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

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This research project is situated in the Bentley Historical Library on the University of Michigan campus. The Bentley Library collects the materials for and promotes the study of the histories of two great, intertwined institutions, the State of Michigan and the University of Michigan. One of the key initiatives of the Bentley is to increase the use of the collections by students and assist faculty in designing great learning experiences for students using the collections. The Bentley Historical 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.

When teaching faculty, archivists, and students use terms like “search,” “document,” or “context” while working with primary, archival sources, they often are talking past one another. This problem is well recognized in the archival literature but its solution is complicated by the lack of venues in which archivists and teaching faculty work together to solve it. This research project will involve two aspects of data collection to support the “Engaging the Archives” project. The first is a meta-analysis of previous studies of teaching with archival sources in three fields: history, archives, and education. Among other things, we are interested in the learning objectives, the nature of the encounter with primary sources (online, in class, in the archives), any exercise or assignment used to structure the encounter, the types of evaluation used to measure those learning objectives, and the role of the archivist. The second is participating in the design of assessments based on the literature review. Third, the student may be involved in in-depth qualitative interviews and analysis of those interviews into the theories and practices of faculty and archivists working with students in the archives. Researchers will also participate themselves in archival education programming at the Bentley Historical Library.

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 peripherally 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 papers or presentations. The student will be involved in collecting new data and peripherally 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

I will meet with the student regularly throughout the project. Additionally, I, along with my staff, and co-investigators will monitor the student closely during several key phases of the project, including the literature meta-analysis and data collection. Together, we will give the student constructive and iterative feedback on research products in a timely manner. The goal will be to develop a synthetic literature review for publication in a peer-reviewed journal.