to ensure there are opportunities, across disciplines, for students to engage in high-quality, mentored research experiences through internal funding.

If you have any questions on our feedback, please reach out to Dr. Erin Carrier (Chair, Undergraduate Research Council, carrier@gvsu.edu) and Dr. Susan Mendoza (Director, Center for Undergraduate Scholar Engagement, mendozsus@gvsu.edu).