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Gaining Career Readiness Competencies through the Humanities Undergraduate Research Lab: A Case Study with Student Perspectives

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Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate how the creation and ongoing work of a Humanities Undergraduate Research Lab can foster career readiness competencies. The authors of this case study are current and former undergraduate students who have taken part in a two-year experiment in undergraduate mentoring at Utah State University. The five student authors (Hannah Budge, Xiomara Casto, Morgan Evans, Eden Marroquin, Yasamin Osqueezadeh, and Ella Stott) have each chosen one or two competencies to explore in a researched reflection on their roles in the lab. The essay begins with an introduction to the lab by faculty mentor Christine Cooper-Rompato, and the essay concludes with offering some suggestions for how career research competencies could be developed more fully in the lab.

Introduction to the Humanities Research Lab (*Christine Cooper-Rompato*)

The USU Humanities Undergraduate Research Lab (hereafter HURL) formally began in late fall 2023. Previously, I attended several undergraduate research mentoring sessions sponsored by the USU Office of Research on undergraduate mentoring, where I learned about the concept of the humanities undergraduate research lab. After reading scholarship and other writings on the subject (Hiatt 2005, Joselow 2016, Breithaupt 2017a and 2017b, Pawlicka-Deger 2020) and exploring different models such as the Humanities Lab at Arizona State University, I approached my department head for seed grant funding to be able to apply for a *Creativity and Research Enhancement* (CARE) grant from the college. Our Center for Intersectional Gender Studies and Research also contributed some funds. With a total of just over \$3000, I started the lab with the goal of hiring four or five undergraduates for a project at \$14/hour. I advertised in my classes (including my first-year experience course) and through the Research and Honors offices. Ongoing funding was provided through grants offered by the Undergraduate Research Office. Our partnering organization, Sema Hadithi, also covered conference registration fees. The lab concept was designed so that it can be handed on to another faculty mentor who will then work to procure funds for their students. Based on the idea of the lab as a “meeting place” and an “incubator for new ideas” (Pawlicka-Deger 2017, citing HUMlab n.d, AU Humanities Lab n.d.), HURL’s goal is to provide quality, hands-on community-engaged research experiences that will lead to career and education goals (Crisp and Cruz 2009; Ticknot 2017).

We partnered with the nonprofit organization Sema Hadithi, the African American Heritage and Culture Foundation in Salt Lake City. Sema Hadithi's mission is to uncover and share stories about Utah Black history. They are involved with grassroots and local projects. One of their goals is to create a museum of Utah Black History, and as part of this goal, they develop traveling museum exhibits that can be displayed at local historical societies, museums, libraries, and universities. The organization has many volunteers and a large advisory board (of which I am a member), and one of its volunteer "threads" is research. When originally developing HURL, I asked the co-founders what topic they would like my students and me to research, and they were very excited for us to extend my earlier research on Utah businesses listed in the *Green Book* (Cooper-Rompato 2020), a popular Black motorist's travel safety guide published between the late 1930s-1960s. Our project expanded to include other Black travel guides. The majors of the students have varied (including History, Nutrition Science, and Journalism), but over time, most of the students have been English majors, as I've recruited students from my courses by discussing the project in class and by word of mouth.

The original goal of this project was for students to develop graduate school or career skills by working with a community non-profit organization to produce a traveling museum exhibit. However, as the students' research developed, Sema Hadithi asked us to grow the exhibit from one to six, with each student creating their own exhibit focusing on particular kinds of businesses (hotels or restaurants, for example) and locations. In fall 2025, students will finish drafting their exhibit designs and will have fulfilled their commitment to the project. They can then decide if they would like to continue by drafting an article of their findings for a peer-reviewed history journal. This project has attracted much local attention, leading to several presentation opportunities.

By Fall 2025, students in HURL will have accomplished the following:

- Learned how to conduct research using archives (including university and local and/or state archives) and online databases (including scholarly databases and newspaper collections), as well as how to collect oral histories.
- Presented preliminary posters on their research at the Sema Hadithi annual Utah Black history conference in 2024 and delivered conference papers for the 2025 conference.
- Delivered a public presentation at a local library for the county historical society.
- Guest-taught a lesson and led a workshop at a local high school for students.
- In addition, two of the HURL members were interviewed for a television news program titled "Belonging in Utah."

