

A Window on America: Bringing Home Interdisciplinary Research

Overview

In August 2001, Albion College, a selective private liberal arts college in south-central Michigan, submitted an application for an NCUR/Lancy Initiative grant to support an interdisciplinary summer research program. The NCUR/Lancy Initiative, a partnership established by the Board of Governors of the National Conferences on Undergraduate Research (NCUR) and the Trustees of the Alice and Leslie E. Lancy Foundation, provides selected institutions with funding for summer research in which undergraduate students and their faculty mentors conduct creative and scholarly work centered on an interdisciplinary theme (<http://www.ncur.org/lancy/announce.htm>). Albion's proposed project, "Boom, Bust, Recovery: Explorations of Albion, Michigan-The Last Half-Century," was to focus on the city of Albion from historical, sociological, environmental, and creative viewpoints. Our initial application to NCUR/Lancy was denied, but in December 2002 a revised version of our proposal was selected for funding.

Eight students funded by the NCUR/Lancy grant and three additional students supported by Albion College's Foundation for Undergraduate Research, Scholarship, and Creative Activity (FURSCA) participated in the program in summer 2003. Projects included:

- a study of economic trends and projections (History),
- an investigation into levels of environmental lead in public schools (Chemistry),
- a history of race, ethnicity, and socio-economics in the community (Sociology),
- a photographic essay (Art and Art History),
- the history of education in Albion: interviews with African-American teachers (Education),
- an analysis of interstate highway development and urban sprawl (Environmental Studies),
- an exploration of the history of the city's Parks and Recreation Department (History), and
- the making of a documentary film (Speech Communication).

A request for a renewal for a second year was granted, funding eight students during summer 2004. New projects this second summer included:



In keeping with the theme, "Boom, Bust, Recovery: Explorations of Albion, Michigan-The Last Half-Century," Albion College's NCUR/Lancy Seminar students toured the local community to learn more about its social, cultural, and economic history.

- academic and vocational horizons and barriers to success of Albion's youth (Sociology and Intercultural Affairs), and
- future prospects for recreational opportunities for Albion's youth (History).

In addition, work on several projects from the previous year extended into this second summer, including an expansion of the study of environmental lead levels to Albion area homes and additions to the documentary film.

In this article we will address:

- the initial process of building a college-wide consensus around an interdisciplinary theme in preparation for writing a proposal,
- the steps taken to develop a narrative, involve faculty from a

variety of disciplines, and finalize the application including a comprehensive budget,

- the re-application process of converting an unsuccessful grant proposal into a successful one,
- a description of the structure of our interdisciplinary summer program, which included a seminar series featuring guest lecturers and student presentations,
- a discussion of the dynamic of the seminar and interactions between the individual student projects and the overarching theme,
- the resulting community involvement and dissemination of the findings of the various research projects,
- changes that were made between year one and two of the funding period, and
- our plans to continue this interdisciplinary work beyond the granting period and to maintain the viability of this type of research on our campus.

In summary, this article will examine a small liberal arts college's grant journey from gestation period to the hands-on stage of interdisciplinary summer seminars and interactions with its home community.

Designing an Interdisciplinary Theme

The program announcement for the second phase of the NCUR/Lancy Initiative stipulated that proposals should be centered on a cohesive interdisciplinary theme. In the summer of 2001, Albion College grant officers sent out a college-wide invitation to faculty, inviting them to offer ideas about interdisciplinary projects. The proposed ideas nearly all centered on some aspect of the city of Albion. As was pointed out in a recent CUR Quarterly article (Ronco, Singer, & Werner, 2004), this focus on institutions' home communities is true for the majority of collegiate projects that NCUR/Lancy has funded over the past five years.

