“A Place to Be Heard and to Hear”: the Humanities Collaboratory as a Model for Cross-College Cooperation and Relationship-Building in Undergraduate Research

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Abstract
This article reports findings from a study of laboratory-styled humanities undergraduate research (UR) programming designed to increase access to this high-impact practice, better reaching historically excluded students and less visible institutions. The Humanities Collaboratory (HLAB) is a ten-week summer research program that emerged from the partnership of a research university and the area community college system. Aimed at actively addressing educational inequity, and the more specific lack of access humanities students have to impactful UR opportunities, HLAB offers an intensive humanities research experience to first-generation students, low-income students, and Students of Color currently enrolled in two-year colleges, HBCUs, MSIs, and HSIs. Since the program’s creation in 2018, qualitative data collected from 50 participating students over three years of self-evaluations illustrates why HLAB presents a significant learning opportunity for students and highlights the critical importance of relationship-building in UR. Analyzing students’ responses through the heuristic of communities of practice provides insight into a community-focused UR pedagogy that emphasizes relationality among students, mentors, and institutions. Students detail the importance of collaborative skill-building, opportunities for peer support, networking connections, and possibilities for more holistic personal growth in UR experiences. Our findings describing the benefits of relational UR signal the need for cooperative programming designs that increase access to undergraduate research for humanities students across institutions of higher education.

Keywords Undergraduate research · Mentoring · Equity · Humanities · Relationality · Communities of practice

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Conversations around undergraduate research (UR) in the humanities often carry certain assumptions about students, mentors, and institutions that limit the possibilities for broader engagement with this high-impact practice. The first: UR works best for noticeably highly engaged students who are advanced in their major and who demonstrate traditional markers of academic success in their grades and postgraduate plans. The second: humanities UR requires a time-intensive one-to-one mentorship model. The third: under-resourced or less visible institutions lack sustainable funding and thus cannot provide significant UR opportunities. These assumptions drive thinking that more students cannot get involved in UR because students are unprepared, faculty are overworked, and institutions are underfunded. These assumptions originate in earlier iterations of UR programs and material differences across institutions. Even institutions committed to UR do not always provide the resources to offer wide UR experiences (Baker et al., 2017). This constrained view of humanities UR fails to recognize potential interinstitutional cooperation, alternative program designs that alleviate faculty overload, and the myriad ways undergraduate students can engage in research that corresponds to their existing lived knowledge and future academic development.

In this article, we report findings from a multi-year study of the Humanities Collaboratory (HLAB), housed at Johns Hopkins University, that serves as model of UR programming that fosters impactful relationships among student participants from two-year colleges, Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), Minority Serving Institutions (MSIs), and Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs) and mentors. Analyzing students’ responses through the heuristic of communities of practice provides insight into a community-focused UR pedagogy that emphasizes relationality among students, mentors, and institutions. Students detail the importance of collaborative skill-building, opportunities for peer support, networking connections, and possibilities for more holistic personal growth in UR experiences. Our findings describing the benefits of relational UR signal the need for cooperative programming designs that increase access to undergraduate research for humanities students across institutions of higher education.

**Literature Review**

This study extends the literature around humanities UR and community-oriented pedagogies as seen through the heuristic of communities of practice (CoPs). Since the publication of the landmark Boyer Report in 1998, the availability and variety of UR programs has increased significantly, with scholars demonstrating the practice’s positive effects on student learning (Kinkead, 2003; Lopatto, 2008; Kuh, 2008; Laursen et al., 2010; Eagan et al., 2013; Murray, 2018). Despite an abundance of research illustrating the success of different UR models—including one-to-one mentored, lab-based, and course-based UR—students have had inequitable access to such opportunities. UR is less available to students in the humanities (Schantz, 2008; Grobman & Kinkead, 2010; Crawford & Shanahan, 2019), to those outside of well-resourced four-year universities (Hu et al., 2007; Hensel & Cejda, 2014; Mathatmya et al., 2017; Hewlett, 2021), and to historically excluded students, including Students
of Color, first-generation students, low-income students, and disabled students (Ishiyama, 2007; Castillo & Estudillo, 2015; Lockett et al., 2020). Outcomes of innovative existing UR programs designed for historically marginalized students and less visible institutions, for example Community Colleges (Grobman, 2010; Perez, 2003; Cejda & Hensel, 2009; Hewlett, 2021) and HBCUs (Kendricks & Arment, 2011; Owerbach & Oyekan, 2015; Perna et al., 2009; Morton, 2020), are likewise under-recognized in the broader field of higher education (Koch et al., 2014, p. 39). This disparity is especially concerning as considerable research has shown that UR has a greater positive impact for historically excluded students (Kardash et al., 2008; Kuh, 2008; Gregerman, 2009; Jones et al., 2010; Greer, 2010; Malotky et al., 2020).

