Presentation

Presenting Research on Rhetoric and Medical Writing:
A Senior Honors Thesis

By Kelly Cheng

One of the greatest challenges presented by research in any subject is the creation of a final product and dissemination of discoveries into larger worlds. What begins in an enclosed lab or dusty library ultimately finds an audience in scientific symposia, research journals, and in honors theses. Thus, choosing one’s major not only influences which library one delves into for hundreds of hours, but also offers a culmination of that degree with the honors thesis: a common and yet personal way to present undergraduate research.

Senior Jenna Tonn completed her honors thesis in Feminist Studies. Her work as a student researcher in that department piqued an interest in American medicine between 1890 and 1900. At that time, she says, “The medical community was at a crossroads of language--how do you talk about uterine disorders when the only language relating to the uterus available is embedded in neurasthenic/hysterical literature?” According to Jenna, neurasthenia was coined for “nervous exhaustion caused by mental overexertion,” and along with hysteria, became associated with uterine disorders. In her thesis, Jenna explores that decade’s rhetorical changes regarding neurasthenia, hysteria, and uterine disorders within the medical community and media. She analyzes the advances of obstetric technologies, access to medical education for women, and the tightening regulations of the American Medical Association, among other effects on the changing reliance on neurasthenic language in medical writing.

Like other undergraduate researchers, Jenna has become an audience to other theses in creating her own. Inside Stanford Medical Center’s Lane Library Special Collections and Archives, she plunged into countless theses written by graduates from Cooper Medical College of San Francisco. That medical school, one of few coeducational medical institutions in the U.S. of its time—a unique focus of the thesis—later became Stanford University Medical College.

Jenna presented her thesis at the Feminist Studies colloquium, a year-end event common in honors programs. She values “the opportunity to truly ‘produce’ an intellectual or academic work,” and sees the thesis as “a form of presentation for the researcher, a structure that benefits the researcher’s development as a member of the academic community.” However, she sees limits in sharing the research through a thesis “because it is so embedded in the formalities of the academic world.” Jenna points to the Haas Center as an answer to this problem.

The Public Service Scholars Program provides researchers an even larger audience in a specific organization or community and in the general public. However, the focus of this program accepts theses that can specifically contribute to public service. This one-year program also provides additional support for seniors to perfect their work. The program concludes with the mini-conference of formal presentations, “Research with a Public Purpose,” and links thesis abstracts on the Haas website.
Jenna’s research employed resources available to undergraduates. She successfully applied to fund her summer research through an URP grant. At the URP office, Jenna also found her “main support,” Hilton Obenzinger, her mentor for the feminist studies internship, who helped her find an advisor for her honors thesis. According to Jenna, her advisor Andrea Lunsford “is always open to reading chapter drafts and has been very enthusiastic.” Patty French, the curator of Special Collections at Lane Medical Library, has also been very helpful. The feminist studies department supports seniors pursuing undergraduate research with an honors college program and an honors thesis seminar.

Perhaps one day, Jenna’s thesis will become another researcher’s memorable material. Within Lane Medical Library, she “opened one thesis and the most amazing, disturbing, perfect image was engraved on the front page!” On that auspicious day, another student’s research became “the cornerstone of her thesis, a brilliant find!” In the meantime, she continues to engage in the timeless tradition of research: a rigorous, in-depth presentation of her passions that could lead future researchers into new worlds.

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Innovative HOPES Project: A Cartoon Book on Genetics and Huntington’s Disease for Young Children

By Christina Ann Chen

All I remember from the interview was: “We can work that out for you.” I had just become a new student researcher for HOPES, and already I had the freedom to choose whatever research project I was interested in. HOPES (Huntington’s Outreach Project for Education at Stanford) is a student and faculty-run website project that provides the general public with up-to-date scientific information on Huntington’s Disease (HD) in everyday language. Video clips, interactive timelines, and articles summarizing findings in medical journals are just a few examples of the group’s online postings (http://hopes.stanford.edu). And my first proposed project was perfectly in line with the group’s goal of educating the public through creative presentation: I wanted to create a cartoon children’s book explaining the genetics of HD.

Writing for HOPES is not just about writing—it’s about collaborating with different people and applying resources in order to make medical information about HD clear and entertaining. I chose to center my project on children, as children’s education would vastly increase the reach of the HOPES website. Specifically, I wanted to write about the heredity of HD for young children between the ages of eight to ten. With my target audience in mind, I began sketching cartoons of googly-eyed flies and curliqued arms of pea plants to animate the genetics of heredity. Based on these sketches, Stanislav Jourin—the graphic artist for this project—was able to bring my ideas to life in a way that I never could have.

To make sure that our book would not overlap with currently available educational materials, Stanislav and I researched local bookstores. After hours of searching, we were astonished to discover that there were virtually no children’s books on specific diseases in teaching specialty stores or mainstream bookstores. Instead, we found books that either glossed over genetics or were too advanced for young children.

Furthermore, the quality and creativity of illustrations in these books were obsolete. The rare find of a humorous cartoon book—which only covered general health topics—pointed to an obvious gap in children’s educational literature that needed to be filled.

Our research prompted us to conclusively decide that we must create this cartoon gene book. Additionally, the research helped me to make decisions regarding my narrative format by exposing me to the most effective writing styles. Some educational stories tell of a child who discovers a lesson through his own mishaps. Others have children explaining lessons to one another. Still other traditional stories contain an omniscient narrator. Finally, more modern books introduce a comical character that narrates the story of a child learning a lesson. Conversations with teaching specialty personnel led me to conclude that children found the last style most appealing: the character had enough distance from the protagonist child to make the story hu-