Along the way, HURL members have gained skills in working alongside a community partner/non-profit organization, public speaking, research skills (including online and database research), and collecting oral histories. What follows in this essay are student perspectives on the career competencies they have practiced and acquired, namely career and self-development, communication, critical thinking, equity and inclusion, leadership, professionalism, and teamwork. At times, the student authors speak together, using "we"; at times, their individual voices are distinguished by named sections.

Career & Self Development (*Xiomara Castro and Hannah Budge*)

We define the term "career" as the path of occupations one holds for a significant portion of one's life. The meaning of "career development" has changed since it was created in the 1950s. Scholarship emphasizes the changes and lifelong processes that encompass one's career, with the National Career Development Association stating, "Career development is the total constellation of psychological, sociological, educational, physical, and economic and chance factors that combine to influence the nature and significance of work in the lifespan of any given individuals" (Hamlet and Burnes 2011, 302).

Considering career and self-development together, we see that academic and life experience influence both career and personal progression. The opportunity to work in HURL provided a significant steppingstone for our early careers as the lab exemplifies the foundational ideas of experiential learning theory (ELT). Shana Meganck quotes David Kolb, the developer of ELT, stating, “‘Knowledge results from the combination of grasping and transforming experience’... and is accomplished through a process of concrete experiences, comprehension, reflective observation, and action. What makes this approach so compelling to educators is that it can be applied to a variety of different learning environments” (Meganck et al. 2016). The basis of ELT is gaining real-world experience along with research. Our research lab involved navigating archives, networking with community organizations, collaborating as a team, and presenting publicly. These hands-on experiences and real-world skills repeatedly practiced in HURL are invaluable for any career field. In the following paragraphs, we will expand on how career development skills we gained from the lab have helped us in our careers after graduating. First, Budge will expand on her experience preparing to be an occupational therapist. Then, Castro will reflect on how the research lab helped her develop skills needed for graduate school in literature.

Career Development and Occupational Therapy

Hannah: During the year after I graduated in English literature, I explored a variety of career interests. These included part-time jobs at a museum (where I was able to learn further about archival and historical work), a position as a medical assistant, and a special education paraprofessional position in a middle school. With each option explored, I carried something indispensable from my humanities research for Sema Hadithi, which was the belief that my career needs to be centered on care for individual experiences. My career also needs to allow me to use deep thinking, compassion, and creativity in caring for others. I am now working toward a career in Occupational Therapy, where I can work with patients one-on-one; Occupational Therapy requires passion for understanding a vast range of life experiences as well as awareness of disadvantages that minorities face. According to the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics, the most important qualities for an Occupational Therapist are adaptability, communication skills, compassion, interpersonal skills, and patience. (Bureau of Labor Statistics) Nurturing personal compassion and awareness during my undergraduate research opened my mind to realizing that I deeply value individual care and want to work in this environment.

Career Development and Doctoral Studies

Xiomara: Undergraduate research has many ways to influence a student’s future endeavors, whether they pursue further education or enter other fields. These research opportunities open up a student’s worldview and perspective on ways other than classes to become involved in the academic community and build connections and relationships with professors, researchers, and peers. From my experience working with Sema Hadithi, the project helped me learn about many professional opportunities and allowed me to contribute to the important collective efforts to spread awareness of Black history in Utah, which relies on the work and effort of many community members. In this project, we formed self-development skills such as making professional connections with other volunteers, scholars, historians, and librarians, especially at the foundation’s annual conference, where we presented our findings; “one of the most significant experiences for undergraduate researchers is presenting their findings at local, regional, and national academic conferences” (Frigo and Furford 2025, 9). Academic conferences also provide opportunities where researchers can develop more self-confidence and public speaking skills and expand mentorship networks. We also learned to manage our time and develop patience as we spent hours looking through articles and databases to find important information. Now, as a doctoral student in literature, I am prepared and excited for academic conferences. In addition, soon I will become a teaching assistant and lead

discussion lectures for other undergraduate students, which would have seemed impossible for me to do before my experiences with HURL.

Xiomara and Hannah: Despite going into different fields after graduating, our efforts to help Sema Hadithi create a museum exhibit allowed us to gain new experiences and skills that are transferable to many industries (in our case, in higher education and the health industry). As one study demonstrated, undergraduate research and federal work study prepare their students and produce higher work achievement compared to students who have employment off campus (Nazaire and Usher 2015, 2). The research experience we gained through our undergraduate careers helped lead us to our future career paths in academia and medical health.

