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CUR Focus

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Telling Tales in Two Cities: How Historical Undergraduate Research Can Inform Urban Policy and Dismiss Urban Legends

Located near Niagara Falls, Niagara University is a Catholic and Vincentian university whose mission is inspired by the life of St. Vincent de Paul, a French 17th century priest who addressed the needs of the poor, marginalized, and oppressed. With 2,600 undergraduates and 800 graduate students, many drawn from western New York, the university has historically been recognized for its service-oriented curriculum, modeled after St. Vincent de Paul's example. The Learn and Serve program, a required component of the curriculum, provides opportunities for faculty to integrate volunteer and service projects into their courses.

The College of Arts and Sciences has also sponsored a series of teaching grants to assist its faculty in developing innovative, integrated, and active service-learning pedagogies and has encouraged faculty/student research as an effective means of achieving these goals.

The university's history department involves its students with the local community in traditional community-service opportunities, presenting unique approaches for using undergraduate research to engage and inform public policy. This article presents one example of policy-oriented research in a collaborative, community-based undergraduate research project. It explores how students in two classes, a civil rights course and a historical methods course, worked collaboratively to inform New York state lawmakers about the historical causes and effects of urban poverty in Niagara Falls. Outlined specifically is the process of developing student research teams that used historical research methods and documentary video to inform state lawmakers about complex racial and economic crises. Importantly, this project required students to confront popular myths and misconceptions concerning the reasons for poverty in the region and to use historical thinking and research to address the problem.

The Legend of the Fall of the Falls: Using History to Confront Racial and Economic Disparities

Everybody wonders why the city of Niagara Falls, New York, looks as it does. Desolate, boarded-up, abandoned homes are clustered throughout the city, bordered by still-occupied ones facing a similar fate. Unlike its bustling Canadian twin across the border, the "Cataract City" on the American side faces significant economic challenges. Niagara Falls is one of the poorest cities in the United States and has increasingly seen dwindling populations, crumbling infrastructure, deteriorating public schools, and even an environmental crisis. What makes Niagara Falls unusual is that it also is an international tourist destination, drawing millions of visitors a year. Many reasons have been given for the deterioration of this American city, some plausible, others absurd—depending on whom you ask (Hess, 2005).

From 2006 to 2007, I attended numerous meetings of concerned citizens, hearing them tell stories about how the city had once been great and expressing concern about its current crisis. Neighbors reminisced about days when Main Street, cluttered with stores, bustled with activity; times when the now-dead factories were a beehive of production, and when the streets were devoid of crime. Those were the halcyon days, at least as they recalled them, yet no one had a convincing answer as to why and how the city had fallen on hard times.

Whenever I randomly asked students in any of my classes to give me some of the historical causes for urban blight in the city, they produced the same storyline that I had already heard but had come to distrust. Some blamed the Mafia for strangling local businesses. Others politely blamed black gang activity and inner-city violence, which devastated the not so distant urban utopia of the past. While many of these allegations held partial truths, they revealed more about the present obsession of local media than how the city had actually changed over time.

In all my classes, I told my students that the most important question a historian must ask and honestly answer is: How does a subject change over time? If we were unable to use the historian's craft to answer some rather basic but important questions about the transformation of our city from the 1960s to the present, what good was a historical education? What good were the historical themes of justice, social action, and equality if we could find no relevant connection in our lives and our communities?

Robert Hengesbach and Tiffany Rockwood discusssing urban housing policy with New York State Senator George Maziarz at CICU Conference in Albany (left to right).

Residents of Niagara Falls participate in oral interviews.

On several occasions, I talked informally with city councilmen, the former mayor, and state senators about the plight of Niagara Falls. I felt that they were people who cared deeply about the city but were constantly being pulled in different directions. They addressed problems as their constituents beckoned but lacked a coherent story to assess the gravity of the situation and prioritize policy discussions. As a historian, the one thing that my professional training could contribute to addressing this problem was a coherent narrative, based in primary sources, to explain the changes that had occurred in their context. I knew we could promise no miracles, but collaboratively we could tell a story attentive to the perspectives necessary for informed civic discussion.

The central, overarching purpose of this project was to tell a story about urban decay in Niagara Falls as effectively as possible. In the process, my students and I would educate ourselves about the historian's craft and its uses, encourage an honest dialogue among residents of the city, and ultimately we hoped, bring about social change through more effective policy. I decided that our narrative need not be comprehensive or daunting in its scope, but rather it should emphasize the collection of first-hand accounts, oral or otherwise, to provide a well-rounded credible account that encompassed contrasting perspectives.

