

Library Award Essay

As an Environmental Science & Policy major, undergraduates are required to obtain an internship experience. To gain credit, we were tasked to write an academic research paper on a subject relevant to our concentration and internship. I am in the Environment & Agriculture concentration and I was a garden intern for the Washington Youth Garden. Combined, my interests and experiences helped guide my research topic.

Before I began my internship, I proposed a potential topic for the term paper. I used the internet and WorldCat UMD to search up interesting topics. I began with broad subjects such as sustainability, organic farming, and agriculture. From there, I used WorldCat UMD to find journal articles using key words such as sustainable agriculture, foodshed, local food, urban agriculture, etc. I ended up basing my proposed research topic on three journal articles. These included a paper on affordable policies for urban governments to encourage sustainability and justice at the local level, one on the practices involved in the sustainable intensification of agriculture, and another on a framework for how Buffalo, NY could expand local food. Thus, I decided to focus my research on the need for sustainable agriculture at the local level, examples of local food production, and how government and nonprofits can encourage a sustainable foodshed.

During this process, I updated my professor on my progress and asked about the expectations and guidelines. However, I did not seek explicit assistance on the paper itself. Nonetheless, I had the opportunity to learn from librarians in the past. In previous courses, Alex Carroll provided great advice on how to take advantage of the library's resources. He taught us Boolean search methods, and whittling down search results with specificity, which included filtering for peer-reviewed journal articles and specific years. He also introduced me to Zotero, a citation management software, which has been incredibly useful. It helps me organize my sources and create bibliographies.

During my research, I collected vast amount of sources. To select among them, I used criteria that focused on relevance and credibility. Selection began by ensuring journal articles were peer-reviewed, which indicates credibility. Then I determined if the source aligned with the research goals. If the source is interesting, but irrelevant I chose not to use it. After examining the abstract, I searched for the bibliography and looked up the sources used. I would examine those sources as well, and check if they were cited in other papers. My reasoning was that if a source was used many times, it is likely to be more credible and must contain useful information. As a result, many of my sources are interconnected.

I also used sources other than peer-reviewed journal articles. For instance, I cited information from the WCED and ICLEI. These are well known international organizations, and they offered primary sources that supported my arguments. Further, I included mixed media sources such as a documentary and book. These sources were not critical in making an academic argument, but added to the context of the paper.

Throughout this research experience, I learned many lessons. After compiling over 70 potential sources, I realized I needed a methodology for reading and analyzing. There were too many papers to read, and I was overwhelmed. I began losing track of which information belonged to which source. Thus, I decided to only read those that were relevant or useful, based on abstracts and summaries. Then, I saved the sources, and systematically took notes as I read each paper, while carefully referencing the notes back to its source. As I read the papers, I immediately made annotated bibliographies. Ultimately, I used 24 of those sources. Through this process, I developed a strategy I can implement on future academic and professional assignments.

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Further, I realized that writing a paper is more than synthesizing information, it is about incorporating new ideas. Some of these ideas can even come from other fields of study. They can inspire your thinking and writing; it is also useful for approaching questions through a different lens. Overall, I am developing the proper mindset and methodology for approaching research. I know being organized, methodological, and open-minded will be critical in my future career. The lessons learned and skills honed in writing this paper will definitely be applied in future jobs where I have to conduct research and communicate findings.

However, if I could redo the paper, I would conduct more thorough research before determining the research topic. While I conducted some research prior to submitting a proposal, I already had an idea of what I wanted to write. It was simply the matter of finding the evidence. Instead, I would still develop a general idea, but be more willing to adapt as I acquired new information. After all, new information may challenge one's assumptions and ideas. I realized I was reluctant to change the direction of the paper. I felt I had already put in so much work that changing the direction would be detrimental. In the future, I would let the research topic develop more organically.

Ultimately, I could not have written a compelling paper without the resources and support the campus library provides. Having access to catalogs and databases is critical, and I am truly appreciative of it. Further, the librarians are always friendly and willing to offer advice. However, I believe the library can be further enhanced. We live in a digital age, and I think the library should make its presence known on Facebook and Twitter. These platforms can facilitate communication between students and librarians. People can ask questions, and librarians can offer tips-of-the-day. Perhaps there can be mini-contests and activities to get people to use the library more and develop good research habits. Also, having a blog where anyone can share advice and provide general resources would be beneficial. Hopefully this online presence can get students to maximize the resources offered by the library.