

University of Maryland Library Award for Undergraduate Research

Essay

I authored my research paper, “Fractured Beyond Repair: Organized Labor and The Civil Rights Movement’s Divergent Approaches to the Revised Philadelphia Plan,” in Professor Robyn Muncy’s Fall 2013 history department capstone course. Professor Muncy’s section of HIST 408 required students to craft an original piece of historical scholarship, rooted in primary source research, which examined an aspect of “Politics, Protest and Social Movements in the 20th Century United States.”

In selecting my research question, I examined several pieces of secondary literature that analyzed the Johnson and Nixon presidencies—a period of twentieth century American history I find particularly interesting. Throughout my reading, I discovered a common theme: the fracturing of the Democratic coalition that had undergirded Democratic Party power for much of the twentieth century. Many scholars attributed this splintering to Nixon’s shrewd political maneuvering and to changing attitudes toward awarding African Americans basic civil rights. Yet, I could hardly fathom how the civil rights and labor movements—together the backbone of the Democratic coalition—could let such a mutually beneficial alliance wither away.

Careful examination of secondary literature and advice from Professor Muncy led me to focus my research on President Nixon’s Philadelphia Plan. I decided to examine the disintegration of the civil rights- labor alliance through the prism of President Nixon’s effort to increase minority hiring in Philadelphia-area unions. Many scholars had examined Nixon’s motivations for proposing a plan he thought would further divide labor and civil rights groups, but none had explained why labor and civil rights leaders opposed and supported the plan, respectively. I wanted to figure out why these two groups took opposing positions to Nixon’s plan, especially if they knew that doing so would harm the integrity of, or even destroy, the coalition that had provided both groups with mutually beneficial political clout.

After confirming my topic, I needed to identify a body of primary sources to examine. Professor Muncy told me that the University of Maryland was soon to acquire the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO) archives. She thought this collection might contain information I needed to answer my research question. So, I reached out to Lauren Brown, and other Hornbake Library staff to inquire about the details of the collection. They informed me that while documents would be available to researchers in early October, finding aids detailing box contents would be minimal, and therefore significant effort would be required to find documents that pertained to my research topic. Despite this obstacle, I moved forward with my topic, and established a weekly research schedule.

Upon arriving in Hornbake Library’s Maryland Room for my first session in the archives, I was given a large binder with short descriptions of the boxes stored in a significant part of the AFL-CIO collection. I selected boxes I believed would contain relevant letters, correspondence, publications, and memoranda by attempting to identify key words, such as “civil rights,” “labor,” and “Philadelphia,” that were included the short box descriptions. Once I selected several boxes, I was given another binder that described the contents of the numerous folders housed in each box. These descriptions were even shorter than the box descriptions, and again I looked for key words to help me identify which folders I should comb through. The process of acquiring relevant boxes and folders was exhausting, both because of the limited number of finding aids, and because some boxes I wished to examine were not yet open to the public. Admittedly, I grew increasingly frustrated, but Lauren Brown served as my liaison to AFL-CIO officials, and

worked diligently to ensure that I was able to examine most of the boxes I believed would be relevant to my research.

When I was finally able to examine the contents of the boxes and folders I requested, I was faced with another daunting task: identifying which documents contained information relevant to my research. I read through each document in the pertinent folders and decided whether it warranted a citation and a section of notes in my research journal. Occasionally I was able to discard a document if its title was irrelevant to my project. However, typically I had to carefully examine each document and decide whether it would help me craft my narrative. I chose to record quotations and notes from documents that contained the most revealing insights into the thinking and strategic calculations of labor and civil rights leaders.

Having the opportunity to examine a portion of the AFL-CIO archives was an immensely rewarding experience that helped illuminate the importance of patience and close analysis in academic research. Archival research requires examining a wide array of documents, many of which will not contain information relevant to one's research interests. Regardless of the strategy a researcher uses to isolate a specific body of sources, many documents one examines will ultimately not play a significant role in formulating the answer to a research question. However, I learned that despite the constant frustrations of archival research, the reward of making an original contribution to a body of knowledge is deeply gratifying.

Throughout the research process, I was continuously grateful to the members of the Hornbake staff that helped me identify relevant documents, and worked on my behalf to ensure that the boxes I wished to examine were quickly processed and made available. Given the circumstances of my project—because the library had only recently acquired the AFL-CIO archives—I could not have asked for more efficient and effective help from the entire Hornbake staff. If I choose to further explore these archives, detailed finding aids would help me isolate relevant portions of the extensive AFL-CIO collection. Even more helpful would be an online version of the binders and box descriptions that I examined in print. Yet, despite the circumstances, my research experience was immeasurably rewarding and informative, and I am deeply indebted to my mentor, Professor Muncy, and to the hard work of the entire Hornbake Library staff.