Communication (*Morgan Evans and Yasamin Osqueezadeh*)

To properly navigate academic settings, we had to hone our communication skills, including public communication through presentations, practical communication between team members, and sensitive communication regarding difficult topics. Through our experiences as Undergraduate Researchers (URs), we have learned how to properly execute these skills and the different ways in which they will be effective for career readiness.

To accurately present, discuss, and engage in discourse regarding a specific topic is to thoroughly understand the subject. A true marker of success is “the ability to communicate. [Undergraduate research mentors] saw that many of the students ‘understood what was going on’ based on their communication skills” (Gastineau-Steven and Wilhelm 2022, 9). Through engaging in undergraduate research, a mentee’s daily and professional forms of communication consistently develop and improve through communicating to a range of audiences, including professors, colleagues, critics, donors, and peers. URs gain a valuable and marketable skill by learning to be versatile in their ability to convey, present, process, and respond to information. During our time with HURL, we have learned not only how to properly present rehearsed information in academic settings but also to connect with community members, present our case to possible donors through grant writing, arrange information in a palatable form for younger audiences, and convey our intent, current status, and future goals to journalists and administrators. This school year, four of our group members presented our research at several conferences. At the end of each conference, Q&A sessions were held, requiring us to think on our feet and communicate our ideas in an unrehearsed manner, while still maintaining professionalism and accuracy to the best of our abilities. Impromptu communication is often an overlooked yet valuable skill that we have cultivated through our research experience. From creating lesson plans for high schoolers to presenting at academic conferences, the members of HURL have developed and refined various styles of communication, giving us the skills to navigate various professional situations effectively and confidently.

The communication that occurs within undergraduate research can vary depending on the team of researchers. For some, the team may only consist of a single undergraduate researcher and their mentor; in the case of HURL, the specific number of team members varies depending on the time of year, graduation schedules, and the personal lives of the undergraduate researchers. Because of this variation, constant communication is necessary to ensure that the project and team are cohesive and coordinated. To create a successful research group, mentors and mentees must “build community among groups of undergraduate researchers and mentors, including graduate students, postdoctoral fellows, and any other members of the research team” (Kinkead et al. 2022, 2). Although close friendships are not required outcomes for the research project, team members must build mutual trust, respect, and understanding, which can only be achieved through proper communication. Communication must be timely, respectful, and precise to maintain professionalism and efficiency. Consistent communication is essential to keeping “ideas and possibilities moving forward and theoretically grounded” (Ketcham et al. 2017, 10). Within our team at HURL, we must

maintain steady communication throughout the school year and fluctuating communication in the summer. By scheduling weekly face-to-face meetings, we increased our levels of communication by creating a regular time and space where we can relay and develop our ideas, as well as allowing us to create smaller, manageable deadlines to keep ourselves on track. During the time between our weekly meetings, my team stays in constant contact via email and text messaging, allowing us to follow up on ideas or mention points of discussion for our next meeting. Such forms of effective communication are essential to career readiness, as many jobs require employees to remain in constant contact with their team, participate in weekly meetings, and report their work and their team's status to upper management.

Our HURL project for Sema Hadithi addresses sensitive subjects such as racism and segregation, and the public's response can vary depending on the current political climate. Such an environment may require delicate use of language and the willingness to constantly learn and adapt. When engaging with different cultures, researchers must be considerate of community norms and values, while taking responsibility for their learning, how they choose to process it, and how they can accurately convey it (Pierszalowski et al. 2025, 6). Demonstrating respect and mindfulness for other cultures through professional communication fosters trust, understanding, and more conscientious discourse. Approaches to sensitive information can depend on the audience the researchers are interacting with. HURL has presented at various locations and settings, requiring us to adapt the way in which we relay our research. The biggest example of this adaptation is the contrast between our presentations at a Sema Hadithi conference and our interactive lesson with high schoolers. While working with the high schoolers, our language had to be simplified, terms defined more fully, and many smaller details omitted due to the students' shorter attention spans and more limited previous knowledge. Although sensitive subjects can be difficult to give voice to, it is important to only tailor the way in which the information is presented, not the information itself. Facts must be presented fully when adapting language to suit a particular audience. Cultural sensitivity and perspective-taking play an important role in the workplace, where it is essential to relay information with the audience in mind. Whether I am interacting with a coworker, a client, or a boss, understanding how to recognize cultural differences and adapt language to certain contexts is paramount.

