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Personalizing History Using Course-based Research on a Student's Own University

This article builds upon one published in the spring print edition of the *CUR Quarterly*, in which author Murray discussed using course-based research on students' own institution as a means of familiarizing undergraduate students with methods of historical research. In this article, descriptions of five student projects completed in a course on the history of American higher education illustrate the diversity of topics and methodologies that can be brought to bear on such an assignment.

The student researchers' ability to tailor their projects to their own personal interests was found to enhance their intrinsic motivation to learn. Links between the course content and students' previous knowledge and interests also facilitated meaningful learning and reinforced their understanding of the practical utility of historical research methods and the relevance of history to their lives.



Anna Gioni reviews archival documents with Isabella O'Neill, curator of Special Collections and University Archives.

The recent article in the print edition of *CUR Quarterly* advocated the use of such course-based research in teaching undergraduates history, citing its potential for cultivating both mastery of the existing historical record and the development of skills in historical inquiry. In this article, we offer further elaboration on the five students' approaches to completion of their course assignment to illustrate how institutional research can be used to personalize the study of history within the undergraduate curriculum.

In previous literature, course-based projects have been cited as a key strategy for expansion of undergraduate research opportunities (Martinetti et al 2009; Mateja 2011), and the humanities and social sciences have been recognized as areas in which such expansion is needed (Malachowski 2003). Proponents of undergraduate research have advocated an instructional sequence in which students are introduced to research early in their college careers and then assisted in building more advanced research skills over time (Brownell and Swaner 2010; Jenkins et al 2003; Karukstis 2004; Willison 2009). Despite well-intentioned efforts to enact such a vision, however, the time constraints of the traditional academic calendar have posed a persistent challenge to its realization (Manske and Chaplin 2000).

Further challenges specific to the humanities and social sciences include perceived limitations in students' research skills and backgrounds, relative to the complexity of potential topics of investigation (Gesink 2010; Howery 2001; LeMahieu 2009; McDorman 2004; Rogers 2003; Schantz 2008; Uffelman 1995), as well as the tradition of independent scholarship that has prevailed in many fields outside the natural sciences (Armstrong 2009; Dean and Kaiser 2010; Schantz 2008).

Within the field of history, the prevalence of the lecture-based survey course, widely deemed to be essential to a firm grounding in historical context, is uniquely problematic insofar as it has often left non-majors with a view of the discipline that does not reflect the analytical and interpretive

orientation toward the study of the past that is embraced by trained historians (Calder, Cutler, and Kelly 2002; Glew 2007; Grim, Pace, and Shopkow 2004; Roth, 2005; Sipress and Voelker 2009). Students tend to view history simply as a collection of facts to be absorbed.

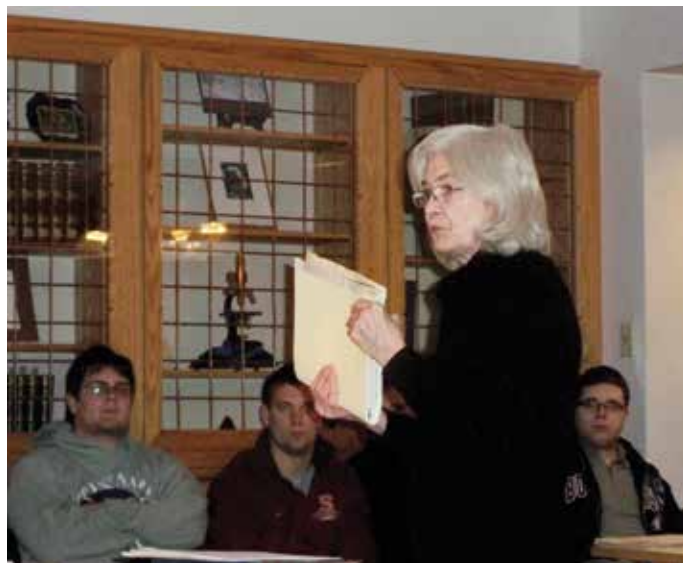
This disconnect has prompted a growing number of history educators to call for curricula that cultivate both an understanding of historical context and the skills of inquiry, argumentation, and criticism (Hounsell and Anderson 2009; Roth 2005; Sipress and Voelker 2009). Glew (2007), in particular, has explained how early use of primary sources can foster students' independence in critically analyzing history and how complex research projects can be made less intimidating to novices by organizing them as a series of more narrowly focused subtasks. The Bucknell institutional history project exemplified all aspects of this emerging vision of undergraduate education in history.

