

LETTER FROM DEPARTMENT HEAD

It is a great pleasure to have a chance to welcome you to the new issue of *Re:Search: The Undergraduate Literary Criticism Journal at the University of Illinois*. Last year, *Re:Search* joined our literary journal *Montage* as a new voice of undergraduate research in the department.

In its first two issues, *Re:Search* has brought together essays by undergraduate scholars that exemplify the great breadth and diversity of approaches to literature in the department of English and other literature departments on campus. In those issues, you can find essays on everything from George Orwell and Elizabeth Gaskell to the comics of Jack Kirby and the problem of paternal masculinity in video games. The essays range across periods, genres, themes, and media. They are all now searchable on Google Scholar and indexed on the University library's online catalogue.

While I find the content of the journal impressive, I am equally impressed by the process that lies behind that content. Each issue is the outcome of collaboration between a number of our majors as well as between students and faculty. *Re:Search* is run by students—an executive board as well as teams of editorial & review board members and copy editors—who carefully select, edit, and publish the essays. Faculty members are happy to help out by serving as mentors who work closely with individual authors and by providing more general guidance regarding research and writing. This year, for instance, Professor Lori Newcomb, who has been the journal's faculty advisor, led a workshop on thesis drafting, and Harriet Green, our English and digital humanities librarian, led another on research methods. English graduate student Alaina Pincus has served as graduate advisor and has offered her own expertise and experience derived from work on a public scholarship forum dedicated to women and women's issues in eighteenth-century literature.

Re:Search is a key part of a departmental and campus-wide effort to promote research by undergraduates. Students who contribute to the journal—as author, editor, peer reviewer, copy editor, or member of the executive board—gain credit toward the Undergraduate Research Certificate offered by the Office of

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Undergraduate Research. Papers published in the journal have also been presented at the Undergraduate Research Symposium.

In thinking about these flourishing activities on our campus, I am struck by the fact that when I was in college—just a few short decades ago!—nobody ever talked about “undergraduate research.” It wasn’t really until my final semester, when I was working on an honors thesis on Shakespeare and the printing press, that I did something that now seems like research—though I’m not sure I would have described it that way back then. And only later, when I was in graduate school, did I have the chance to work on a journal like *Re:Search* and that turned out to be one of the best experiences I ever had in school. I’m glad our students get to take part in something like this earlier than I did.

The fact that nobody was talking about undergraduate research when I was in college didn’t stop us from being excited about our education or about the possibility of developing new ideas, but it meant we didn’t really have a framework or vocabulary for thinking about what we were doing *as research*. And I believe that matters. The reason it is important to think of our work as research—and not just a paper or assignment required for a class—is that it allows us to conceive of what we’re doing as part of a *larger conversation* about culture, about knowledge, about the world. Although we in the humanities do most of our work alone—in the library or in front of a computer—understanding that work as research means recognizing that we are part of a community of other researchers, of people trying to make sense of the world in newer and better ways. It is a good feeling to be part of a collective undertaking aimed at greater insight.

I am so happy to see undergraduate research alive on our campus—and I am especially pleased to be able to introduce the new issue of *Re:Search*. Enjoy your reading—and get involved in the conversation!

Michael Rothberg
Professor and Head of the Department of English