Past research into UR programs offers inroads into implementing institutional partnerships designed to create research pathways. Two-year and tribal college teacher-scholars have emphasized interdisciplinary partnerships within and across institutions to better support students and mentors and to create stronger ties between students, transfer institutions, and graduate education pathways (Hunnes & Dooley, 2004; Gasparich, 2009; Watkins, 2009; Martinez et al., 2018). These partnerships are critical because focusing attention on UR opportunities for students in two-year colleges and HBCUs also works to address inequitable access to UR for historically excluded students (Shanahan, 2020; Ashcroft et al., 2021). Interinstitutional partnerships can mitigate historical disparities, and UR experiences alongside academic mentorship can have short- and long-term positive impacts for historically marginalized students’ success in undergraduate education and futures in academia, government, industry, and private sectors (Ghee et al., 2014).

Building from this focus on interinstitutional connections, this study attends to relationality and community as central to UR, though yet underexplored in humanities research contexts. Increasing attention has been paid to the importance of collaboration and community to UR, especially for first-year students (Balster et al., 2010; Kobulnicky & Dale 2016; Sandquist et al., 2019; Rubush & Stone, 2020; Lawrence et al., 2020). Taking a collectivist approach to UR not only aids in inclusion (Malotky et al., 2020; Connors et al., 2021), but also encourages the development of team-based research skills, strengthens students’ sense of belonging, and increases student interest in pursuing additional education or careers that involve disciplinary research. Some scholars have worked specifically to develop UR opportunities, or analyze existing programs, through the lens of CoPs, considering how the apprenticeship model of UR lends itself well to thinking through questions of community, belonging, and disciplinary transformation in and outside of the classroom space (Hunter et al., 2006; John & Creighton, 2013; Auchincloss et al., 2014; Gardner et al., 2015).

It is to this trend of UR scholarship, which thus far has focused on STEM students, that our article makes a specific intervention, as we analyze HLAB data through the heuristic of CoPs as initially theorized by Lave and Wenger (1991) and developed further through both the theory’s extension (Wenger, 1999, 2000; Lave, 2019) and critique (Contu & Wilmott, 2003; Lea 2005; Duguid, 2008). Legitimate peripheral participation and CoPs (Lave & Wenger, 1991) were initially understood as “an analytical viewpoint on learning” that emerged out of ethnographic case studies of global apprenticeship models (p. 40). LPP describes the process by which new
individuals become a part of a sociocultural practice, which includes developing skills associated with that practice alongside social ties (p. 29). A CoP is “a set of relations among persons, activity, and world, over time and in relation with other tangential and overlapping” CoPs (p. 98) that involves participation from those Lave and Wenger describe as newcomers and old-timers, previously framed as apprentices and masters.

LPP and CoPs offer insight into UR, and especially to community mentoring models such as HLAB. Having multiple staff, graduate student, and peer mentors emphasizes the range of humanistic approaches and perspectives and opens space for tension and consensus. A central feature of LPP and CoPs is the continual shift between majoritarian and marginalized ways of knowing. Community, in this theorization, does not signify harmony (Wenger, 2000). Given its explicit design to disrupt institutional patterns of exclusion, HLAB works to consider “power relations in the (re)formation of communities of practice” (Contu & Wilmott, 2003, p. 287) and aims to craft more equitable, inclusive CoPs in UR and in the humanities. With this interest in understanding how students describe their experiences of a collaborative model of UR and the unique benefits a community-focused approach brings to humanities UR invested in access, analyzing our qualitative survey data over the last three years of HLAB with attention to CoPs extends the literatures on UR, humanities pedagogies, and educational equity that has implications for continued innovation in humanities UR.

