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Essay

I was granted the opportunity to pursue my first in depth research paper in my History 208 class, a required course for all history undergraduates. History 208 is a class that essentially guides you through the process of writing a large research paper, step-by-step. As a first-semester sophomore, I was overwhelmed by the idea of a fifteen page paper on any topic; how would I choose from the multitude of interests and ideas I had regarding the classes topic, History 208L: Historical Research and Methods Seminar: Public Memory, Commemoration, and Interpretation in the United States. Thankfully, the course was designed with step-by-step assignments that allowed me to hone in on my interests and narrow my paper topic to a specific memorial, in this case, that of Martin Luther King Jr. Our first assignment was a Research Proposal where we listed three possible topics for our final paper. After conferencing with my instructor, I discovered my topics were extremely broad and would never fit into fifteen pages. I have always been infatuated by the Civil Rights Movement and find so many aspects of it fascinating. My instructor worked with me to narrow the topic down, from the movement to the leaders to Martin Luther King Jr. and finally to settle on his newly erected memorial on the National Mall. I had visited this site many times before and thought the memorial was an awe-inspiring physical representation of the peaceful side of the Civil Rights Movement, which led me to my thesis; that modern America chose to commemorate the Movement, not for the violence and hatred, but through the leader noted for peaceful demonstrations and remembered as the beacon of hope from the Civil Rights era.

The Maryland Library System was the only resource center I used. At first the seven floors of McKeldin overwhelmed me; how would I ever narrow down the books and articles I needed? Thankfully, the structure of History 208 offered assistance. One class period was designated to a library session where the class was taught how to utilize Maryland's library system. This included detailed examples of how to use the interlibrary loan system, the resource data bank and how to find hardcopies in the labyrinth that is McKeldin Library. I made use of McKeldin mostly, while

also experimenting with the interlibrary loan system to obtain a much-needed and helpful source. The Maryland library website also allowed me to discover the newspaper database Lexis Nexis, where I searched year's worth of newspapers from across the world and collected the bulk of my resources. After discovering nearly one hundred sources for my paper, I decided to alphabetize every printed article into a research binder and color code the pages depending on which part of my paper it would be needed for. I dedicated a corner of my bedroom to my research; with a stack of nearly thirty books on the life, philosophy and work of Martin Luther King and research binder brimming with highlighted and post-it noted articles that would somehow become my twenty-page research paper. This brought on my next task, getting my paper started.

My instructor, Allison Finkelstein, was my greatest ally in this process. Yes, it was her job to instruct us on the methodology of the course, but she went above and beyond to ensure I was on the right track, constantly checking my sources and reading various drafts of different parts of my paper to ensure I had integrated my multitude of sources to their full effectiveness. The course benefitted me once again as it gave me deadlines to finish certain portions of my paper; a thesis statement, then an intro, then a first draft all due at different times made the process much more manageable and made me more confident in my time management skills to tackle this large paper. This aid greatly benefited my writing process and enhanced my overall work.

I sifted through many a newspaper article and selected the ones I thought had the most pertinent information regarding the building process and reasoning behind the erection of the memorial. Once I skimmed my sources, I recognized many recurring themes and color-coded them accordingly so I could implement their information into the corresponding part of my paper. The skills I acquired in research methodology will be powerful assets in my future as a student of history and in my professional career. The tools available through the Maryland library system made a seemingly impossible task, a twenty-page research paper, manageable and provided me with both a great accomplishment and useful writing sample for the future.

A reoccurring theme amongst my 208 peers and I was the concepts of starting earlier and spending more time on our projects. I would have loved to devote the entire fall semester to

my research, however, with other classes and commitments there were moments I could not spend on my project and for that, there were probably parts of my paper that suffered. Therefore, I would change when I was working on this and would prefer to write this paper when I had more time to fully commit to the process. While the library was an amazing asset for my research, I could have benefited from more hands on training with the library staff. Approaching a librarian alone seems a bit intimidating, perhaps if there were scheduled group meetings where research students could be paired with a library mentor who could answer any and all questions regarding library resources and could offer alternative methods to the students. Essentially, more time and more opportunities would have only enhanced my research paper.