

The Virtuous Circle of Student Research: Harnessing a Multicourse Collaborative Research Project to Enhance Archival Collections

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ABSTRACT

University faculty have worked to increase use of high-impact educational practices in recent years by implementing multicourse collaborative research projects between students in multiple courses in a semester and occasionally in small groups through multiple semesters. Meanwhile, university archives face the problem of underdocumentation of their institutions' diverse communities and the lack of available research hours to remedy it. By combining the two types of multicourse research projects—whole-class sections working together across semesters—with the archives acting as project repository and knowledge conveyor between semesters, undergraduates can make significant contributions to the archives' documentation of diverse communities.

Between 2014 and 2016, Mississippi University for Women (MUW) instituted a sequential multicourse collaborative research project in which upper-level history courses, partnering with the University Archives, uncovered and documented the history of MUW's desegregation and racial integration. Using this project, the faculty and the archives implemented high-impact educational practices in coursework, uncovering the history of MUW's desegregation in time for the 50th anniversary in 2016, re-creating for students the experience of participating in scholarly discourse, and building new collections, finding aids, and other supplementary materials for the archives.

This project shows that sequential multicourse collaborative research projects can be an effective if labor-intensive way for small departments and lone arrangers to foster and leverage student research for both pedagogical and collection-building purposes.

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KEY WORDS

Undergraduate instruction, Teaching with primary sources, Collection building, Underdocumentation, Diversity, Mississippi University for Women

Research-based instruction has long been a priority for college and university instructors as a way to increase learning outcomes, and it provides an avenue for archives to make inroads into college classrooms to optimize their usage and better serve the mission of the parent institution. One method of research-based instruction—the sequential multicourse collaborative research project—when expanded to include collaboration between whole classes allows archivists to participate even more deeply in student research by serving as the central laboratory for the project as a whole and a conveyor of accumulated knowledge across sections, disciplines, and semesters.

From 2014 to 2016, Mississippi University for Women conducted a novel sequential multicourse collaborative research project focusing on the university's desegregation in 1966 and its subsequent steps toward racial integration. In preparation for the 50th anniversary of desegregation in August 2016, students were tasked with unearthing the history of that event by interviewing important individuals and constructing a narrative. Through this project, the students uncovered the history of desegregation at the institution, were exposed to high-impact educational practices known to improve educational outcomes, successfully re-created a scholarly discourse, and created numerous archival resources including oral histories, artistic works, and exhibits. Inspired by the project, some students even created resources in other classes.

Research-Based Instruction

Educators at the collegiate level have long known about the importance of bringing more student research into course curricula. In 1998, the National Commission on Educating Undergraduates in the Research University recommended broad implementation of research-based learning in colleges and universities of all types and sizes.¹ Research is a key component of the ten high-impact educational practices that “have been widely tested and have been shown to be beneficial for college students from many backgrounds,” as identified by the American Association of Colleges and Universities.² The 2007 *Association for the Study of Higher Education (ASHE) Report* finds that student researchers improve their writing skills, personal and educational satisfaction, confidence, retention rates, interest, critical thinking, and academic achievement. Research-based learning also encourages the integration of underrepresented minority groups into academic and social spheres.³ Meanwhile, archival literature on the benefits of research-based instruction and its support in archives is growing more robust as well.⁴

Collaborative and Multicourse Projects

In an effort to introduce more high-impact practices into their classes, some instructors have implemented collaborative research projects in which all of the students in a class pursue the same broad topic with the instructor acting as facilitator. Robert Stephens, Kathleen Jones, and Mark Barrow use the example of a history capstone class creating a book to argue that a collaborative project can increase effort and quality of work even among weaker students: “The shared sense of mission and the promise of a tangible, lasting product can increase student commitment to their own learning, enhancing accountability by creating pride of ownership.”⁵

Additionally, in more recent years, experiments have combined student research from multiple courses, both to implement high-impact education practices and to scale up to a more significant product. Usually these multicourse projects take place between courses in the same semester, but, in a rare few cases, the relationship has been sequential through multiple semesters instead. In one example, Christopher Corley conducted numerous multisemester projects in French history with a small group of advanced students and says of his own experience that multisemester projects comprising an academic year and a summer tend to be more successful than single-semester ones.⁶ Matthew Tuthill and John Berestecky, meanwhile, directed microbiology students in a series of semester-long projects to learn how to conduct genetic engineering to develop antibodies against common pathogens.⁷

