Research and Teaching: Is there a Secret Sauce?
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When I read the thesis question (Does research bring us together?), my reaction was….. “Of course! Why even question this?!” But then I did some research.

The question posed by the Provost is not a settled issue, by any means. Surprisingly, several meta-analyses have found that the quality of teaching and quality of research aren’t correlated statistically, or worse, are negatively correlated (Prince et al. 2007)! How can this be?

Part of my incredulity stems from my career choice. I love research and teaching. But I forget, as many faculty do, that most students are not younger versions of us. We tend to have been top students ourselves, with an analytical bent. But my unscientific sample is not limited to me and my academic friends. Many of my undergrad classmates engaged in research, and all found it a very positive formative experience, not just those that went on to graduate school and careers as professors.

Part of the answer may be…..”secret sauce”. One study in the UK found that engaged teaching helped produce excellent research, but the effect was non-linear. Increasing engagement in the teaching program helped the research program, but only up to a certain point. After all, there are only 168 hours in a week. Time spent preparing for class is time not spent doing research, and vice versa. How do we find the right ratio for our faculty? Are places like William & Mary succeeding because they have hit a “sweet spot” in this ratio?

Another component to success in strengthening the research-teaching nexus may be inductive-style teaching, that capitalizes on the professor’s own research. Teaching that moves away from transmission of knowledge by lecture to something that resembles the research process itself.

Here’s how the Boyer Commission on Educating Undergraduates in the Research University sees it: “As undergraduates advance through a program, their learning experiences should become closer and closer to the activity of the graduate student. By the senior year, the able undergraduate should be ready for research of the same character and approximately the same complexity as the first-year graduate student; the research university needs to make that zone of transition from senior to graduate student easy to enter and easy to cross. For those who do not enter graduate school, the abilities to identify, analyze, and resolve problems will prove invaluable in professional life and in citizenship.” (emphasis added by me) (Final Report, 1998, p. 17)

I think William & Mary has done a great job achieving the Boyer model, in many disciplines. Should we embrace this view College-wide? Can we jump-start more teaching experiments that look like research, like the Howard Hughes Medical Institute phage hunters project? Are there equivalents for the humanities? I think we can't afford not to experiment.