Mentoring Narrative

Xiaomei Cai, PhD

A good mentor is more than just a teacher in the classroom. A good mentor’s impact lasts a lifetime. This is probably more true in research mentoring than in other areas of teaching and learning. I credit my graduate school mentors for not only teaching me research skills but also igniting my passion for research. Knowing how much their knowledge, patience, and care have helped me grow as a scholar and a person, I often regret the fact that I did not have the opportunity to learn and experience research sooner when I was an undergraduate student (I went to college in China). For this reason, I consider mentoring undergraduate students in research a personal mission. I have been actively involved in undergraduate research ever since I joined the faculty at Mason. To me, mentoring is not restricted to traditional one-on-one intensive research training. More importantly, mentoring means instilling a culture of research among undergraduate students, awakening their intellectual curiosity, and equipping them with the necessary research skills to find answers of their own.

Research is an integral part of everyday life, not just an abstract concept. This is the philosophy I convey to all undergraduate students in my classes. Students new to research often have the misconception that research is hard and esoteric and has little to do with their life. They do not see the value of research in their future career either. My first goal, therefore, is to correct these misconceptions. My students are communication majors. Communication is at the center of our daily life and research ideas related to communication are abundant. In the research methods class that I teach every year, I offer examples of past studies in various areas to broaden students’ understanding of research, ranging from issues in interpersonal relationships, to biases in information processing, to the effects of mass communication. At the same time, I also encourage students to observe their surroundings and look for communication phenomena that they care about. I believe that good research comes from curiosity, not from textbooks or professors. With my encouragement and under my guidance, my students have conducted original research on a broad range of interesting communication topics. A sample from the last few years include the relationship between the quality of romantic relationship and Facebook activities, car advertising trends in the *Motor Trend* magazines in the past 40 years, and the use of mobile apps and academic procrastination. My efforts also go beyond my own classroom. As the course coordinator for the research methods class in the Department of Communication, I train new instructors to ensure that students from all sections of the class will have the same opportunities to experience and engage in original research. Partly as a result of this effort, last year the research methods course in my department was formally designated as a Scholarly Inquiry course by the Mason Office of Student Scholarship, Creative Activities, & Research.

It is my belief that students will become receptive to learning research skills once equipped with a positive attitude toward research. Teaching research skills is at the heart of research mentoring. I believe in reinforcing those skills through rigorous exercise and systematic application. In my research methods class, students’ projects take shape as the course progresses and generally move through the following steps: identifying research question, refining their question, identifying variables, proposing appropriate research method, locate relevant literature, critically evaluate the literature, compile an annotated bibliography, design their research instrument, pilot test their study, and write up a final report. I provide extensive feedback at each step. My honors students receive even more rigorous training as they are required to take a two-semester sequence of research methods classes. I had 16 honors students completed the sequence last year and 15 this year, each conducting their own individual research project. The amount of time I devote to mentoring these students is countless. In addition to our weekly class meetings, I meet with them individually on a regular basis. I also use email extensively to answer their questions, provide guidance, and monitor their progress. Last year alone, I exchanged over 750 emails with my honors students. I also challenge my honors students to higher standards. For instance, after receiving my feedback, honors students are required to not only revise their work, but also submit a response letter.
detailing and justifying the changes made. This is a demanding process but has proven highly effective. The quality of the students’ work generally shows dramatic improvement over the course of the semester. More importantly, they can actually pinpoint the improvements they have made and explain how they have done things differently to enable such improvements. These lessons, learned through rigorous training, are likely to stay with them and provide important guidance for their future research endeavors.

Mentoring is an extremely rewarding experience. I enjoy seeing the smiles on my students’ faces when they see the fruits of their research. Many students say that my class is the best experience they have had at Mason. Hearing them say that is extremely gratifying, making me feel that my hard work is absolutely worth it. Indeed, on many levels mentoring is a mutually beneficial experience. The sense of fulfillment mentors derive from it is tantamount to the learning and accomplishments of the mentees. This is why I love doing it.
Evidence of Mentoring Experience

Xiaomei Cai, Ph.D.

My mentoring of undergraduate research consists of two major strands of activities. The first aims at cultivating a research culture among all undergraduate students in the Department of Communication. The second focuses on mentoring individual research projects by our honors students. I will list my accomplishments in these two areas in separate sections below.

Cultivating undergraduate research in Communication

I started to teach research methods class as soon as I joined Mason in 2006. In the past nine years, I have been teaching research methods classes every year. I have taught at least 400 undergraduate students in my regular research methods classes. All my students are required to propose or conduct an original research project. I also strongly encourage my students to seek opportunities to present their research. For example, one student group paper developed in my methods class was presented and well received at the Eastern Communication Association Annual Conference in 2012. The title of the paper was “Looking good in the digital world: How Facebook usage can develop and show concerns on self-image,” by Christina Talhame, Katherine Lopes, David Fink III, and Abdi Fatah.