These two types of research projects—the collaborative project and the sequential multicourse project—can be combined with the assistance of the archives. An archives that retains the products of student work can serve as the conveyor of new knowledge between class sections, courses, and semesters, reaping benefits in archival usage, description, and even acquisition. Undergraduate research can generate many different products, some of which educators and information professionals commonly underrate. Peter Scott Brown and Jace Hargis, for instance, in implementing project-based learning in an art history course, learned that “undergraduates in Art History—and by extension in the broader Humanities—are capable of making intellectually significant, original contributions to the state of knowledge in the field.”⁸ Lesley Willcoxson et al. used the data gathered by their undergraduates to implement a nationwide project and acquired a national grant to do so.⁹ These contributions to scholarship can themselves be added to an archives’ holdings and strengthen existing collections. Nevertheless, little archives-oriented scholarship exists on opportunities for archivists and special collections librarians to support, and even pitch to faculty, sequential multicourse collaborative research projects.

Case Study—The Integration Project at Mississippi University for Women

Mississippi University for Women (MUW, formerly Mississippi State College for Women, or MSCW) conducted a collaborative research project from 2014 to 2016 to uncover the history of its desegregation and racial integration¹⁰ in preparation for the 50th anniversary of its 1966 desegregation while incorporating more high-impact educational practices into history coursework. Dr. Erin Kempker, associate professor of history, and Derek Webb, university archivist, originally conceived it as a single-course collaborative research project, but we expanded it into a sequential multicourse project after the initial course, then adding two goals: to re-create scholarly discourse for the undergraduates involved in the project and to supplement archival holdings in this area with student research, oral histories, and creative output.

As recently as 2013, institutional memory of desegregation at MUW was limited. The sole published history of the university covering the period states only:

In 1966, the college peacefully integrated. Black History Week began to be observed, and a faculty and student committee was formed to deal with complaints about racial discrimination. The founding principles of fairness and sensitivity to the needs of each student made integration a relatively uneventful process at MSCW. By 1972, black students comprised 11 percent of the student population, and they were involved in every facet of campus social, political, and academic life. *Las Amigas*, a black social club, was organized in 1976.¹¹

The state of the university's archives further impeded the excavation of this history. The archives was only then hiring its first archivist since 1990, and its few finding aids were incomplete and inaccurate. In addition, underdocumentation of diverse communities is a ubiquitous issue in archival repositories, so we suspected that sources would be relatively few and time consuming to uncover.¹²

We decided to explore project-based learning to uncover this history, satisfying both the desire to incorporate more high-impact practices—collaborative projects and undergraduate research—into history coursework and the need to marshal significant research hours uncovering records relevant to desegregation. In the fall of 2014, Kempker offered the history course “Women in America” building into the syllabus a classwide collaborative archival research project on desegregation. Students chose archival collections for their focus, with multiple students working on larger collections, and wrote research papers to convert into public presentations on a panel at the end of the semester.

We did not originally intend this collaborative research project to extend past the initial course, but extension became necessary due to both a surprising success and a failure. The project generated significant interest both in class and around campus. Students responded in their evaluations that they greatly enjoyed working on a project they found meaningful. Many, including a few who did not attend the course, also expressed separately a desire to continue working on the project. In addition, several instructors in other disciplines (art, theater, literature) learned about the work and brainstormed projects in their own courses incorporating the research. The project failed, however, to uncover the history of desegregation to our satisfaction.

Thus, planning began to transition the project from a single course to a sequential multicourse. We created a working group of interested faculty and other stakeholders for what we now call the Integration Project, outlined as follows: background research would continue via instructor-directed, archives-supported student effort in history coursework in the spring 2015 semester, culminating in research papers and panel presentations given at public events. Then, the history department would offer an oral history course the following fall to interview individuals identified from previous courses. Oral histories are a common method of documenting the history of diverse, under-documented communities, and repositories housing them widely consider them “a key way of supplementing the record.”¹³ Finally, students in arts and humanities courses would use the body of research to generate works for public consumption in spring 2016 and the subsequent 2016–2017 anniversary year.