Albion, Michigan, located at the forks of the Kalamazoo River and home to Albion College, was first settled in the 1830s. Area farms and mills were soon supplemented by factories which were magnets for immigrants from Europe, African American migration from the South, white Southern migration from Appalachia, Mexican American migration from Texas, and most recently a sizeable contingent of immigrants from Yemen. It could be said that "all roads led to Albion,"



Consistent with the interdisciplinary nature of Albion College's NCUR/Lancy Seminar, the students and faculty came from disciplines including art and art history, chemistry, education, environmental studies, history, sociology, and speech communication.

and Albion's industrial history is, in many respects, the story of the American Dream.

However, Albion is undergoing a difficult process of redefining itself in a post-industrial age, as factories, businesses, and services have closed. In this regard, Albion is emblematic of America's changes and struggles. A close examination of Albion's story has potential to illuminate America's story, replicating many national and regional historical trends. Albion has been referred to as a "Little Detroit" because of its reliance on heavy industry and its diverse ethnic and racial population. At the same time, because Albion is a small town (population of approximately 9,000) it offers a personal, human-scale look at trends and forces in American life.

This aspect of Albion provides unique and interdisciplinary opportunities for research and scholarship for Albion College students: to examine Albion's history from the industrial boom times of the 1950s and 1960s to the present, focusing on the economic, sociological and environmental dimensions of the boom, the bust, the recovery, the current scene, and projections for the future. Research into the past and exploration of present conditions also provide perspective as Albion considers new directions for a post-industrial era.

Developing a Narrative and a Budget

Once the consensus was reached among faculty members willing to contribute to the project that the theme would focus on the social, cultural, and economic history of the local community, Albion College grant writers and faculty worked on finalizing the application, which included developing a narrative for the theme and working out



As part of their research, the NCUR/Lancy Seminar students gathered oral histories from community residents. Albion College student Karolina Maluga interviewed local resident Hazel Lias about public school education.

Albion College's matching share for a Lancy Initiative grant. The amount of support available from NCUR/Lancy was \$40,000; the college proposed that these funds be used for student stipends, travel to the NCUR conference, a stipend for the project director, and supplies and equipment for the proposed projects. To supplement these funds, Albion pledged an additional \$30,000 for stipends for the faculty mentors, housing costs for summer students, and to cover the costs of field trips and administering a weekly interdisciplinary seminar series featuring films and guest speakers.

It was decided that eight Lancy Scholars would be chosen based on several criteria, including the significance and relevance of their individual proposed project to the overall project theme and the financial need of the students (with preference given to students eligible for financial aid). The students chosen would come from each of four disciplinary areas: sciences, social sciences, humanities, and the arts. The completed application was submitted in August of 2001.

Achieving Success in the Grant-seeking Process

Largely as a result of the post-9/11 downturn in the stock market, the amount of funding available for the second phase of the NCUR/Lancy Initiative was decreased substantially, resulting in only two grants awarded in 2001 rather than four. After the review of applications was complete, NCUR/Lancy officials informed us that, had they given the usual four grants, Albion College's proposal would have been funded, and accordingly, they encouraged Albion to reapply for the next round of funding. After minor modifications, taking into account changes in availability of specific faculty members and feedback from reviewers

of the initial grant, we submitted a revised grant application in 2002 which resulted in "Boom, Bust, Recovery" being funded on its second try. The Albion project thus began in the summer of 2003.

The Interdisciplinary Seminar: Bringing It All Together

Albion College faculty from a variety of disciplines mentored the NCUR/Lancy summer students, working with them on the various interdisciplinary research projects and preparing them to present their research findings to various campus audiences, including those attending the college's annual undergraduate research symposium, to local community residents, and at NCUR's national meeting. A central focus of the summer experience was a weekly seminar for Lancy Scholars, their mentors, other interested campus groups, and community members.

At the opening meeting of the Lancy Seminar, the theme of "Boom, Bust, Recovery: Explorations of Albion, Michigan-The Last Half Century" was elaborated, and expectations were announced. Relevant readings were distributed and important resources identified, including the Local History Room at the Albion Public Library, which is the central depository for Albion's written and photographic history.