Critical Thinking (*Xiomara Castro and Eden Marroquín*)

Undergraduate research helps students develop critical thinking, which is defined as “a method of solving complex problems that are subject to a series of restrictions that act as restraints on a solution, but yield greater confidence in the solution because of the restrictions” (McCuen 2023, 2). These skills are transferable to students who decide to pursue further education or work in different industries, aiding us in the analysis of history, facts, data, and research to develop new scholarship. It is essential to evaluate sources and evidence to assess their credibility, relevance, and potential biases. This is especially important in archival research, in which context and origin shape interpretation. Additionally, critical thinking enables students to move beyond surface-level observations and ask nuanced, open-ended questions that lead to deeper understanding. In fields like history and literature, students learn to question dominant narratives and explore alternative perspectives, which is essential for uncovering underrepresented voices.

Critical thinking is applicable to group research projects and individual investigations. As HURL researchers, we found ourselves doing hours of archival research and analyzing historical sources. In the initial stages, this included tracking down Utah businesses and local community figures and making broad connections to historical events during the segregation era. In this part of the project, we developed self-discipline and attainable goals. We set realistic goals of what we could contribute to Sema Hadithi. Evensen's article, “Undergraduate Research: Benefits from Extensive Involvement as a Research Assistant,” argues, “As students engage with their own mentors and learn to become

independent, these developments promote further educational advancement and develop a foundation of experience to address more complex research questions” (Evensen 2021, 5).

Xiomara: The research skills I gained through volunteering in the lab apply to archival research in my doctoral studies, and—more importantly—they help me remind myself why I am eager to continue pursuing education in the humanities. As students of literature, critical thinking is essential to our research and analysis. Throughout our time working together, we began to ask ourselves: Why are Black Americans often disregarded in the conversation about Utah’s history? What can we research in the future to close these gaps? Who can benefit from learning about those underrepresented in our state’s history?

As an example, one day in the summer, HURL gathered in Ogden, Utah to visit Weber State University and look through historical archives at the library. We also visited Historic 25th Street, which, in the early to mid-1900s, segregated Black businesses and customers to the south side of the street. These historic sites in Ogden helped us contextualize how segregation was enacted in the city, as well as how that history still impacts the city. For example, Moore’s Barbershop, a Black American business opened in 1943 by Willie Lee Floyd Moore, continues to operate today. Zhang, Duan, and Matsuda argue that visiting sites and places as a UR enhances critical thinking skills: “incorporating place studies in student-oriented research projects enhances learning about cultural sites—both by providing students a theoretical framework to rethink their engagement with the new environment” (Zhang et al. 2020, 1). We prioritized our research to serve our local community and promote a deeper understanding of history. In summer 2024, Eden Marroquín and I had the opportunity to appear on the local television news, showcasing historical sites in our area that were listed in the Black safety travel guides. We were asked to explain how local communities and businesses contributed to the safe journeys of Black travelers. For example, what is now a candy shop in Logan, Utah used to be a hotel that was open to Black guests. This is part of local history that is important for people in the community to be aware of. As researchers and critical thinkers, we aim to show our research and history to the local community, including young students and educators.

Equity and Inclusion (*Eden Marroquín and Hannah Budge*)

Eden: The terms “equity” and “inclusion” have become dirty words in the recent political climate, particularly in Utah. The tangible distaste for DEI initiatives only increased during the 2024 General Assembly when HB 261, “Equal Opportunities Initiatives,” was adopted and then took effect. The results were apparent during the 2024-2025 school year when cultural centers were “reorganized” and open hostility to non-majority populations on campus became more socially acceptable. The *Utah System of Higher Education HB 261 Guidance* document outlines rules for Utah’s public colleges and universities on how to handle training, hiring, admissions, student programs, and institutional speech. These include a ban on “Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion” naming, in which non-teaching and non-researching offices and positions cannot have “diversity,” “equity,” and “inclusion” in the title. The positions must be renamed or repurposed if tied to “prohibited” practices. Additionally, cultural centers can remain viable only if they focus on education and are open to all, and they must be separate from student success services. Official university clubs also must comply with the guidelines. (USHE Guidance 2024).

As a result, cultural centers at Utah State University, such as the Native American Cultural Center and the Latinx Cultural Center, were grouped under the “Center for Community” umbrella, diluting their distinct missions and histories. This reorganization not only disrupts community-building efforts but also signals a retreat from acknowledging systemic barriers faced by marginalized students. These effects trickled down into all aspects of campus life, including undergraduate research. Although the “Equal Opportunities Initiatives” bill does not apply to academic research, the need for intentionality in fostering inclusive research environments has become more urgent. Faculty and

students alike must now navigate a landscape where institutional support for marginalized communities is increasingly constrained, and where the language of equity is treated with suspicion.