Methodology

Between 2018 and 2021, we have collected pre- and post-survey data from HLAB participants (n = 50) in the interest of understanding students’ experience of the program and programmatic outcomes in terms of students’ self-reported confidence, skill development, and awareness of academic/professional opportunities in the humanities. We look to the survey’s qualitative data to posit a theory of relationship-building in UR, illustrating why these partnerships have positive results for participating students and how programs across institutions and disciplines can take up community-oriented pedagogies in UR to support historically excluded students in higher education.

Data

A large grant awarded by the Mellon Foundation to Johns Hopkins University and the Community College of Baltimore County in 2017 set the stage for HLAB’s 2018 creation. The grant supported initiatives related to humanities two-year students’ persistence and success in their programs and transfer to four-year institutions. One program that emerged from this grant was a summer research experience for two-year students at Hopkins. While the initial program more closely resembled a traditional literature course, the program was re-designed after hearing student feedback. Participants described feeling that they were missing out on the research experience their STEM dormmates were having, namely the collaborative environment that
comes with a laboratory setting. HLAB was created through the consideration of this feedback, merging together a lab-style approach that emphasized collaborative mentoring and modeling with humanistic research techniques and questions.

The revised summer research experience now included morning sessions led by one program instructor on a particular topic, afternoon sessions where students worked in a highly visible environment, and cohort-building and professional development programming in the evenings and weekends. Further, with funding from the Leadership Alliance, the program accepted a group of students from HBCUs. Running a laboratory-style program required additional instructional support. The collaborative mentoring team now includes the undergraduate research director, assistant director, postdoctoral fellow, two-three graduate student instructors, and one peer mentor (a past HLAB participant).

Like other recently developed and innovative mentorship and research models (Tenenbaum et al., 2014), HLAB was designed to serve historically excluded students (see Table 1). Whether it be their status as a first-generation student, financial standing, or race, these students’ determination for access to conduct original humanities research at an R1 university is not deferred by their exclusion. HLAB students bring vast arrays of community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) to the program that enriches the UR experience for all involved, including mentors.

Out of the 50 participants, 23 identified as low-income. Many students (n = 24) also identified as first-generation college students. While all HLAB participants can be characterized as underrepresented in higher education, some students have experienced intersecting barriers to access based on race, income, and educational history even as their backgrounds also offer community traditions and knowledges that lift students up in ways often institutionally unrecognized.

### Analysis

Data for this study was collected via a pre- and post-survey distributed to all HLAB participants in the 2018, 2019, and 2021 cohorts. The survey was adapted from Singer and Zimmerman’s (2012) instrument describing students’ self-evaluation of growth and confidence after participating in UR alongside their mentors’ perception of said development. Singer and Zimmerman advocate for including students’ self-perceptions of their growth, noting that UR outcomes are difficult to assess, given project variety and inconsistent faculty engagement. Our project’s instrument incorporates some important changes to the original, including additional questions about the Collaboratory, students’ understanding of the humanities and humanities-related

| Total Students | Asian, Pacific Islander | Black, African American | Hispanic, Latinx | Hispanic, Latinx & Native | Native | White |
|----------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|------------------|---------------------------|--------|-------|
| 12             | 3                       | 3                       | 0                | 0                         | 0      | 6     |
| 9              | 0                       | 6                       | 1                | 0                         | 0      | 2     |
| 29             | 4                       | 9                       | 8                | 1                         | 1      | 6     |
methodologies, and students’ experiences of educational marginalization. Most importantly to this study, twenty open-response questions were added to generate qualitative data that would offer insight into students’ thought process around HLAB, UR, the humanities, their sense of belonging in higher education, capabilities as researchers, and potential as collaborators in a research community. Our work for this article’s study is qualitative, focusing on the open-ended questions. The questions asked about students’ definitions of major terms such as “research” and the “humanities,” views on the importance of undergraduate research and the HLAB model, expectations for what they will experience and gain, and academic histories and plans.

To prepare data for coding, we moved deidentified written responses into a table with four columns: student pseudonym and attribute codes two-year/four-year, race, income, first-generation college student (Saldaña, 2015, p. 83–4); survey question; pre-survey response; and post-survey response. Prior to data analysis, we considered provisional codes to clarify the assumptions with which we entered coding. Based on the open response questions posed and our reading of UR literatures, we expected responses to reference noun-based codes including: imposter syndrome, access, opportunity, growth, gratitude, passion, relationships, individual hardship, and structural challenges.

