

May 2010

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Recommended Citation

Bridi, Lea (2010) "Studying Language Variation in West Virginia," *Mountaineer Undergraduate Research Review*: Vol. 2 , Article 12.

Available at: <https://researchrepository.wvu.edu/murr/vol2/iss1/12>

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STUDYING LANGUAGE VARIATION IN WEST VIRGINIA

Lea Bridi

The West Virginia Dialect Project (WVDP) is an ongoing study of language variation and culture in West Virginia. Directed by Professor Kirk Hazen, The WVDP offers unique research opportunities to students. Dr. Hazen knows the importance of undergraduate research. According to Hazen, “Research is the best kind of education you can get—it is the essence of active learning.” As a testament to this philosophy, Hazen gives the seven students currently working on the WVDP a huge voice in the project. These students are involved in every aspect of the dialect studies, from planning, to carrying out the research, to contributing to scholarly articles.

Recently, the WVDP has completed studies of demonstrative them (e.g. Do you see them birds?), consonant cluster reduction (e.g. past © pas’), and was leveling (e.g. We was there. vs. We were there.) Currently, the WVDP is studying how “be like” is used as a quotative verb in Mountain State (e.g. She was like, “I just love undergraduate research!” vs. She said, “I just love undergraduate research!”) Quotative like is a language feature that originated on the West Coast during the 1970s. It is interesting to linguists because it has spread rapidly across the continent in just a few decades.

Dr. Hazen believes that there are three reasons why the study of language variation is important. One is its scientific aspect. Though language is an essential part of being human, it is far from being fully understood. Then, there is the sociological aspect, as language can also tell us something about our cultural makeup. Finally, part of the study of language variation is about activism. Speakers of many non-standard English dialects face discrimination based on inaccurate cultural assumptions about language. The WVDP works to reduce this discrimination by dispelling language myths.

Hazen enjoys all aspects of the study of language variation. “My favorite thing about research is the diversity of the intellectual work,” he says. “I’m still learning. I like to learn.”

THE UNANTICIPATED BENEFITS OF ACADEMIC RESEARCH

Molly Simis

I recently completed my Biology Honors Thesis, which was based on a project that began my freshmen year concerning the population genetics of a beautiful dwarf dogwood species that grows in a unique ice-vent system in West Virginia. The products of my time in the lab include so much more than my thesis paper and presentation that were the culmination of three summers and five semesters of research. Among other things, my experience in undergraduate research helped direct the trajectory of my career plans and led to the creation of this journal.

My own undergraduate research took me to the American Society of Plant Biologist’s (ASPB) 2009 Conference. While attending poster presentations and other workshops, I came across a workshop on effectively communicating science to the public. Increasing the public’s understanding of science (my career goal) is imperative to society’s well-being, and successfully achieving this feat involves utilizing the framework that was introduced to me at that workshop. The workshop was a pivotal lesson in my understanding of science communication.

During my time in the lab, I realized that there was no place for the many undergraduate researchers to share their work. In 2008, I wrote a proposal and was awarded a grant from the WV Experimental Program to Stimulate Competitive Research to start an undergraduate research journal. As chief editor of the journal, I have helped to create a forum where students can display their efforts and experience the process of submitting research to an academic journal.