Engaging the Archives: Theory and Practice for Improving Student Success in the Archives

Terry McDonald, Director, Bentley Historical Library

This research project is situated in the Bentley Historical Library on the University of Michigan campus, which collects the materials for and promotes the study of the histories of the State of Michigan and the University of Michigan. One of the key initiatives of the Bentley is to increase the use of the Library’s archival collections by students and to assist faculty in designing great learning experiences for students using the collections. The Library recently received funding for a project, “Engaging the Archives,” from the University’s Teaching and Learning for the Third Century (TLTC) Program. This project brings faculty and archivists together to discuss approaches to improving student success in courses using primary archival sources and aims to help faculty redesign their syllabi or assignments around the student’s encounter with primary sources.

This research project, now in its second year, involves interviews with faculty members and archivists about using archival sources and working together on such teaching, and evaluation of students who are actually in the courses taught by faculty in the project. Among other things, we are interested in influencing the learning objectives of the courses, the nature of the encounter with primary sources (online, in class, in the archives), any exercise or assignment used to structure the encounter, the roles of the archivist and teaching faculty, and the evaluation used to measure the results of this work. The REMS student will be involved in the coding of research interviews, the checking of interview transcripts, and the conduct of semi-structured interviews. An analysis of previous studies of teaching with archival sources in the field of education may also be done. REMS students will also participate in such archival education programming at the Library as is available during the summer.

Student Role

The student will serve as a research assistant and be involved in research meetings with archivists and other co-investigators. In this way s/he will participate in a research team and be exposed to all aspects of the research. The student will be assigned specific duties leading to at least one peer reviewed presentation. The student will be involved in collecting new data and in thinking about evaluation techniques for the entire project. The student will also gain experience in archival education from the perspective of the archivist.

Mentoring Plan

The student will meet regularly throughout the project with the research team led by a postdoctoral researcher and lecturer in the UM School of Information, Dr. Patricia Garcia. Additionally, I, along with my staff, and co-investigators will monitor the student closely during several key phases of the project. Together, we will give the student constructive and iterative feedback on research products in a timely manner.