I serve as the course coordinator of the research methods class. In this role, I coordinate different sections of the class, train new instructors, and schedule regular meetings to improve teaching effectiveness. In 2014, I received a curriculum development grant from the Office of Student Scholarship, Creative Activities & Research. Working with my colleagues, I have successfully revised the research methods class (COMM400/490) and made it a Scholarly Inquiry class. At present, the honors section of the research methods class (COMM491) is under review for the RS designation.

I have never deliberately collected my students’ information after they finish my class. But I know that many of them have gone on to pursue graduate degrees. Some have decided to stay at Mason for their graduate studies. As the MA director in my department, I happen to know who they are. Just as an example, in the last two years, the following students from my research methods classes have since joined our MA program: Brittany Baker, Ayana Burch, Rachel Jouburan, Lubna Abu-Ulbah, Kathleen Butler, Nicole Kratzer. Currently two of my former students are also in the process of applying to our MA program: Al-Hussien Al-Mutawakil and Michael Richardson.

Individual mentoring

To help revive the department’s honors program, I have taken over the honors research methods class, and with it the huge task of mentoring individual research projects for all honors students. Here is what I have done in the past few years and some samples of its impact on our students.

- I have mentored a total of 41 honors students on their individual research projects.
- I have mentored six OSCAR students in 2014 and 2015.
  - Three OSCAR students in 2014: Amanda Lee, Jessica Smith, and Heleena Winters
  - Three OSCAR students in 2015: Eric Backus, Christina Gabriele and Kelly Pizzigrilli
Three of the honors students from last year are currently in graduate school
- Samantha Scruggs: Kings College, London
- Zachary Eisenstein: Brown University
- Erin Weistenberg: Longwood University

One of my honors students, Bridget Bush, is applying for the graduate program here at Mason. I fully expect that she will be admitted.

A student paper entitled “Charitable nonprofit messages: A content analysis of external messages for charitable nonprofit” (by Heleena Winters) won the Best Overall Research and Scholarship award in the poster session at CHSS Undergraduate Research Symposium in 2014. Her paper was also accepted for presentation the Annual Conference for the Eastern Communication Association, April 2015.

A student paper entitled “The effects of communication styles on sports performance” (by Kelly Pizzigrilli) was accepted for presentation at the Undergraduate Research Conference during the Annual Conference for the Eastern Communication Association, April 2015.

In April 2014, 15 honors student research projects I directed were presented at the CHSS Undergraduate Research Symposium.

1. Bridget Bush, Family communication patterns and political development.
3. Emma Cruz, Study on the gratifications sought and obtained through the use of online news media.
5. Laurie Jacobs, Media’s portrayal of mental illness and its influence on the perception of college students.
9. Amanda Lee, How an individual’s news consumption affects their depth of political knowledge.
13. Cherelle Washington, Opening lines on the development rate of romantic relationships.
15. Heleena Winters, Charitable nonprofit messages: A content analysis of external messages for charitable nonprofit.
The following are honors student research projects I directed to be presented at CHSS symposium in April 2015:

1. Eric Backus, The effects of instructor immediacy on student-veterans’ affective and cognitive learning outcomes.
2. Oscar Cordova, Facebook feedback and social connectedness.
3. Sean Cummings, Academy awards campaigns: is there a relationship between Academy Award campaigns and Academy embers’ decision of a nominated performance?
4. Rawan Elbaba, The tale of two media: Framing the Middle Eastern women during the Arab Spring.
5. Christina Gabriele, Online anonymity in social media: Exploring the potential threats of Yik Yak on college students.
7. Hannah Menchhoff, Framing of sexual assault in gendered magazines.
8. Theresa Novak, The portrayal of strong female characters on television: A change in types over time.
10. Karla Ponciano, Relational dissolution: Can it take a Knapp?
11. Ariel Porter, Color me beautiful: Examining colorism in African American television shows.
12. Kaitlyn Reitz, Fashion blogs and what leads to their success.
13. Logan Rice, Stay with me, and off of Facebook: How heightened Facebook use prompts uncertainty within intimate college relationships.
15. Saira Sohail, Classroom interaction with international students and its effect on students’ intercultural sensitivity.

Service related to Undergraduate Research

- Course coordinator for COMM400 Research Methods in Communication. It is a required class for all communication majors.
- Member of the University Undergraduate Research Committee (2014-present)
- Judge for the OSCAR applications (2014-present)
- Judge for the CHSS Undergraduate Research Symposium
- Member of the Council of Undergraduate Research (CUR)
Xiaomei Cai

Reviewer’s Name: Tim Gibson

Relationship:

Known Applicant: Over 2 years

How does the nominee enrich undergraduate learning through the mentorship of research and creative projects?