In a research context, equity and inclusion are necessary principles that shape the way research is accessed, valued, and produced. Equity in undergraduate research means that students from historically marginalized backgrounds have the same opportunities to participate in undergraduate research. Inclusion means that different cultural perspectives and lived experiences are not only welcomed but also centered as vital contributions to the pursuit of knowledge. Without equity and inclusion, research becomes a space where the same dominant voices are amplified, while others are marginalized and erased. It is not uncommon for marginalized students to face challenges regarding racism, sexism, and heteronormativity, as many of these issues are deeply embedded in contemporary research, which is rooted in white supremacist cisheteropatriarchy (Pierszowski et al. 2024, 1).

Through my work in HURL, I have seen firsthand how centering Black voices reshapes not only the content of research but also its purpose. Rather than treating African American history as peripheral, our lab positions it as foundational to Utah's broader historical narrative. Black history in Utah has commonly been referred to as a sort of secret history that needs to be uncovered, because of the strong presence of predominantly white history that shapes the societal structure today. As a result, all members of the lab have acquired valuable skills in navigating, discussing, writing about, and reflecting on a history that is not our own. This process has required a commitment to equity and inclusion that has shaped our approach to specific situations, which can translate to our career development.

Hannah: Sema Hadithi provides an opportunity in our predominantly white university for humanities research that can shed light on diverse stories and experiences. Researching Black travel guides and history in Utah is important work for us as students, especially in preparation to enter a career field as informed individuals. For example, I plan to enter the field of healthcare. Learning context about minoritized groups' experiences and reading/hearing individuals' voices are critical for me as I prepare to work with diverse populations. One of the segregation-era travel guides we researched contained healthcare professionals whose practices were open to Black travellers. As HURL team members discussed discrimination in the healthcare world for non-white individuals during the mid-1900s, we reflected on the many ways in which healthcare for minorities is still unbalanced today. The National Library of Medicine defined "health disparities as systemic, plausibly avoidable health differences adversely affecting socially disadvantaged groups," (Lee et al. 2020). As I enter the field of healthcare, I am thankful I had the opportunity to gain this awareness so I can contribute to the work of improving equality in healthcare systems, while actively advocating for disadvantaged groups.

Leadership (*Ella Stott*)

Being part of HURL taught me valuable skills in leadership as I took accountability for my section of the project and as I worked alongside a team of researchers. There are many components to leadership—including communication, time management, decision-making, and networking skills—and undergraduate research is an excellent gateway to this career competency.

Within the research project, I chose my own section to study: Ogden businesses as represented/advertised in the Black travel safety guides. The city of Ogden was a place many African Americans relocated to because of work with the Union Pacific Railroad and Hill Air Force Base, so there were more Black-owned and Black-friendly businesses there than most other Utah cities during the time of segregation. Since I chose this subject, I became responsible for something beyond my normal educational experience. Between interpreting data, conducting interviews, compiling research, and

designing posters/educational materials, I was brought into professional settings I hadn't been in before. Being part of this research project has shown me how to effectively manage my time, abilities, motivations, and values in order to produce my best work. As Suzanne Wood has argued, "Allowing the time for undergraduates to take ownership over a project can enhance the quality of their research endeavors and facilitate the production of publication-worthy data" (Wood 2019). Research allows students to take ownership of their work because it isn't for a class or a job; it is for something they are choosing to do to expand their own knowledge.

Because HURL had no designated student leader, everyone in the group had chances to develop their leadership skills. Sometimes, when multiple students had projects that overlapped, one researcher was tasked with facilitating communication between the two and ensuring their information was compiled and distributed correctly. For example, Eden Marroquín is researching Utah hotels and motels that were owned by or welcome to the African American community, and my project is on Ogden businesses listed in the guides. This offered some overlap between the projects, such as Ogden's Porters and Waiters Club, which was a hotel and club ("Porters and Waiters Club, 1947-1959"). Because of this, I was tasked with compiling the information Eden and I had both gathered on these businesses into a panel, which I sent to Eden to incorporate into her project. Through this experience, I learned how to effectively communicate with collaborators, combine different perspectives through a shared interest, and prioritize the needs of the group to create the best result. This idea was corroborated in an article on the benefits of undergraduate research, which found that