The project was situated in a course that focused on the history of American higher education and its enduring impact on current educational practices. Common readings for the course were drawn primarily from two course texts, one consisting of a collection of essays highlighting various methods of historical inquiry, as applied to the study of higher education (Gasman 2010), and the other a unified overview of the historical development of the American higher-education system (Cohen and Kisker 2010). Weekly issues of *The Chronicle of Higher Education* served as supplementary sources of content for class discussion on contemporary problems in academe.

The primary course assignment for the semester was a report on an aspect of Bucknell's history, chosen by each student. The final paper was to be based on a combination of primary and secondary sources. Students were encouraged to draw support from the archives staff at the university, as well as the staff of the campus writing center. Throughout the semester, students were also assigned weekly readings in the Gasman (2010) text and were asked to complete writing assignments in conjunction with these readings. Through these assignments, students were able to gain experience in applying various research methods to the study of Bucknell's history and to make continuous progress toward completion of their final reports. These assignments also served as a basis for class discussion throughout the semester.



Anna Gioni consults with Joseph Murray on a writing assignment.



Isabella O'Neill, curator of Special Collections and University Archives, conducts an informational session on the resources available through her department.



Joseph Murray makes some use of lecture to establish a common context for examining the history of American higher education.

An important aspect of the project was giving each student the responsibility to choose both the topic of the investigation and the specific methods used to pursue it. Undergraduate research is grounded in constructivist learning theory (Hu et al 2008), which characterizes knowledge as understandings generated by the learner through active engagement in academic discourse, within a community of learners (Fosnot 2005). Gagnon and Collay (2001) have put forth a model for “constructivist learning design” that incorporates six fundamental elements that contribute to an engaging educational environment, all of which were present in the design of the Bucknell higher-education course and the institutional research project: (1) a structured context for learning, (2) opportunities for interaction within groups of learners, (3) establishment of links between newly introduced subject matter and students’ prior knowledge, (4) use of questioning to promote deeper engagement with the subject matter, (5) provisions for exhibition of student work, and (6) opportunities for students to engage in

thoughtful analysis of their emerging individual and shared understandings.

Closely related to constructivist learning theory is the concept of meaningful learning (Oldfather et al 1999), which occurs only when “new symbolically expressed ideas (the learning task) are related in a nonarbitrary, and nonverbatim fashion, to what the learner already knows” (Ausubel 2000, 67). A critical component of meaningful learning is the personalization of subject matter. According to Ausubel (2000), the connections that are made between newly acquired knowledge and prior understandings occur at the level of the individual, so each learner’s unique bank of knowledge must serve as the basis for these associations. Meaningful learning helps both mastery of the historical record and an applied understanding of historical research methods, so that the ability to use procedural knowledge in new situations, widely known as “transfer,” is affected by links to accumulated knowledge (Ausubel 2000).

A common criticism of undergraduate instruction in history is that faculty members too often employ what has sometimes been termed a “coverage” model, in which students are treated simply as consumers of knowledge generated by the professor, often with a focus on memorization of factual content (Sipress and Voelker 2009). Placing emphasis instead on the meaning that students make of course content, Roth (2005) has argued that “if we expect students to take history seriously as a tool or an approach to their understanding of themselves and their lives in society, then we need to select the subject matter with them in mind and make a case for the relevance of history to learning something that is or ought to be important to them” (8).