This Integration Project differed from other multicourse collaborative projects reported in the literature on the subject in two important ways. First, this project involved collaboration between all of the students in a class section through sequential semesters, rather than between class sections in a single semester, or a single or small group of students through multiple semesters. We hoped that a sequential collaborative research project would allow students to re-create the scholarly discourse they are usually locked out of, especially in the humanities. The Association of College and Research Library’s (ACRL) “Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education” describes scholarly discourse as “communities of scholars, researchers, or professionals engag[ing] in sustained discourse with new insights and discoveries occurring over time as a result of varied perspectives and interpretations.”¹⁴ Students normally experience scholarship only as silent onlookers; their instructor alone reads any scholarship the students conduct in response. This project could re-create scholarly discourse in microcosm, allowing students to refine and dispute the arguments of their predecessors.

Second, the archives was involved in the project from the initial planning through its completion. I surveyed the archives for places likely to contain

relevant records, noting several promising collections. I then was embedded in the courses, hosting multiple class sessions in the archives for research and conducting regular individual and group reference for students. The archives not only served as the laboratory for student research, but afterward became the repository for the students' scholastic output, conveying the scholarly discourse from one semester to the next while supplementing its finding aids and even the collections themselves.

The project continued mostly as planned with a few pleasant surprises. Students tracked social club integration in the yearbook; analyzed correspondence between the president and the head of admissions; pored over student publications; and conducted oral histories with people unearthed in the research. In the summer, the administration funded a group of six interns to scour campus for other possible sources of pertinent records. The research then informed other projects during the final phase as project leadership passed to Dr. Beverly Joyce, professor of art history, including exhibits in both the art gallery and at sites of historical events around campus, a triptych created in a painting course, a readers' theater using the oral histories, a subject guide created by an archives intern, and an anthology of student creative work edited by archives interns. The project also inspired a campuswide celebration of the anniversary in August 2016, during which the university held a ceremony to award the desegregating women the Medal of Excellence, as well as the creation of a permanent Pioneers Plaza to honor these women and others who fought for inclusion at MUW.

Discussion

This sequential multicourse collaborative research project achieved the four goals of implementing high-impact educational practices, re-creating scholarly discourse for undergraduates, supplementing archival holdings, and uncovering the history of desegregation at MSCW. Students engaged in the high-impact practices of writing intensive courses, collaborating on assignments, and participating in community-based learning. Students also successfully created scholarly discourse, consulting and even citing the papers crafted by their predecessors, and, as a result, their topics and projects filled in gaps rather than repeating topics or theses. The archives also greatly enhanced its holdings relating to the university's desegregation. Records created or discovered during the project include twenty-one student research papers citing records elsewhere in the archives; thirteen oral histories with transcripts; a physical exhibit on desegregation; a digital exhibit forty pages deep with images, audio, and video; an anthology of creative work; and publicity and ephemera from the various events and projects created from the research. New finding aid materials

include a subject guide created by a student intern as well as a historical survey by a student researcher.

The project also unearthed a wealth of information about desegregation and integration at MSCW. Among other information, students discovered that not only did three undergraduates, all from the same local high school, desegregate the university, but also three of their teachers enrolled as graduate students at the same time. They found that in 1964–1965, the Admissions Office attempted to prevent potential black applicants from receiving application materials, even going so far as to analyze the grammar and return addresses of letters of interest and sequestering the suspicious ones in a file titled “Letters Considered Wise Not to Answer.” The oral history interviewers heard vivid descriptions of black students’ experiences from 1966 to 1970, including instances of aggression and bullying, and an account of a near-lynching that occurred while several students drove back from a political event in Memphis. They also learned that not only did Peggy Wallace Kennedy, the daughter of Alabama segregationist governor George Wallace, attend MSCW just after desegregation, but she also became close personal friends with one of the students who desegregated the dorms.

The archives reaped other benefits from the project as well. Numerous students used the archives for extended research, multiplying usage statistics several times over. The archives’ recorded visits ballooned from nineteen in fall 2013 before the project to eighty-two in fall 2014, thirty-eight in spring 2015, and seventy-two in fall 2015 before receding back to twenty-three in fall 2016 after the project concluded. The project spurred archival consultation in courses outside of the history department, with which the archives had struggled in the past. It greatly increased the archives’ visibility by associating it with the campuswide effort to commemorate desegregation, building goodwill in communities with whom the archives has had little contact. Faculty also expressed to me their satisfaction with the project’s pedagogical impact, further building the archives’ relationship with them and increasing the likelihood of future partnerships.