"...developing skills in critical thinking and communication will allow students to emerge as leaders in multiple professions after graduation... ethical study and application of the scientific process develops critical thinking and independence necessary for achieving the highest standards of quality in scholarship, service and leadership." (Petrella and Jung 2008)

Working with a team and being assigned a leadership task enhances a student's critical thinking and communication because it places them outside their comfort zone and into a new terrain of leadership. Researchers have also argued that "project-based learning can serve as a medium in the process of developing leadership skills through the practice of managing emotions and higher-order thinking skills" (Enung et al. 2023). Although this group of researchers studied postgraduate research students, the same benefits apply for undergraduate students—and they are practicing these skills and receiving these benefits earlier on in their education.

Although HURL has not provided any one student a direct leadership role over other students, it has provided many opportunities for the students within it to practice their leadership skills and gain important experience in leadership positions. As an example, I have used the experiences gained through this research lab in other leadership positions, such as in my role as the chief copy editor for Utah State University's student-run newspaper. Here, I practice daily principles of communication and decision-making I refined in the lab. Everyone in HURL has gone on to receive awards for the example they set for their fellow students, such as the English Department Scholar of the Year, Student of the Year, Creative Writing Student of the Year, and two Undergraduate Researcher of the Year awards. Through communication, time management, decision-making, and networking skills, this lab and undergraduate research is preparing us to enter the professional workforce and become leaders in a variety of fields.

Professionalism (Yasamin Osqueezadeh)

Professionalism is a broad term often used by recruiters to describe their desired candidate. The skills encapsulated by that label differ depending on the situation. Thus, the exact definition of

professionalism is rather vague, as it only describes the general “qualities connected with trained and skilled people” (*Cambridge Dictionary*). In the realm of research, professionalism can be defined through proper reactions to critique and feedback, engagement in discourse, effective presentations, and networking.

Within professional environments, peer review, feedback, and critique are vital aspects of the revision process. Knowing how to properly give and receive assessments is an important step in fostering a healthy professional work environment and relationships. Although a fundamental aspect of professionalism, it is quite difficult to engage with criticism in a healthy, non-self-deprecatory manner. Acknowledging the faults in our work can only be productive if we can view it “from an impartial standpoint” (Flores et al. 2016, 7). Many students struggle to develop this skill due to “uncertainty, indecision, and inaction,” all of which are normal reactions when first delving into undergraduate research (Flores et al. 2016, 5). To break out of that cycle, we had to engage in peer review and develop confidence in our work. HURL has done well in fostering an environment that is both supportive and critical. Before our work was given to the chief executive officers of Sema Hadithi, we first met as a team to review each other’s work, give feedback, build ideas and templates, and aid one another during periods of creative blocks, which often appeared during the museum curating process. During my first presentation at the 9th Annual Tell the Story Black History Conference, I heavily relied on Ella Stott and Eden Marroquín to guide me through the process. I referenced their poster presentation when making mine and constantly asked for feedback. As I became more experienced, I was able to provide my own form of feedback. Instead of viewing each other as evaluators, we become collaborators. Although we are individually responsible for separate sections of the project, it is a collaborative assignment, so we must work together to succeed. This mindset develops a healthy professional environment, which can only be achieved with mutual respect. “The ability to offer constructive criticism is an essential skill in the workforce,” making this experience invaluable to developing career readiness (Flores et al. 2016, 7). Using each other as a support system, we completed the “Belonging in Utah” news interview, presented at multiple Sema Hadithi conferences and dinners, bounced off each other during Q&A sessions, and led a group lesson plan for students at Sunrise High School.