Our primary approach to the substantial qualitative data we have collected is grounded in constructivist theories of qualitative research (Charmaz, 2014). With awareness of our expectations for the data, we worked to listen carefully to students’ experiences as expressed in the data, following a distracted coding practice to develop a wide set of in vivo codes expressing various interests, emotions, experiences, and assessments from students. This cycle led to dozens of codes pulled from students’ language in their responses. A pattern among many of the codes, however, was a focus on relationships. We found that students continually pointed to relational processes as significant and meaningful, even when the question did not ask directly about collaboration. Through analytic memo writing, we crafted process codes (Saldaña, 2015 p. 111), which included developing collaborative skills, supporting and learning from peers, building a professional network, and forming friendships/family. During second cycle coding, we determined that the process codes reflected nuance across students’ responses in describing the collaborative development and relationship-building they engaged in over the program (see Table 2).

The four codes represent different aspects of collaborative work that coexist without one being more instructive in the importance of relationship-building in UR than any other. Participant responses generally had multiple instances of the four codes we developed with most codes also appearing across each participant’s responses. Students’ responses offer insight into relationship-building behaviors and mindsets that can emerge in a highly collaborative environment and that form the basis of our findings around community-focused pedagogy in UR.

We then analyzed coded data through CoPs as a heuristic to consider how students’ descriptions of HLAB’s collaborative environment suggest a community-focused UR pedagogy that fosters confidence-building and belonging and indicates a need for more humanities programming that creates similar opportunities for historically excluded students. LPP in CoPs, as theorized by Lave and Wenger (1991)
Table 2  Second-cycle process codes

| Process Code                  | Definition                                                                 | Examples                                                                 |
|-------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Developing collaborative skills | Individual attainment of a team-oriented skillset                        | Building skills in peer review, communication, and observation           |
| Supporting and learning from peers | Collective development of cohort                                           | Cooperating with peers led to greater content and methodological learning and engagement with varied perspectives |
| Building a professional network | Opportunities for and self-aware pursuit of academic and professional connections | Connecting to peers and mentors with similar professional goals and increased expertise |
| Forming friendships/family     | Personal and intimate community development                               | Developing social and emotional ties to peers emphasizing themes of care and support |


and Wenger (1999; 2000), necessitates sustained and meaningful interactions with multiple community members for both the benefit of the “newcomer” but also to foster innovation and development within the larger community. CoP membership “requires access to a wide range of ongoing activity, old-timers, and other members of the community; and to information, resources, and opportunities for participation” (Lave & Wenger, p. 100). Wenger later describes the “shared repertoire of communal resources” CoPs produce (2000, p. 229) as necessary to community growth and member participation. The comparative under-visibility of humanistic research methods and scholarly practices (Schantz, 2008) has complicated LPP, especially for students who already face difficulties accessing educational infrastructures due to institutions’ exclusionary histories and practices. Theorizing student data through LPP and CoPs highlights how students’ responses offer several tenets for a community-oriented UR pedagogy.

Limitations

There are several limitations to this study to consider. The largest limitation is that participants respond to the survey immediately before and after their HLAB participation. A longitudinal approach (which we are currently developing), would better indicate how students understand and assign meaning to this community-oriented pedagogy as they return to their home institutions, participate in additional research opportunities, and/or pursue graduate education or a career. As we continue to collect data from future HLAB cohorts and increase our sample size, we also can do more to disaggregate the data to consider with more nuance how different student groups perceive relationship-building. For example, Ishiyama (2007) has found that, of student researchers, first-year students tend to value personally supportive mentoring relationships more than advanced undergraduate researchers. Even within first-year students, Black students valued these relationships more than White students, including FGLI White students. Similar variations across HLAB participants might be a factor as well. We could also work to collect data from a variety of sources, including through participant observation, interviewing or focus groups, and from mentors. Lastly, we could further commit to relationship-building and creating research opportunities with students by involving past HLAB participants, for example our returning peer mentor, in our study as co-researchers (Seery et al., 2021; Larracey, 2021).