The weekly seminars centered around invited guests, including local government officials, media representatives, educators, former factory workers, minority affairs activists, and economic development officials. Common among the speakers were deep roots in Albion and a breadth of Albion experiences over the past half-century. Their talks were videotaped for use by the seminar and as a permanent archive for the Local History Room.

To broaden seminar horizons, the director instituted a film series which featured *Voices from a Steel Town* (Braddock, Pennsylvania); *Downside Up* (North Adams, Massachusetts); *Roger & Me* (Flint, Michigan); *Pleasantville* (fictional depiction of 1950s small town life); *Taken for a Ride* (focus on the role of General Motors in the demise of mass transit in America); *Wisconsin Death Trip* (Black River Falls, Wisconsin); *Tale of Two Cities* (Benton Harbor and St. Joseph, Michigan); and *Breaking Away* (Bloomington, Indiana). The entire summer campus population was invited to join seminar members in viewing the films. Lively discussions concerning small-town America, de-industrialization, globalization, the rust belt, race, poverty, corporate responsibility, civic engagement, town vs. gown, and recovery strategies ensued. The film series represented a liberal arts component of the seminar's work,



As part of their research, the NCUR/Lancy Seminar students gathered oral histories from community residents. Albion College student Heather Dueweke interviewed local resident Barbara Gladney about racial segregation in the 1950s.

which served to relate the Albion case study to a wider historical and contemporary context.

To become better acquainted with Albion, the director led the seminar on history tours of the community. The seminar also took field trips to various Albion industries. In one case, the factory was thriving; in another, the occasion was the bankruptcy auction of Albion's major iron foundry, Harvard Industries, known historically as The Albion Malleable Iron Company. A Michigan conservation group focusing on the Kalamazoo River featured a "Kanoë the Kazoo" river trip that began in Albion. For Lancy Scholars and mentors, this was a unique way to experience the local environment and to meet activists working to make the river part of Albion's recovery.

At the conclusion of the summer of 2003, the Lancy Scholars, together with the Albion NAACP, hosted a reunion of seminar members and Albion citizens who generously supported the seminar's explorations. The reunion was held at Holland Park, formerly the site of the segregated all-black school, West Ward, which was closed in 1953 because of a protest by Albion African Americans. Some of the seminar speakers had attended West Ward and many talked about the significance of its closing for Albion's history. West Ward had been a central theme in seminar discussions. Emblematic of the Civil Rights struggle and progress, Holland Park was a fitting location for the seminar and community to commemorate the summer's work.

Refining the Process

Following a successful first year of the research project, Albion College applied for and received a renewal for a second year of funding from NCUR/Lancy, continuing the same interdisciplinary

theme. Minor modifications for the second summer included refocusing some of the projects that would be continued and adding new projects based on promising research areas identified the first year. Budget modifications were also necessary, since the funding available from NCUR/Lancy for renewals was limited to \$22,500. In order to continue the very successful seminar series, the college pledged more than \$45,000 to cover seminar costs in addition to picking up the costs of student and faculty travel to NCUR and supplies and equipment that had been covered by NCUR/Lancy funds the previous summer. The majority of the NCUR/Lancy funds covered the stipends for eight students and the project director.

Our theme, "Boom, Bust, Recovery: Explorations of Albion, Michigan-The Last Half Century," implies a focus on Albion's history. The project director, a historian, made certain that the Albion Lancy Seminar of 2003 gave Albion's community history its due. The history lessons applied particularly to Albion's boom period of the 1950s and 1960s and to the economic downturn of the 1970s to the present. Some students and faculty, however, were interested in dealing more with Albion's future, its recovery. In the seminar, the group debated the merits of emphasizing Albion's past versus paying more attention to solving Albion's problems. This debate had particular relevance as we planned for the 2004 Albion Lancy Seminar. With the historical groundwork laid during summer 2003, it was decided the 2004 program would focus on solutions and recovery.