A natural result of working within a team and engaging in peer review and critique is the rise of professional discourse. We are often exposed to “differing views, experiences, and styles,” leading to the inclusion of diverse ideas (Nicholson et al. 2017, 5). Diversity is an invaluable aspect of teamwork, but it can often result in contrasting beliefs. Depending on who reviews our work, we can get varying feedback, some of which we may not agree with. In such cases, it is important to require “members to trust and be trusted, to have integrity, be honest, take pride and responsibility in their work, and communicate when there are conflicts or concerns” (Nicholson et al. 2017, 5). The feedback can be considered and discussed, but it does not always have to be implemented. If some members disagree with the critique, they can either respectfully reject it or alter it. Each team member must stand for their opinions while being open to new ideas. Such a middle ground can be difficult to uncover, but it is vital to create a space that allows for healthy discourse. For example, during one of our meetings, we had various ideas on how to style our individual museum exhibits, as they needed to be eye-catching, neat, and cohesive. Some team members came with plain, white backgrounds; some implemented picture backgrounds; and some used various colors to separate sections. We all had different ideas as to what our exhibits should look like, but we needed a single, cohesive theme. After a lot of brainstorming, we decided to keep small pops of color and a majority white background. This decision satisfied the members and satisfied the needs of Sema Hadithi. In addition to dealing with discourse within our team, we also had to deal with discourse between HURL and Sema Hadithi. During our work with Sema Hadithi, we were given various forms of feedback, most of which we accepted and implemented. However, due to personal opinions, we didn’t act on some of the suggestions presented, most notably the use of generative Artificial Intelligence photos.

After a long discussion, we unanimously decided against it, and we were still able to complete our work without it. Because of the mutual trust between ourselves and Sema Hadithi, no concerns arose from the situation.

Apart from the inner workings of individual teams, a big aspect of being professionally successful is presenting our results and ideas to peers, professors, committee members, and chief executive officers. Presenting is a valuable professional skill that requires us to be comfortable with public speaking, have professional writing skills, and be confident in our work and knowledge (Farshi et al. 2021, 7). Presenting isn't a skill that can be taught through lectures. To become a good presenter, students must have repetitive practice in a multitude of settings.

Engaging in undergraduate research develops our public presentation skills, through which students gain “experience and knowledge in their research with every presentation, improving their speaking skills in public, and increasing their network. These experiences also [help] them grow to what they have become and [prepare] them for real life” (Farshi et al. 2021, 8). HURL has given us many opportunities to develop our presentation skills. We have learned to adjust our language to meet academic and casual audiences—examples of which include our participation in informal presentations at a high school, community conferences with academics, and historical society presentations at our local library. When presenting at Sunrise High School, the Logan County Historical Society Conference, and the Black History Month Conference at Millcreek, Utah City Hall, we included definitions of segregation, basic legislative history, and key activist movements, as a majority of our audience members did not have a comprehensive understanding of Black American history throughout the United States of America and within Utah. While at the 9th Annual *Tell the Story Black History Conference*, the majority of our audience consisted of academics and historians who already had a base knowledge of Black American history and segregation legislation, so we removed a lot of explanatory language. Through these various experiences, we learned how to adjust our presentations to better fit our audience's needs.

Through our various public speaking events, we were able to network with community members, historians, professors, and city workers. By building this vast network, we found additional information that was left out of official reports and newspapers, connected with family members and friends whom we could interview, and got pictures of hotels, community members, and families. During our presentation at the Black History Month Conference at Millcreek, Utah City Hall, I had the opportunity to meet with a community member who knew David H. Oliver's distant relatives, allowing me to connect with people who held sensitive, unreported information about Oliver, his education, his family, and his activist work. Opportunities like this allowed us to further our research and build our professional networking skills. Going into the project, many of us were nervous to interview and connect with seniors in our fields. However, through constant exposure and a necessity to further our research, we found the confidence to present ourselves as professionals worth engaging with.

Regardless of prior experience, we were all able to develop and sharpen our skills. Such experiences “are essential in showing other people, such as potential employers, the type of work that you have done and essentially what you are capable of achieving” (Farshi et al. 2021, 8). By beginning the development of presentation skills at an early point in your academic career, you become more marketable.

Teamwork (*Xiomara Castro and Ella Stott*)

Xiomara: As HURL started coming together, undergraduate colleagues and I met with our mentor and set clear goals and expectations for the semester. We were communicative and open to mentoring each other as we began brainstorming ideas on what aspects of Utah's Black history Sema Hadithi wanted us to help expand. Sema Hadithi also set clear goals, which helped create a relationship with

them as a partner organization. This collaboration and teamwork began when we discussed what roles we wanted to assign ourselves. Every student had their own interests or specific areas to further study. I focused on creating a comparative analysis of all the segregation-era travel guides that included Utah and compared and contrasted differences such as intended audience, tone, economic stability, etc. Other colleagues focused on more specific topics, such as Utah hotels, restaurants, and entertainment that catered to Black travelers. Despite everyone having different focuses, we communicated with each other promptly and sought help and guidance, establishing mentorship relationships and engaging in teamwork. Over the past year, some of us have moved away and begun different careers while still contributing to this project. When something was unclear, I sent a text or email for help or clarification. When we were in different time zones or countries, we would communicate over Zoom and go over sources or texts together, making sure we all understood the content. It is also important to meet up and talk about other topics outside of our research, such as classes, work, and friendships, to maintain a good relationship with colleagues.