Findings

The findings from this study illustrate the complex and layered ways a community-oriented UR pedagogy fosters a collaborative, supportive, and meaningful learning environment for historically excluded students in the humanities. Three key themes emerged from the analysis conducted via coding and through the CoP heuristic. The first is that students found the HLAB environment developed their collaborative skills and interdisciplinary knowledge while simultaneously promoting accelerated
individual skill development and project expertise. Secondly, students reflected on the more intimate friendships they formed with their peers across the program, highlighting the importance of social and emotional support to feelings of belonging and confidence in intensive educational experiences. Finally, students valued the multiple CoPs engaged in HLAB, including those personal to their race and/or ethnicity, linguistic culture, and gender (among others) historically devalued in education. Taken together, the findings show how community-focused UR can address limitations of one-to-one mentoring UR models, stand on its own as an effective educational design, and illustrate the connections among situated learning theory, LPP, and CoPs with UR.

**Interdisciplinary, Accelerated Skill Development**

An important part of UR opportunities and CoP mentorship is in the skill development of newcomers, in this case, HLAB undergraduate researchers. As HLAB participants have generally only completed one year of college study, most are new to the varied humanistic research and writing techniques taught in the program. By joining a UR community, HLAB students build their individual research and writing skills on top of strengthening how they work in a group. They further develop expertise in their own project’s content while also becoming familiar with a vast array of disciplinary subjects and methods through the peer review and mentorship important to the group.

Students across the three years of data collection, even during the 2021 virtual program due to COVID-19, describe how they feel more prepared to collaborate successfully with others and communicate their academic needs to peers and advisors. This collaborative space demystifies research, removing it from the realm of an individual undertaking to a collective and visible endeavor. It’s unsurprising that students often reference the collaborative skills they build over the program as they purposefully practice these skills daily. As one student notes, the expectations of the program are to “work hard and work together.” Throughout the ten weeks, students engage in all their work collaboratively, taking up all research-related tasks as a group, sharing screens and offering peer feedback. This writing and research environment is more reflective of advanced (or “oldtimer”) humanist practices as professional scholars do not conduct all their work under the mentorship of one individual. Scholars write with feedback from colleagues, graduate student mentees, editors, reviewers, and more. Individual mentoring, of course, is valuable to students, but reliance on one-to-one mentoring in humanities UR neglects other aspects of overlapping and robust CoPs.

As past research into CURE models in STEM has shown (Balster et al., 2010; Kobulnicky & Dale, 2016), collaborative UR models support both individual skill-building and confidence-building. These models include opportunities for peer feedback, conversation, and exposure to several peers’ processes, successes, and setbacks. HLAB data demonstrates how a similar focus on community in the humanities and for two-year and HBCU students strengthens student learning. Students’ descriptions of their collaborative experiences shed further light onto their overall
skill development in UR. One student remarks, “Working with others has taught me more about researching and allowed me to acquire more skills than I would have on my own.” This response is one of several that directly attributes students’ acquisition or strengthening of other skills (collecting sources, analyzing materials, drafting, revising, and presenting) to how they work in a group. Students reflect on how other individuals research and consider differing disciplinary practices and ways of knowing.

Essential to students’ LPP in humanities CoPs is a familiarity with CoP practices and networks and the communicative skills to contribute and ask questions. HLAB encourages students to seek out help and seize opportunities quickly as they have access to so many possible mentors and peers, a practice that will serve students beyond the boundaries of the program. As one student shares,

[HLAB] has allowed me to break out of my pandemic-induced shell of social anxiety in a significant way. I have been able to take more initiative and build greater opportunities for myself this summer due to that fundamental growth in my communication skills and confidence.

“Taking initiative” might initially seem like a very individually-focused outcome for a collaborative structure. Yet, as the student asserts, practicing communicating among peers and mentors with varying levels of experience and areas of expertise encourages students to vocalize their needs and recognize their contributions as similarly valuable. This data shows how HLAB’s structure leads to a greater sense of belonging and mitigates feelings of imposter syndrome. Two responses are especially illustrative here. One student writes, “[HLAB] has taught me to be a lot more interactive and less intimidated by my instructors and peers” and another notes, “I’ve found it easier to take constructive criticism, I’ve become less afraid of using my voice, and I’ve gotten better at working within a team.” “Intimidated” and “afraid” are apt descriptors for how some historically excluded students feel in higher education, especially in PWIs. We know very well that students have been taught, either directly or through pervasive microaggressions, that they do not belong in many academic spaces.