It is my pleasure to write in support of Dr. Xiaomei Cai for OSCAR’s Faculty Mentor Award. During the past two years, Dr. Cai has supervised our Undergraduate Honors Program. In this program, our honors students take an advanced version of our Research Methods course (COMM 490) in Fall semester, then complete an independent research study under Dr. Cai’s supervision in COMM 491, held each Spring. Over these two years, Dr. Cai has supervised 39 honors students, with 31 students completing their research projects by the end of the Spring semester (note: some students withdraw from the Honors program between Fall and Spring). During this time six of Dr. Cai’s mentees have received OSCAR grants, and last year, three of her OSCAR grant students presented their research at the OSCAR presentations in May 2014. Her students’ research projects have also been recognized outside the OSCAR program. For example, last year, 15 of her students presented their research at the CHSS undergraduate research symposium’s poster session, and one of these students—Heleena Winter (also an OSCAR grant recipient, I believe)—won the CHSS Best Overall Research and Scholarship Award for the poster session. This year, she has repeated this feat, with another 15 students scheduled to present their research during the CHSS symposium poster session. Finally, Xiaomei’s OSCAR students are winning recognition at leading Communication conferences as well. For example, Ms. Winter presented her research at last year’s Eastern Communication Association (ECA) in the Organizational Communication Division (i.e., not a student-only division). In addition, one of Dr. Cai’s current students, Kelly Pizzlingirilli (also an OSCAR student) will present her COMM 490 paper at ECA’s Undergraduate Research Conference in April. This record of mentoring and student success does not come easily. Dr. Cai spends countless hours meeting individually with all of her honors students—she challenges them and supports them. She offers extensive feedback and meticulous guidance. And the results of her tireless efforts speak for themselves. She is richly deserving of this award, and it is an honor to work with her.

How does the nominee influence students’ academic choices and future trajectories?

see answer to #5.

How does the nominee help to foster a culture of student scholarship at Mason?

see answer to #5.
Xiaomei Cai
Reviewer's Name: Kelly Pizzigrilli
Relationship: Current student mentee
Known Applicant: 7-12 months

How has your mentor enriched your learning through your research or creative project?
Dr. Cai has given me a different perspective on learning. Through trial and error, I have learned that sometimes not everything is going to turn out the way it was planned. Through her support and guidance in my research, she has made this perspective a smooth and assuring learning process. I have always felt confident with her direction and guidance and trust that she is going to help me learn new lessons through my research. I could not imagine a better mentor throughout this process. Her experience and support are two of the most important qualities she possesses in her "mentor" title. I'm thankful to be one of her current mentees!

How has your mentor influenced your academic choices and future goals?
Dr. Cai has greatly influenced my academic choices and career goals. When I first met Dr. Cai, it was during an interest meeting for Honors Communication, in which she strongly encouraged me to apply. Her encouragement and support through the application process for Honors Communication has opened so many doors for me, academically and for my future career goals. Without her encouragement, I would have never seen this side of research and I never would have developed such a passion and interest for research. This has been such an encouragement for my future goals as I strive to work my way into the Market Research industry following graduation.

How does your mentor help to foster a culture of student scholarship at Mason?
Dr. Cai comes to class with so many opportunities for us to be involved with and share our research outside the classroom. She is always finding opportunities through OSCAR, Communication conventions, etc. so we can display and learn more about our research. She never fails to encourage every student to pursue opportunities to further his/her research, while learning more about the process itself. To note, her encouragement doesn't just stop at the end of this semester. She is already pushing for Juniors to apply for OSCAR in the summer program, as well as, opportunities for next year as well. When we have doubts about our research, or take steps back in the process, Dr. Cai is always there for assurance, assistance, and she is an amazing support system.
Xiaomei Cai

Reviewer’s Name: Anne Nicotera
Relationship: Known Applicant: Over 2 years

How does the nominee enrich undergraduate learning through the mentorship of research and creative projects?
Dr. Cai teaches our honors section of Communication Research Methods and supervises our honors program research projects. Her students are required to submit their projects to the CHSS Undergraduate Research Symposium. She also encourages them to submit to undergraduate research conferences and to regional communication conferences. The student response has been very positive.

How does the nominee influence students’ academic choices and future trajectories?
She urges students to apply for graduate school. As our MA director, she finds every opportunity to inform our undergraduates about our MA program and about graduate school in general.

How does the nominee help to foster a culture of student scholarship at Mason?
She encourages all students to pursue their research, not just those continuing on to an honors project. She spends many hours in her office working one-on-one with students who are working on independent research projects. She is solely responsible for the recent upsurge in undergraduate student research in our department. She has also been mentoring other faculty to create a rotation through the honors research projects course. She has been an active member of our OSCAR curriculum development project. She makes herself available to colleagues for guidance from her experience working with undergraduate research and encourages us to supervise independent student projects.