For the project to work, I needed students to be at the center of the research, engaging the sources, stakeholders in the community and each other. The students in the civil rights class focused on connecting the plight of Niagara Falls in the present with historical themes of social justice. They were assigned to interview Niagara Fallsians about the origins of this urban crisis. Students in the introduction to research class worked with reference librarians at the Niagara Falls Public Library Local History Department, Maureen Fennie and Linda Reinumagi, to find archival evidence relevant to the project. The librarians also helped the research class students create primary source document portfolios. These portfolios were important because they were used by the research class as the basis for their research papers and by the civil rights class to illustrate a video documentary on the project. Throughout the semester both classes exchanged documents, interviews, oral history transcripts, research briefs and resources with each other.

I thought my modern civil rights course was a good fit for the scope and content of the project because one of the central questions posed in the course was: How do problems addressed in the civil rights era persist in the present? The question was designed to get students to think beyond the great personalities of the era, such as Martin Luther King and Rosa Parks, and to examine the significant policy changes that came about during this era and how they continue to impact American society.

Beyond the civil rights themes of racial segregation in this course, historical parallels in housing inequality and urban slums also seemed worthy of attention. In the course, we discussed King's anti-slum campaign in Chicago in 1965, the Federal Housing Administration (FHA), and the Fair Housing Act of 1968. The mixture of people, policy and places was an approach that

students could easily relate to when they looked at Niagara Falls. They could see a drastic difference in neighborhoods of the city and found residents to talk about the conditions and the changes that took place. While some students in the class identified possible interviewees, I asked another group of students to place events in the history of the city against the civil rights timeline and primary source documents we had studied.

The next step was to interview black and white residents of Niagara Falls who were old enough to reflect on the historical transition of the city. Henry Hampton's *Eyes on the Prize* PBS documentary series was particularly useful because it showed how moving historical video could be and how relevant these themes still were in contemporary policy discussions. Hampton also showed the benefit of a modern civil rights course is that many people who lived during the era are still alive today and often willing to be interviewed. So we conducted a series of interviews—some independently and others through the Health Association of Niagara Country (HANCI) to probe the meanings of these connections in our local community. The interviews served as primary sources of information that brought the historical themes presented in the course to life. Students became more motivated when they realized that they were dealing with real people and issues, not just another history paper.

The final step in the project was for the modern civil rights class to create an 11-minute mini-documentary to visually summarize the students' conclusions from both classes based on the interviews, research papers and document portfolio. In the both classes we discussed how historians must not only be masters of research but also must learn how to make compelling arguments through effective storytelling. The students received a crash course on how to use video equipment and do video editing. I warned them to be particularly attentive to differences between writing a narrative and crafting one through video. The research methods class watched the documentary and critiqued it by emphasizing the disparities between their written version and the civil rights class' video version. The end product simultaneously illustrated the nature of historical storytelling and exposed misconceptions about the decline of the city.

From the archival sources and oral interviews, both classes reached a conclusion about the demise of Niagara Falls that was consistent with themes in other major cities across the

Joseph Fitzpatrick discusses the documenting history of urban decay with an interested onlooker at the CICU.

United States. Deindustrialization, combined with white flight from the inner city and the isolation of the urban poor, left expansive urban infrastructure too expensive to be maintained by a declining population on an eroding tax base. While residents of historically segregated neighborhoods of the city blamed the influx of black residents, the reasons for the fall of Niagara Falls resulted from issues well beyond their immediate control. Practices of blockbusting and redlining had isolated the city's poorest residents—both black and white—and set a dangerous precedent similar to national trends evidenced in other cities.

As home ownership plummeted and property tax rates increased, the number of dilapidated buildings increased. Suburban areas sprawled on the outer rings of urban areas, choking the city of the population and resources necessary for proper maintenance. The urban blight of Niagara Falls, though closely connected to racial segregation, is not directly a result of any racial group; therefore, policy discussions on remedying the problem must go beyond urban legends of darkening ghettoes.