These findings show that archivists have much to offer and to gain in supporting sequential multicourse collaborative research projects. Serving as a project’s central repository and conveyor of knowledge between courses accrues real benefits to the archives and can be undertaken cheaply as well. Kathryn Neal notes that structured oral history projects can be used to fill in gaps in the historical record “given adequate staffing and resources”; the experience of MUW shows that even a single archivist reliant on intra-university grant money can adequately support a project of this type.¹⁵

The primary drawbacks in a project of this nature are the time investment required and the reliance on undergraduate labor. Each class required an archival orientation session and one to two weeks of archivist-assisted class

meetings in the archives on top of individual student research visits. Not only did the number of student visits increase as described above, the average visit length increased from one hour and twenty-two minutes to one hour and forty-four minutes. On occasion, students who stumbled into a research dead end had to be redirected quickly, requiring the archival staff to assist in locating useful sources and conducting extensive reference. The students also varied widely in interest and ability, which became especially worrisome during the oral interviews, as it was unlikely that we would get a second interview to supplement a poorly conducted one.¹⁶

In addition, while the Integration Project acquired and discovered for the archives a wealth of records generated and gathered by contemporary students, it has not produced as many records donated from the community as I hoped. The handful of materials from the first integrated social club pale in comparison to the bonanza Ellen Swain describes in her own oral history project, for instance.¹⁷ The differing results could derive from a less trusting relationship between the university and the community or an outreach skill gap, but it is also possible that lack of diversity among student interviewers and project coordinators—the archivist, faculty members, and most of the students were white—impeded our attempts to build sufficient trust in the community.

We plan to replicate this project in the future. The 30th anniversary of coeducation at MUW is approaching in 2022, and students and alumni have expressed unsolicited interest in a project focusing on students, faculty, and alumni with diverse gender and sexual identities. The Integration Project provides a template and a well of goodwill in the campus community on which to build these projects.

Conclusion

The sequential multicourse collaborative research project can be an effective way to further the goals of both instructors and the archives. For instructors, such projects can be used to insert numerous high-impact educational practices into their courses as well as to re-create for their students the experience of participating in a community of scholars. For archivists, students participating in these projects can uncover hidden collections and document underdocumented communities while creating new records and finding aid supplements. While archival and pedagogical studies have explored the various pieces of this project separately—collaborative projects between whole classes within a semester, individual or small-group student projects spanning multiple semesters, and using student-created oral histories to supplement the archival record—exploring a project that spans whole classes across several semesters using the archives as a lab and conduit between classes is new.

The experience of Mississippi University for Women shows that, while labor intensive and not guaranteed to produce a mass of donations from the outside community, such a project can be successful even in a lone arranger archives and can be a major boon to the archives, its partners across the university, and those in the university family who deserve to be fully included in its pantheon of heroes.