The literature on motivation offers further support for a more personalized approach to the study of history and more direct engagement of students in shaping aspects of their learning activities. Influential educational theorists have long recognized the strength of inherent motivation (Bruner 1966, Kohn 1999), which has been linked in the psychological literature to a sense of self-determination and control (Csikszentmihalyi 1991, Deci and Ryan 1985). Classroom-based observational research suggests that intrinsic motivation is perhaps most closely associated with conditions of high “cognitive autonomy support,” in which students are encouraged to think in original ways about the subject matter of a given course of instruction (Stefanou et al

2004). Constructivist learning theory itself has been linked to intrinsic motivation within the educational literature (Oldfather et al 1999).

Although the institutional history project described here was not lacking in structure, undergraduates enrolled in the course found ample opportunity within its parameters to pursue inquiries that were of personal interest to them, using a variety of research methods. Below, a review of the projects completed by the co-authors of this article illustrates the widely varied directions in which an assignment of this nature can lead and serves as the basis for discussion of the project’s impact on students’ meaningful learning, depth of understanding, and intrinsic motivation.

The Bucknell Community-College Scholarship Program: A Story of Collaboration, Success, and Dreams

Sean Fortney’s project traced the origins of an academic scholarship program for talented community-college transfer students, which was established with a grant from the Jack Kent Cooke Foundation. This program serves the dual purpose of expanding educational opportunities for economically disadvantaged students and enhancing the diversity of social and cultural perspectives represented within the undergraduate student body. Participants in the



Zoey Goldnick uses a document projector to incorporate historical university publications into a classroom presentation.



Zoey Goldnick uses a pencil and notebook to record information from archival documents.

program not only receive full financial support, but also draw social support from designated faculty mentors and from one another.

At first blush, an historical analysis of this topic struck Fortney as premature, since the current scholarship program only dates from 2007. However, as he delved more deeply into the topic, it became increasingly evident to him that the historical roots of the program ran much deeper than he had initially thought and that they were inextricably linked to the personal histories of numerous individuals

on whose vision the program had been built. Interviews with campus administrators associated with the program, along with a review of existing background literature on the philanthropist Jack Kent Cooke, revealed the degree to which the life experiences of key individuals fueled their passion for the scholarship program and their personal commitment to its underlying purpose.

Accordingly, Fortney's historical analysis of the program was heavily influenced by the genres of biography and life history. This aspect of his investigation was uniquely

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illustrative of points raised in the assigned readings, where the influence of historians' own life experiences on their articulation and interpretation of biographical narratives was discussed (Urban 2010). The topic of Fortney's report was deeply personal for him, as he had transferred into the university with the aid of a scholarship from the program just one semester prior to his enrollment in the higher-education course. Through class discussion, both he and his peers benefitted from his reflections on the potential influence of this experience on his interpretation of the historical record.

Another distinguishing feature of Fortney's project was his analysis of both Bucknell's community-college scholarship program and the broader national initiative of which it was a part. In discussion of an assigned reading on the concept of "horizontal history," meaning the history of organizations that exert influence on multiple educational institutions simultaneously (Thelin 2010), Fortney's research on the Jack Kent Cooke Foundation proved to be a fine example illuminating how powerful such influence can be.



An online photo collection maintained by the university allows Sean Fortney to access historical images from a remote location.

The History and Present Condition of Athletic Merit Aid at Bucknell University

Like Fortney, Kevin LeValley addressed the theme of educational access in his research project. In his case he focused on the introduction of athletic merit aid into the Patriot League and resultant changes to institutional policies at Bucknell. LeValley's sources included published literature, archival documents, and interview data. In conducting his investigation, he interviewed a senior athletic administrator, the chair of a faculty committee on athletics, and the president of the university. The research related closely to LeValley's personal interests because he was a highly accomplished student athlete himself and had competed in intercollegiate wrestling throughout his enrollment at Bucknell.