A collaborative environment where students are encouraged to put forward their own perspective and learn from each other mitigates these negative associations. One student writes that the most significant experience of the ten weeks was “working with my peers to solve problems we had during the research process.” The group is necessary for support, so much so that students identify this support as transformative. Though the peer activities students engage in may be typical, the UR context adds further weight to their importance for student success. Further, peer cooperation also allows for additional content learning and experience with varied perspectives. One student writes, “[HLAB] helped me be more open to help from my peers. It gave me a place to be heard and to hear. I truly appreciate being able to be with my cohort because they helped me grow intellectually and culturally.” This student talks about more than activities like peer review or group work. They describe an orientation toward academic work that values listening, helping, and growing among undergraduate researchers.

This orientation toward academic work is especially important given that many participants have been pushed out of UR and academic CoPs (Lea, 2005). One
student responded that HLAB “was a safe environment where everybody could share diferentes ideas and points of view. There was no wrong answer, because everything that was shared in [HLAB] was very helpful and educational.” Students’ responses suggest that they assigned immense importance to learning from each other. Students learn across the humanities projects they develop, while also learning about peers’ educational histories and ideologies in ways that deepen their respect for others. This shared respect, where students feel listened to, intensifies students’ feelings of empowerment and pride. Though students in the pre-survey reference feelings of intimidation in engaging in work at a research university based on prior educational experiences, by the conclusion of the program they report higher feelings of belonging, while still recognizing the ways in which educational institutions have reified marginalizing mindsets and practices. Part of UR’s work is to demonstrate to students that they can and do make important contributions to our collective disciplinary knowledge despite histories of exclusion. The collaborative model, where students are asked to explain their decision-making, justify their methodological choices, and recognize their work’s interventions and significance, emphasizes students’ knowledge-making power.

Deliberate and careful pedagogical design ameliorates the risk of employing a community-focused UR that overwrites marginalization and oppression in favor of consensus (Contu & Wilmott, 2003, p. 287). Students’ perceptions of HLAB’s community-focused pedagogy illustrate how the program encourages students to speak up despite feelings of fear and intimidation cultivated thus far in their time as students invested in the very same CoPs (of undergraduate researchers, of humanities scholars) that they are working toward full participation within. While HLAB is a small part of larger efforts toward greater educational equity at the institutional level, students’ responses indicate that at the individual level, HLAB’s success in building confidence comes with its focus on connection and the whole group. HLAB asks students to hold space in contrast to the ways students have been forced to absent themselves. By focusing on students’ collaborative skills, HLAB leads students to feel more confident owning their place in academia. CoPs rely on disruption to normalized, and exclusionary, habits and mindsets. Programs such as HLAB seek to contribute to the transformation of humanities CoPs. This transformation originates in the contested work of excluded newer scholars in underrepresented institutions locating power and operationalizing their already nuanced ways of knowing alongside additional skill development through their connections across varied CoPs.

**Personal Relationality**

Our second, unanticipated, finding regards the importance of personal and intimate connections (becoming friends or feeling like family) to participants. Given the stakes—the mix of trauma that accompanies marginalization and healing that emerges from collective recognition—it is necessary that UR program designers, mentors, and students consider the potential for social and emotional connections that extend beyond the academic occasion of UR.
Across the qualitative responses, students emphasized the degree to which they felt connected and supported by others throughout HLAB. One student writes, “I have gained skills, yes, but I have also gained support and love and a family.” Unlike the other findings described here, which could be taken up in other UR programs through instructional design and activity-building, this finding calls more for reflective awareness across the UR community being fostered, having more to do with an openness in mindset as to what academic work entails—an engaged pedagogy along the lines of bell hooks that creates space for love and connection (1994)—than anything like an icebreaker or social event. The goal here is not to romanticize CoPs (John & Creighton, 2013, p. 761). We can consider the importance of relationality to UR work and cultivate programs that emphasize respect and reciprocity that extends beyond professional courtesy.