One Good Story Told To Others: Using History to Inform and Engage Citizens in Public Policy

During the final phase of the project, both classes shared their final projects and comments with each other. The research class had provided important archival documents that the civil rights class used in creating a mini-documentary, and the civil

Robert Hengesbach, Tiffany Rockwood, Joseph Fitzpatrick (on bench on left) share the narrative of urban decay in Niagara Falls with State Senator Antoine Thompson (center) outside the State Senate floor. Dr. Seneca Vaught looks on (bench on right).

rights class produced oral interviews that the research methods class used in their research papers. Both classes learned how to work with primary source documents and to craft a historical narrative while investigating how historical themes impacted the local community.

Many of the student learning outcomes for each course had been fulfilled in one assignment. Students in the introduction to research course had successfully chosen topics and identified sources appropriate to the discipline. Students in the civil rights course had identified major themes of the civil rights era and their continuing significance in the present. Over all, the students had demonstrated the ability to conduct historical research appropriate to the levels of the courses. If the project had ended there, I would have been happy. Students confronted popular myths, misconceptions, and rationales for the urban poverty and decaying housing in the city. Most importantly, they had used historical thinking and research skills to illuminate the problem.

The story did not end there, however. I selected the best students in the two classes to work together on a poster presentation for the Commission on Independent Colleges and Universities' (CICU) Undergraduate Research Exposition at the Legislative Office Building in Albany. CICU is a non-profit alliance of over 100 educational institutions in New York. Its mission is to support and advance higher education policy in New York state. The conference was organized in part to allow state elected officials to see the importance of higher education and to keep it as a priority. My three students (Joseph Fitzpatrick, Robert Hengesbach, and Tiffany Rockwood) presented a three-part poster presentation at the conference entitled, "A House is Not a Home: The Legacy of Housing Discrimination in Niagara Falls, New York."

Students had an opportunity to discuss the implications of their research with state senators George D. Maziarz (62nd District) and Antoine M. Thompson (60th District). The senators both asked the students serious questions about how they reached their conclusions and its implications for the city. Senator Thompson welcomed the students in a private conference with him in the capitol. He listened attentively, posed questions, and invited the students to discuss their research at a community breakfast in Niagara Falls. This was to be part of an ongoing dialogue with city government and concerned citizens.

This conversation, we hope, is the beginning of a new approach to revitalizing Niagara Falls. History has shown us that effective public policy begins with informed and engaged citizenry. We perceive this project to be part of that process in western New York. Already, Senator Thompson has publicly pledged to devote more attention and resources to the city. While we cannot say that this is a direct result of our project, we can certainly conclude that it has helped (Prohaska, 2009).

This project has also helped my students understand the usefulness of history. The accomplished world historian Peter Stearns writes, "History is in fact very useful, actually indispensable, but the products of historical study are less tangible, sometimes less immediate, than those that stem from some other disciplines." In general I have found students approach historical research as an obstacle to their educational growth, not a cornerstone of core knowledge and skills that augment their ability to be more effective in virtually any discipline. In part, we instructors have been to blame. Our courses have been more prone to emphasize great names, themes, and developments than the process of historical thinking itself. In a bubble-sheet society, students have become accustomed to history courses providing neatly packaged summaries of our world's evolution and problems, rather than posing complex questions on its unfinished chapters (Wineburg, 2001; Barton, Levstik, 2004; Stearns, 1998).

Through this project, the students taught me, the community, and our elected leaders that they are willing and able to confront social problems if given the opportunity and proper guidance. They taught each other that they are able to move

beyond simple stereotypes and "tall tales" of urban poverty and engage the complexity of race, class, and deindustrialization in the post-civil rights years. They have shown that they are optimistic and willing to present solutions to problems in the world that they have inherited. Another major outcome of this collaboration was a shift in the student focus from grades to thinking. One of the students, Joseph Fitzpatrick, went on to work with the ReNU Niagara Community Outreach Partnership Center, a university partnership initiative supported by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). He is now transforming the mini-documentary into a full-length film and continues to meet regularly with me and stakeholders in the community—a year after he completed the course.

Through students' researching and telling stories of Niagara Falls in the state capital in Albany, this project presents examples of how university involvement with policymakers and the local community can be an effective model for collaboration in the 21st century. This approach is not new nor is it novel; several colleges and universities in western New York have embarked on the service-oriented, community-based model that is rapidly becoming a template for faculty and student research in the nation.

Colleges and universities of the 21st century must take a bold step forward in applying our disciplinary training to the host of social problems we encounter. We can no longer be content to dwell upon mastery of content as sufficient; rather we must implement new paradigms of problem solving and learn to address the host of social problems our generation faces (Lowe, 2008; Bullough and Baugh, 2008).

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