While Fortney's project sought to place the community-college scholarship program in the context of the lives of its creators, LeValley sought to understand the events leading up to contentious financial-aid policy decisions from the perspectives of observers who were not themselves

instigative of the controversy. While the people Fortney interviewed emerged, to varying degrees, as central figures in the resultant narrative, LeValley's were informed observers who directed his attention to events that did not spring from their own backgrounds. This point of contrast was important in illustrating distinctions among related historical genres. While Fortney's project drew inspiration primarily from the traditions of biography, LeValley's use of interviews was more representative of the approach used by oral historians.

His project also added a further dimension to class discussion of the concept of "horizontal history," because his analysis of the merit-aid issue incorporated details of the organizational histories of the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), the Patriot League, and the Ivy League, in addition to the institutional history of Bucknell. The historical account

that he presented underscored not only the influences of external organizations on collegiate institutions, but also the organizations' influences on one another.

The Road to Coeducation at Bucknell University

Anna Gioni was one of several women in the class who chose to examine the history of women's education at Bucknell, further illustrating the degree to which the theme of access resonated with students as a persistent struggle facing American higher education. Although an affiliated pre-collegiate institute for female students was established early in Bucknell's history, it was not until almost 40 years after the university's founding that women were finally permitted to enroll in college-level courses. The focus of Gioni's investigation was on the interim period between the establishment of the institute and women's regular admission to Bucknell, during which the expansion of educational opportunities for women at Bucknell was debated and ultimately approved.

Occurring in the second half of the nineteenth century, the events that formed the substance of Gioni's narrative could be ascertained only through the use of documentary evidence. However, the availability of several published volumes on the early history of the university allowed her to make more extensive use of secondary sources than would have otherwise been possible. Using several of these works, as well as related archival documents, she was able to piece together a timeline that led her to propose that admission of women to the university might have been based as much on economic considerations as on the moral arguments that figured more prominently in the published literature. She also found evidence to suggest that William Bucknell, the benefactor for whom the university was ultimately named, might have played a role in advancing the movement toward coeducation.

Without the luxury of surviving witnesses, Gioni's project enabled her to experience firsthand the challenges that historians face in constructing detailed narratives of the distant past. For example, in her readings she found that an early female applicant to the university shared the surname of a faculty member who had advocated strongly on her behalf,

yet the available documentation yielded no conclusive evidence as to whether or not a familial relationship existed between them. Gioni's experience with the project illustrates the potential for such an assignment to cultivate students' ability to propose tentative interpretations based on limited evidence, while simultaneously recognizing the uncertainty that attends to such interpretations. King and Kitchener (1994) have cited this aspect of critical thinking, which they have termed "reflective judgment," as an important outcome of undergraduate education.

Although Gioni's research dealt primarily with the early days of the university, she ultimately juxtaposed her findings with more recent data on the representation of women in contemporary higher education, both nationally and at Bucknell. In so doing, she reinforced the significance of history as a source of insight about the present. In an activity related to an assigned reading on the use of photographs as artifacts (Bieze 2010), she also drew contrasts between a contemporary photograph of a familiar women's residence hall and an earlier image of the same building. As she shared the two images with the other members of the class, the resultant discussion illustrated how changes in the physical environment of the campus can offer clues about concurrent changes in the institutional culture.

Curricular Changes in an Era of Turmoil: Adaptation During World War II

Zoey Goldnick's project dealt with the university's adjustment to the international crisis posed by the onset of World War II. While the general literature pertaining to the war's impact on higher education typically has centered on the influx of veterans to American colleges and universities upon their return from duty, owing to passage of the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944 (Cohen and Kisker 2010), Goldnick's research primarily emphasized the war's impact on the university during the conflict itself. In particular, she examined curricular adaptations undertaken in response to the practical needs of a nation at war and the significance of these reforms to public perceptions of higher education as a patriotic alternative to military service. The long-term impact of these changes at the institutional level was significant, in that they contributed to a broadening



Zoey Goldnick reviews archival documents with Isabella O'Neill, curator of Special Collections and University Archives.

of the curriculum beyond the liberal arts, a change that has persisted to this day and become a central element of Bucknell's unique institutional identity.