This aspect of community-oriented UR pedagogy has less to do with a specific learning activity and more to do with a learning environment. By considering this study’s data alongside the CoP heuristic, we found that Wenger’s (2000) description of connection in CoPs sheds light on this aspect of learning. Wenger discusses the “deep connections with others through shared histories and experiences, reciprocity, affection, and mutual commitments” (p. 239). HLAB students come to feel these connections because of the shared effort given to their UR projects. Virtually, students spent 40 h/week on zoom together. In person, students not only study but live in dorms together, in a more learning community-styled UR experience. The amount of time and energy each participant offers to the group through this program distinguishes it from course-based or one-to-one UR design. LPP requires the work to be “legitimate,” meaning in part that there is sustained investment and interest involved. The intensity students bring to HLAB is reflected not only in their academic work to strengthen their research and writing skills, but also in the strengthening of bonds between participants.

Such an intensive environment, however, could invite competition – for mentors’ favor or potential acceptance as a transfer/graduate student. For example, in the pre-program survey, one student anticipated that the most significant experience they would have over the ten weeks would be “presenting in front of Ivy League schools and all the leading professionals in the field of humanities.” In their exit survey, however, the same student reflects that what was most significant for them was “presenting perfectly in front of all the friends and loved ones I made.” The first response suggests a desire to be seen alongside students traditionally recognized as more academically successful, a more competitive impulse. The second, however, demonstrates an investment in the HLAB community and the trust and care that can come with UR experiences.

One response is particularly valuable in thinking through the relevance of students’ full participation in the program—academically, professionally, and personally. The student writes:

[HLAB] has made me feel included, seen, and welcome in academia. I was nervous being in such a prestigious institution, that I would have trouble connecting with others because of my economic/social background, but I have never felt more welcome in the academic world. I am curious and interested.
in what my peers are doing and what they have to say. I care so much about everyone’s work and experiences. I have felt fully supported, inspired, and feel more driven now than ever. I feel confident in asking my instructors and peers their opinions and value what they have to say. This has been such a warm and engaging environment, it has felt like a family, which really means the world to me.

This participant’s response suggests why it is critical to attend to the social and emotional aspects of UR programming. The exclusionary practices traditional to research universities have created a long-standing hostile environment for students, especially marginalized students. Students’ strong positive reflections on the “warm and engaging environment” of HLAB indicate that UR programming can disrupt these histories with a more inclusive, caring environment. This response also brings forward once more why these relationships matter so much to students. As students discuss when describing why the collaborative skills they developed are important and what learning with their peers has offered them, this focus on the collective fosters a sense of belonging that many students have not always experienced in their education but one that they intensely value.

Connections to Past, Present, and Future CoPs

As we listen to student data to theorize a community-oriented UR pedagogy, it is important to note that we are not describing the creation of a small-scale CoP. Instead, we are thinking through how CoP and UR literatures intersect and connect to study data. Student participants, in fact, are part of multiple CoPs already, both in and outside of academia, including those of undergraduate researchers and humanities scholars. In looking at students’ responses describing networking, we found that students were reflecting on their membership in new CoPs that overlap, connect to, and conflict with their existing communities.

From an academic standpoint, HLAB connects students not only to HLAB peers and mentors, but to a broader and interdisciplinary UR community, the research university, the Leadership Alliance and its national UR symposium, and additional humanities mentors outside of our university (including faculty that may provide guidance on transfer/graduate school applications). Several students wrote about the access to networking opportunities HLAB fosters, expanding their overall academic community. Many spoke specifically about presenting in front of students attending highly selective universities, indicating that having an occasion to be heard in this audience boosted confidence in the value of their scholarly contributions. When considering what they have gained over the program, another student writes: “I have gained a breadth of insight about a wide variety of humanistic topics; a fresh perspective on how humanistic research is to be conducted; a network that I believe will serve me for many years to come; and a newfound hope in not only the humanities but in academia as a whole.” This student identifies the importance of the networking they engaged in over the program as something to maintain or expand. The “newfound hope” in academia is a striking comment about the positivity engendered through HLAB. Across their responses, several students consider how they have felt pushed
out of educational spaces for a variety of reasons including racism, ableism, classism, and linguistic prejudice. While HLAB mentors do not pretend that one summer program can erase those experiences of oppression, the program aims to craft a welcoming and inclusive educational, professional, and personal learning environment. HLAB, too, originates from the hope for more equitable and just learning for humanities students and works to make that manifest through multilayered mentoring and collaboration.