NOTES

- ¹ For a thorough history of the Boyer Commission, see Wendy Katkin, "The Boyer Commission Report and Its Impact on Undergraduate Research," *New Directions for Teaching and Learning*, no. 93 (2003): 19–38.
- ² "High-Impact Educational Practices," Association of American Colleges & Universities, June 24, 2014, <https://www.aacu.org/leap/hips>; Cindy A. Kilgo, Jessica K. Ezell Sheets, and Ernest T. Pascarella, "The Link between High-Impact Practices and Student Learning: Some Longitudinal Evidence," *Higher Education* 69, no. 4 (2015): 509–25, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-014-9788-z>. In addition, a sample of case studies of research-based instruction and its positive impacts include Barbara Rockenbach, "Archives, Undergraduates, and Inquiry-Based Learning: Case Studies from Yale University Library," *American Archivist* 74, no. 1 (2011): 297–311; Robert M. Rakoff, "Doing Original Research in an Undergraduate Environmental History Course," *The History Teacher* 37, no. 1 (2003): 29–37, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1555595>; Mollie Godfrey, "Making African American History in the Classroom: The Pedagogy of Processing Undervalued Archives," *Pedagogy* 16, no. 1 (2016): 165–77.
- ³ Shouping Hu et al., eds., "Reinventing Undergraduate Education: Engaging College Students in Research and Creative Activities," *ASHE Higher Education Report* 33, no. 4 (2008): 33–43.
- ⁴ Rockenbach, "Archives, Undergraduates, and Inquiry-Based Learning"; Magia Krause, "Undergraduates in the Archives: Using an Assessment Rubric to Measure Learning," *American Archivist* 73, no. 2 (2010): 507–34; Magia Krause, "'It Makes History Come Alive for Them': The Role of Archivists and Special Collections Librarians in Instructing Undergraduates," *Journal of Academic Librarianship* 36, no. 5 (2010): 401–11; Matthew Cook, "Build It and They Will Come: Integrating Unique Collections and Undergraduate Research," *Collection Building* 34, no. 4 (2015): 128–33.
- ⁵ Robert P. Stephens, Kathleen W. Jones, and Mark V. Barrow, "The Book Project: Engaging History Majors in Undergraduate Research," *The History Teacher* 45, no. 1 (2011): 77. Also compare John Wertheimer, "The Collaborative Research Seminar," *The Journal of American History* 88, no. 4 (2002): 1476–81, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2700614>; Lesley Willcoxson et al., "Enhancing the Research-Teaching Nexus: Building Teaching-Based Research from Research-Based Teaching," *International Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education* 23, no. 1 (2011): 1–10.
- ⁶ Christopher R. Corley, "From Mentoring to Collaborating: Fostering Undergraduate Research in History," *The History Teacher* 46, no. 3 (2013): 406.
- ⁷ Matthew C. Tuthill and John M. Berestecky, "Integrating Undergraduate Research at Two-Year Colleges," *Journal of College Science Teaching* 46, no. 4 (2017): 12–17.
- ⁸ Peter Scott Brown and Jace Hargis, "Undergraduate Research in Art History Using Project Based Learning," *Journal of Faculty Development* 22, no. 2 (2008): 152.
- ⁹ Willcoxson et al., "Enhancing the Research-Teaching Nexus," 1–10.
- ¹⁰ For the purposes of this article, I distinguish the term "desegregation," as the moment black students were allowed to enroll in classes, which occurred definitively in the fall of 1966, from "integration," the feeling of full ownership of and incorporation into the life of the university, which is ongoing, intergenerational work.
- ¹¹ Bridget Smith Pieschel and Stephen Robert Pieschel, *Loyal Daughters: One Hundred Years at Mississippi University for Women 1884–1984* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1984), 135–36.

- ¹² Even forty years later, the most compelling diagnoses of this problem remain F. Gerald Ham, "The Archival Edge," *American Archivist* 38, no. 1 (1975): 5–13; and Howard Zinn, "Secrecy, Archives, and the Public Interest," *Midwestern Archivist* 2, no. 2 (1977): 20–21.
- ¹³ Jessica Wagner Webster, "'Filling the Gaps': Oral Histories and Underdocumented Populations in *American Archivist*, 1938–2011," *American Archivist* 79, no. 2 (2016): 254–82. Also compare Ellen D. Swain, "Remembering Alma Mater: Oral History and the Documentation of Student Culture," in *College and University Archives: Readings in Theory and Practice*, ed. Christopher J. Prom and Ellen D. Swain (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2008), 71–96; Helen Willa Samuels, *Varsity Letters: Documenting Modern Colleges and Universities* (Metuchen, NJ: Society of American Archivists and Scarecrow Press, 1992), 9; William J. Maher, *The Management of College and University Archives* (Metuchen, NJ: Society of American Archivists, 1992), 331–38.
- ¹⁴ Association of College and Research Libraries, "Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education," January 11, 2016, <http://www.ala.org/acrl/standards/ilframework>.
- ¹⁵ Kathryn M. Neal, "Giving It More than the Old College Try: Documenting Diverse Populations in College and University Archives," in *College and University Archives: Readings in Theory and Practice*, 110.
- ¹⁶ See also Donald A. Ritchie, *Doing Oral History: A Practical Guide*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University, 2003), 9.
- ¹⁷ Swain, "Remembering Alma Mater: Oral History and the Documentation of Student Culture," 83.

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