

Revisiting the Value of Research

Sure, they're interesting research stories. But what does research really mean to UNLV, to the community, and to you? **By Suzan DiBella**



Like most universities, UNLV is committed to research. Simply put, we believe in the value of research, and we know that it is critical to the advancement of the institution. As are most true believers, we are compelled to share the importance of our endeavor, and we ponder how best to do so.

Certainly, the most common method of communicating the importance of research is to do precisely what we have done in this publication: write about examples of outstanding research that is being conducted. These stories are intended to educate readers about the given research topics and draw attention to the innovation, expertise, and commitment of the researchers. The thinking goes that if readers find the stories worthwhile, interesting, and compelling, then they will surely infer the inherent value of research.

Although this approach seems logical and gen-

erally successful, we wonder at times if the message is being conveyed clearly. Through the years, UNLV has publicized literally hundreds of stories about fascinating, significant research, but we sometimes still encounter uncertainty about our designation of research as an institutional priority. It appears that some still may not fully understand our commitment to the goal of becoming a major research university.

Perhaps our reliance on more subtle means of communication has not adequately produced appreciation of the research mission. Hence, we are pleased to now offer a more direct message: In summary, the conduct of research benefits students, the faculty, the public, and the institution itself in immeasurable ways. To elaborate a bit, we have developed a list of a few of the questions we hear from time to time with some brief answers.

What does research seek to accomplish?

Research seeks to advance the existing body of knowledge in virtually all disciplines. Although stereotypical depictions suggest research is conducted in laboratories, it is actually performed in virtually all subjects – from English to physics, from health sciences to history, from chemistry to criminal justice. Different methods are employed, but, at its most fundamental level, research seeks to expand understanding.

Why do faculty conduct research?

Faculty members are tasked with discovering and creating new knowledge and sharing that knowledge – as well as their systematic methods of acquiring it – with students. Faculty members who perform research gain the respect of their

colleagues, stay at the forefront of their fields, and are able to share their disciplines' latest developments with students. They tend to collaborate with scholars from other universities, consider new interpretations and methods, and bring valuable grant funding to the university.

How do students benefit?

Teaching and research are far from mutually exclusive; they are, in fact, complementary activities. Students benefit tremendously from involvement in hands-on research experiences and develop valuable practical and analytical skills from their participation. Faculty who conduct research share up-to-date information with students and give them the opportunity to explore fields of interest in greater depth. The best and brightest students are often attracted to a university because of the opportunity to work closely with faculty; as a result, outstanding research programs tend to help recruit great students at both the undergraduate and graduate levels.

How does the public benefit from research?

The public benefits when sophisticated faculty expertise is employed to improve quality of life. Research addresses a variety of pertinent local and state issues, solves practical problems, and encourages economic diversification. UNLV is particularly committed to conducting research that is beneficial to the community, state, and region.

How does research impact economic diversification?

University research creates knowledge that can lead to new technologies, commercial products, and development of industries that can have a significant impact on the economy. UNLV researchers are working to create such new technologies and intellectual property with commercialization potential. In addition to providing a revenue stream to the university, this could also bring business opportunities and jobs to our area.

How does higher education view research?

Research is critical to the advancement of UNLV's reputation among colleges and universities. Research success is a key indicator of the sophistication of a university; many believe it is the yardstick by which academic reputation

is measured. UNLV continues to gain respect throughout the country because its research is highly regarded. If the university seeks to gain even greater respect in the academic community, supporting research is the way to go about it.

How is UNLV performing so far in the world of research?

UNLV has made tremendous strides in the last several years in working to build infrastructure that significantly advances the university's research agenda. One indication of our progress in research is the university's success in obtaining grant funding (discussed in this publication's Research Report). The growth in research funding indicates that UNLV faculty members are bringing in substantial external funding to conduct their research. UNLV's move into the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching category of "Research Universities (high research activity)" is another such indication and is excellent news. This move places UNLV in the company of many fine institutions and confirms its status as a nationally recognized research institution.

How do we improve research at UNLV?

Developments such as these demonstrate institutional research sophistication and most certainly aid the university as it endeavors to enhance its academic reputation. It is important to note, however, that these improvements are the result of strategic planning designed to build research infrastructure in recent years. The institution is just beginning to reap the benefits of this planning. Naturally, additional support of research infrastructure is necessary for the institution to continue its upward trajectory.

These short explanations only begin to provide context for UNLV's ongoing commitment to advancing research, but we hope that they open dialogue on the subject. As time goes on, we will be pleased to continue sharing news of outstanding research projects being conducted by faculty members who seek to use their time and talents for the greater good; they are, after all, at the core of the research enterprise. But we must also revisit the topic of the value of research at UNLV periodically to help build support for the research endeavor in general, as success in this area will be the force that takes the university to new levels of prestige and growth in the years to come.