Part of more inclusive education is the recognition of students’ existing CoPs and knowledge-making practices, especially important for students historically excluded from educational institutions. Because HLAB students work with multiple mentors to develop research questions, participants often pursue topics of deep personal meaning. Students draw from their creative abilities (e.g., as poets or filmmakers), family histories (e.g., as migrants), and community cultural wealth originating from their race, religion, ethnicity, gender identity, income, and more. Students’ descriptions of the love they have for their project, their commitment to the new networks they have formed, and their solidified resolution to a humanistic mindset signals how community-oriented UR functions less like a one-semester course or the deeply valuable but contained one-to-one mentoring relationship and is more akin to CoP engagement and lifelong learning practices.

Discussion and Conclusion

The Humanities Collaboratory is more than just a name and UR experience modelled off the lab environment. What HLAB represents is an opportunity to match those students who benefit most from UR with the time, resources, and funding to conduct that research: not only to benefit the students themselves, but to continue shaping an academy that must evolve. Creating a research program that harnesses the differing perspectives on academia offered by underrepresented scholars creates a UR model that is more flexible in format, wider-ranging in concentration, and conducive to deeper student engagement in ways that traditional research models cannot support.

UR administrators, mentors, and institutional leaders can employ this study’s findings when considering building new UR programs or reimagining existing opportunities in partnership with multiple institutions or within one institution. Though a community-oriented pedagogy is broadly applicable across disciplines and student populations, our findings suggest that it is particularly worthwhile when addressing barriers to intensive humanities UR and the limited access historically excluded students have had to high-impact practices. Consideration of the pedagogical moves elucidated above might feature, like in HLAB, in a multi-week, multi-institutional summer research experience. However, given the costs associated with such programming, faculty, staff, and administrators can also see how this community-oriented approach aligns well with past research in CURE-based programming and community mentoring models. It is possible to integrate collaborative skill-building, peer mentorship, recognition of multiple CoPs, and reflection on social/emotional growth in existing UR programs, even ones that largely focus on
one-to-one mentoring. Adjustments to supplemental programming, such as workshops led by UR offices that bring together students across disciplines, can facilitate community-building in the absence of extensive grant funding. Explicit acknowledgement of the collective aspects of UR alongside the individual gains students report can foster a more inclusive UR design.

A critical implication of this work is that addressing institutional-, disciplinary-, and identity-based inequities in UR access requires recognition of the interconnections between institutions. Partnerships among institutions are necessary to enhance UR opportunities, especially for historically marginalized students in the humanities, and research universities can serve as collaborators in creating and sustaining programs that address our ethical mandate to increase access to high-impact educational experiences. Scholarship in higher education has tended to originate from and focus on four-year universities. This disproportionate attention not only ignores students attending other institutions (Hassel & Giordano, 2013) but also obscures the relationships between institutional types and the ways students move among them (Lueck, 2020). CoPs are not harmonious, and the larger higher education community likewise demonstrates how power can coalesce around institutions that have historically served wealthier, White students. The intense external pressures nearly all colleges and universities face require tactical and strategic alliance-making that recognizes the strengths and needs of varied institutions to better serve students (Adler-Kassner, 2008).

HLAB is challenging. It requires significant commitment, focus, and work. HLAB’s emphasis on connection provides warmth and welcomes curiosity and cooperation. This assignment of meaning to relationships is particularly important for two-year and HBCU students. HBCU researchers point to the whole-person model of HBCUs to emphasize the critical importance of care and connection on campus and culturally affirming pedagogies (Williams, Russell, & Summerville, 2021). HLAB, then, brings together a mix of students alternatively distant from or highly connected to their individual college to a PWI that historically has excluded them. Feeling cared for and respected is necessary to students’ success in the program. These findings, then, extend conversations around cohort-building (Dodson et al., 2009; Posselt & Black, 2012) in higher education.

This article describes how to extend existing high-impact practices to excluded students and to open space to learn from said students’ community cultural wealth through an analysis of HLAB. Partnering multiple institutions whose student bodies include large numbers of otherwise underrepresented students allows HLAB to gather these students in one place for an extended period of time, making the distribution of R1 resources to more students feasible while simultaneously mitigating the one-to-one burden of traditional UR research models by emphasizing collaboration and community: among institutions, among instructors who work as a team, and among students themselves.

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Robinson. All authors commented on previous versions of the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

**Declarations**

**Financial Interests** The authors declare they have no financial interests.

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