Mentorship networks foster a positive environment for undergraduates. “A significant body of research indicates that students who experience high-quality mentoring have favorable outcomes, varying from increased proficiencies in skill sets and personal confidence to better networking and professional opportunities” (Thurman 2022, 2). Oftentimes, academic research for a class is done independently, so this lab allowed us to mentor and help each other, bettering our teamwork. We also all studied different disciplines, such as literature, nutrition, and science. Despite our different ages, backgrounds, and majors, we created a mentorship network and friendships that helped us become better colleagues and team members in our fields. As a current graduate student and graduate student association member at my university, I have the responsibility of hosting events and mixers for students, for which teamwork and communication skills are the most important.

Ella: This undergraduate research setting provided us a unique opportunity to grow in our teamwork because it presented us with challenges outside of a normal educational context. Purdue University researchers say, “Teamwork in educational settings fosters a collaborative learning environment which can result in higher achievement and greater productivity compared to individual efforts. This is particularly true in research settings, where the complexity of problems often requires diverse perspectives and skill sets” (Aggrawal et al. 2024).

In HURL, I interviewed a member of the African American community in Ogden who was alive during the time of the travel safety guides. I asked Xiomara Castro if she would be willing to attend with me and take notes on the conversation, but I also invited her to ask questions of her own. She surprised me with questions I would have never thought to ask, which deepened my understanding of the subject and opened up new possibilities in my research. For example, Xiomara asked about the interviewee’s job during the time of the guidebooks, which gave us information on the Brigham City Intermountain Intertribal Indian School, a place we hadn’t yet connected to our research. If I had attended the interview alone, my questions and knowledge would have been limited. The study by the Purdue University researchers corroborated this idea, as they found the students in the Undergraduate Research Programs reported more effective and engaging results when working together: “This interdisciplinary nature of teamwork in URPs can lead to innovative approaches and solutions, as students learn to integrate knowledge from different fields” (Aggrawal et al. 2024). HURL has taught me about the importance of teamwork in a research setting because it has paired students with different experiences, interests, and research topics.

Conclusion *(All authors)*

One of the main goals of this project was to create a way for undergraduates to get involved with community-based research and to experience a variety of research activities (including interviewing, presenting, writing, etc.) that would directly lead to career skills. Researching the topic of Utah Black

history has taught us a lot that we didn't know, and our comfort zones have been stretched as we have presented our work to a variety of audiences ranging from high school students to conference attendees.

A striking result of participating in HURL is that we have gained the confidence to seek out other research and creative projects at the university. For example, in summer 2025 Stott participated in a creative writing seminar in France in order to finish a memoir. Osqueezadeh currently is partnering with a professor of African American literature to explore the rhetoric of privately and publicly owned plantation spaces and traveled to conduct research in South Carolina this summer. Marroquín traveled with her mentor to Washington DC this summer to research James Baldwin's possible connection with the CIA. And Castro, now in a doctoral program, is researching Mexican vernacular religious expression. Each of these research projects will result in further career skills development as we continue to work on leadership, teamwork, communication, critical thinking, and professionalism, as well as strengthening our commitment to equity and inclusion within our research and daily praxis. Another effect of our HURL participation is our preparation for graduate school. Although this essay has focused on career competencies, many of us HURL members are interested in graduate school, and career competencies overlap strongly with graduate school competencies.

There are also some aspects of HURL that need to continue to be worked out. Student stress is an ongoing issue, especially for undergraduates who are balancing classes and work schedules on top of extra research. While paying students for their research is helpful, often the amount is not enough for the student to be able to cut back on their regular work hours. It would be helpful if universities could think of creative ways to help fund undergraduate research more fully, such as comping meals for research and offering more research assistantships that don't require extensive application processes. Our mentor also expressed that in the future she needs to set firmer limits with the partnering organization for the project with a firm end date so that the project doesn't grow exponentially and students have a choice to reengage or move on from the project. Undergraduate students often have several academic interests and are eager to explore other fields and academic opportunities. HURL is a steppingstone for many students that are looking for not just on-campus employment opportunities, but also how to shape their futures.

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