Like Gioni, Goldnick relied entirely on documentary evidence to carry out her project. However, in doing so, she was able to benefit from a far more extensive body of relevant archival documents than was available to Gioni. In particular, promotional literature and other formal communications pertaining to the university's role in the war effort offered a window on both the cultural mood of the time and its impact on the public image that the institution sought to craft for itself. Amidst military recruitment efforts—strongly reinforced by public sentiment—that emphasized a young man's patriotic duty to serve, the university faced the challenge of positioning college attendance as a respectable alternative to enlistment. In her investigation of institutional efforts toward this end, Goldnick made effective use of archival documents to directly examine the rhetoric used to make the case for enrollment.

In addition to contributing to her own understanding of historical research, the project helped illuminate key concepts raised in class discussion. For example, one of the assigned readings introduced the concept of "presentism," meaning the tendency to interpret historical events through the lens

of contemporary sensibilities (Hutcheson 2010). In further discussion of the concept, Goldnick cited the importance of historical context in understanding the apologetic stance on college attendance that was common during World War II—in stark contrast to the social desirability ascribed to college attendance today. This example further reinforced the need for a general understanding of historical context and the appropriate use of both primary and secondary sources.

Bucknell Graduates' Economic Performance: A Comparative Examination

Scott Sechler used longitudinal institutional data on Bucknell's tuition and fees and the starting salaries of its graduates, together with general economic indicators, to conduct a comparative analysis of the immediate financial return on the investment in a Bucknell education of members of the graduating classes of 1968 and 2010. In carrying out his analysis, he first compared the percentage increase in average first-year salaries against the rate of inflation for the same period, in order to determine which class had fared better in real economic terms. He then compared the percentage increase in tuition and fees for the same period against the rate of inflation to determine the comparative tuition burdens borne by members of the two classes. Finally, he calculated the average first-year salary for each class as a percentage of the corresponding tuition and fees, as a basis for comparison of the average return on investment for members of the respective classes.

A major strength of Sechler's report was his measured interpretation of the findings. For example, in comparing first-year salaries for the two classes, he noted that results varied widely when data were compared for specific majors. Additionally, he observed that, nationally, the inflation rate for college tuition and fees during the period of analysis exceeded the overall rate of inflation for the same period. Finally, he cautioned against the assumption that the value of a college education can be measured solely in financial terms, citing an historical essay on the timeless philosophical question of what purpose higher education ultimately serves (Perlmutter 1958). This question had emerged as a recurrent theme in the Cohen and Kisker (2010) text, which served

as a common point of reference in establishing historical context.

Sechler's approach to the assignment was unique, in that he alone made use of quantitative data as the primary basis for drawing conclusions about the past. His final report illustrated certain benefits of quantification that were cited in the course readings (Robbins 2010)—for example, that use of tabular data enabled him to present extensive detail on his findings in a concise and easily understood format. His project also reinforced the relevance of historical analysis to understanding contemporary issues since the rising cost of higher education was among the current problems in academe examined over the course of the semester. Like many of the other students' projects, Sechler's study affirmed the salience of educational access as a matter of concern to undergraduates.

Discussion

What becomes clear from this review of individual student projects is that authentic historical research can be carried out by undergraduates drawn from a variety of academic majors, within the time constraints of a single academic semester, when their institution is recognized as a legitimate

source of historical data. What becomes equally clear is the potential for such research to personalize the study of history in ways highly conducive to learning.