Another concern was ensuring that the seminar remained fresh and vital and that steps were taken to prevent "burn-out" among returning faculty and students. At the same time, during the second summer some faculty mentors and most students were new to the

program. While the Lancy Seminar repeated some basic orientation from the first summer, the director responded to the concerns of those who wanted a greater emphasis on the present, on solutions, and on Albion's recovery. The 2004 seminar reflected this. For example, seminar members read Richard Florida's *The Rise of the Creative Class*, inspiration for Michigan's Cool Cities initiative. Seminar mentors and scholars had a lively discussion of where Albion fits in the cool cities conversation followed by a field trip to a local artist's kiln. The Lancy Seminar thus addressed the challenge of combating stagnation with new inspiration for its participants.

Future Directions: Giving Back to the Community

The city of Albion and Albion College have grown up together. The blue-collar, iron foundry, racially diverse, and, lately, impoverished city of Albion contrasted with the middle class, mostly white, and affluent Albion College student body. Albion "town and gown" misunderstandings and apprehensions are proverbial. The Lancy Seminar, dedicated to exploring Albion, has helped in improving city and college perceptions of one another. For this project, a first step was community interest and participation in our work. Community members' enthusiasm gave confidence to the Lancy Scholars and lifted their morale as they went about discovering the city and its people. Community cooperation and collaboration enabled the Lancy Scholars to achieve their research goals. Thus, the community gave the seminar a sense of its significance.

The Lancy Seminar and Scholars have given back to the community by sharing their research findings through public forums and research symposia. A documentary film, "Envisioning Albion," produced by one of the Lancy Scholars has been shown on Educational Access television as well as at an Albion town meeting. In 2004, several of the Lancy Scholars' work focused on Albion youth. Two of them were invited to present their findings to the Albion School Board and to another Albion taskforce dealing with youth initiatives. An important part of the work of the Lancy Scholars lives on in the form of honors theses, available to the public through the Albion College library. Plans call for a second documentary film to be shown on Educational Access television.

In return, the Albion Lancy Seminar gave community members a forum for telling their stories. Those histories have been recorded and will be available to the community at the Local History Room of the



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Albion Public Library. The seminar has captured some of Albion's history that otherwise would remain undiscovered or lost. Those parts of Albion's memory may prove valuable in the years ahead as the city continues to struggle with reinventing itself.

A poignant example of "giving back to the community" is the work undertaken by a particular Lancy Scholar. An Albion native, Jessie Longhurst worked on a project entitled "Growing up in Albion during Boom, Bust, and Recovery." Her focus became youth recreation in Albion. At the end of the second summer Jessie applied for and received an external grant from Michigan Prevention Network to continue her project, now focused on organizing poetry "slams" centering on prevention of abuse of alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs among high school students. Sadly, Jessie died in a car accident while studying off-campus in Australia in April 2005. In her memory, the "Jessie's Gift Mentoring Program" has been set up as a collaboration between Albion College and the Albion Public Schools. Her friends and fellow students have rallied in support of her project and the work that Jessie pioneered will continue.

Whenever our Lancy Scholars presented their findings to the community, the college, or nationally at the National Conference for Undergraduate Research, audiences were interested and asked great questions that told us that our story resonated across America. It cannot be said that our Lancy Seminars discovered the answers to Albion's plight, but perhaps we helped to ask some new questions. Although we have not solved the riddle of Albion, Michigan, it is safe to say that our seminar participants' affection for Albion has grown

over these two years and their lives have been enriched through the privilege of exploring this American town.

The research made possible by the NCUR/Lancy Initiative grant has clearly demonstrated the broad potential for future interdisciplinary projects focused on the city of Albion. Several of the Albion Lancy faculty mentors and Lancy Scholars will be working with programs connected to the Albion Public Schools during the next academic year, including the Jessie's Gift Mentoring Program. Through financial support from FURSCA and the college's Foundation for Interdisciplinary Studies, Albion College is well positioned to continue this interdisciplinary and collaborative student/faculty research.

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Reference

Ronco S, Singer J, Werner T. The NCUR/Lancy Initiative: A Five-Year Retrospective. CUR Quarterly. 2004;25:86-92.

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