By virtue of their enrollment at Bucknell, all students in the higher-education course could reasonably be expected to feel some degree of connection to the university's institutional history. In examining the specific topics that students chose to research, one can also see how uniquely relevant their projects were to their individual interests. For example, it should come as no surprise that Gioni and Fortney might take a personal interest in educational opportunities for women and community-college transfer students, respectively, and to take seriously the need for an accurate understanding of Bucknell's progress toward more inclusive admissions policies and recruitment practices. As a political science major, Goldnick was able to draw upon her primary disciplinary perspective by examining institutional issues within the context of national and world events and by interpreting historical artifacts with an eye toward the rhetoric of persuasion and strategic messaging. Similarly, Sechler's quantitative analysis of returns on investment reflected his perspective as a management major and future businessman. As a student athlete and aspiring athletic administrator, LeValley had an interest in athletic merit aid that was of both immediate and potential long-term consequence.

In addition to the diversity of topics chosen by the students in the course, the range of research methods employed and their suitability to the chosen topics were likewise striking. For example, both Fortney and LeValley employed interviews as their primary sources of data, taking advantage of fresh memories and personal insights to gain understanding of topics in recent history. In contrast, both Gioni and Goldnick relied more heavily on analysis of documents in studying earlier periods in the institution's historical development. Finally, Sechler's analysis of quantitative data was uniquely suited to his examination of the institution's financial history. In each instance, the student's selection of a particular methodology exemplified appropriate transfer of procedural knowledge that had been presented in the course readings within a completely different research context.



Zoey Goldnick consults with Joseph Murray on a writing assignment.

Consistent with constructivist learning theory, students were actively engaged at each step in the planning and execution of their studies. Reflecting principles of meaningful learning, their prior knowledge was brought to bear on both the subject matter and methodology of their investigations. For example, while the use of quantitative data in the examination of history might have been new to Sechler, his previous use of economic data in analyzing contemporary business problems clearly informed his approach to the design of his study. Focusing on an era that is heavily emphasized in history curricula at both the high-school and college levels, Goldnick similarly was able to benefit from her general knowledge of world events to contextualize her examination of institutional curricular issues.

As might be expected, the students exhibited high levels of inherent motivation in carrying out their projects. For example, the interest that Fortney and LeValley had in existing institutional programs and policies drove their curiosity about the chains of events that helped shape these facets of the university's current functioning; their research questions flowed naturally from this innate curiosity. Even such potentially cumbersome tasks as Sechler's transcription of detailed numerical data or Gioni's deciphering of handwritten notes from nineteenth-century faculty meetings were made more palatable by the light that they helped shed on matters that innately interested these students.

Although a course studying the history of higher education might be seen as more readily conducive to campus-oriented projects than most undergraduate history courses (Murray 2014), the projects reviewed here also offer tangible evidence of the relevance of such institutional research to broader historical themes. For example, the curricular revisions that Goldnick identified in her research could be traced directly to the economic impact of a major war. In his examination of more recent economic trends, Sechler brought to light the impact of such shifting patterns on the financial interests of the individual. LeValley's research on athletic merit aid raised questions about the value assigned to various talents and competencies within an evolving economy. Fortney's study of the community-college scholarship program drew similar attention to the theme of socioeconomic mobility as a timeless issue in complex societies. Finally, Gioni's study of

coeducation at Bucknell addressed the evolution of gender roles as a significant aspect of socio-cultural history. Clearly, each of the students' projects dealt in its own way with a major historical theme, but in such a manner as to make it of immediate personal interest to the researcher. Such an experience holds the potential to advance meaningful learning and produce a deeper understanding of history in courses addressing a wide range of historical topics.

Conclusion

Based on this review of individual students' projects, research into their own campuses appears to be a powerful means by which to introduce students to methods of historical inquiry within the undergraduate curriculum. In addition to providing authentic experience in the conduct of original research, the course assignment described here established the relevance of history to the lives of current undergraduates. The structure of the assignment was found to offer an optimal level of support to first-time researchers, while simultaneously challenging them to assume an active role in their own learning. Consistent with contemporary theories of learning and motivation, the project was found to engage students deeply with the subject matter of the course, to draw upon their previous knowledge in developing their understanding of the course's content, and to capitalize more fully on their natural curiosity to maximize their incentive to learn.

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