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Library Award for Undergraduate Research

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Reflective Essay on the Writing Process and Use of Library Resources for my Paper on the Antikythera Mechanism - Written Fall Semester 2015

Once capable of tracking the solar, lunar, planetary, and constellational orbits (among other functions), and considered to be the world's first computer, the Antikythera Mechanism is a most fascinating, complex, and mysterious device, one that has still not been fully understood even a century after its discovery. It is not often that I am able to write on such a fascinating topic, and as such, I am grateful for having taken Professor Dennis Sullivan's seminar class, HONR 238L: Engineering in Ancient Empires during my Fall semester of 2015. The class covered detailed investigations of engineering technology from ancient Greek, Roman, and Byzantine civilizations, and included a broad array of topics that included infrastructure such as buildings, roads, bridges, and aqueducts. We also examined carts, wagons, ships, and other transportation devices, in addition to civilian technology, military artillery weapons and fortifications, and other wonders of the ancient world. During the semester, we researched a handful of topics in particular depth, while ultimately attempting to understand how these devices fit into the world around them at the time of their existence. The final research paper was a culmination of the research methods we had learned in class, and was supposed to be a comprehensive examination of both ancient and modern scholarly sources on a subject that we had studied in class, with the goal of becoming an expert on that one particular device. Once we had the class where we talked about the Antikythera Mechanism, I immediately knew that I wanted to write my final paper on this device, and I approached Professor Sullivan for guidance.

While thinking about how to approach the process of writing a paper such a topic, I used the sources which Dr. Sullivan had provided as a starting basis for my research. I knew, however, that with such an enigmatic device, it was essential that I look further into the research that had been conducted in order to fully understand the inner workings and potential purpose of such a complex device. Looking for sources for a research paper, I naturally started at the library. Being a student at the University of Maryland means that I was able to access numerous professional publications and academic journals through the online library subscriptions in order to complete my research in a more complete and informed manner. Maryland's ResearchPort was therefore a very valuable resource, and I found it easy to utilize these websites for gathering and evaluating scholarly sources and references for my paper. In conducting these searches, I mainly focused on papers that examined the technical aspects of the Antikythera Mechanism, especially those that attempted to decipher the complex configuration of over thirty dials that contributed to the precise inner workings of the device. During my research, I was able to find the most up-to-date information on the progress that has been made in studying the Antikythera mechanism using modern imaging technology, and these provided a current perspective to my paper on an ancient device. Conducting my academic research was therefore greatly facilitated by having access to these online services and database subscriptions, and they are greatly appreciated.

In addition to the academic side of research, there is also the logistical side of writing a paper. The way in which most papers are written has changed over the past several years, and as such, it is fantastic that the library has stayed ahead of the technological curve by offering so much support for the digital devices with which we now create most of our academic work. The library services at the University of Maryland have enabled me to efficiently complete my work by taking full advantage of the array of devices and supporting software offered through the library system, including during instances when I would have been unable to finish assignments due to technological issues. From the hardware and software to the staff and technicians, the technology and the technological support available at the library greatly enables productivity in the age of digital learning.

Though I have no real complaints about the library's technological support or the assistance offered by library personnel, it would be helpful if the printing process were updated to be a bit more user-friendly. I understand the cost and environmental impact associated with printing, but as someone who works better with a physical copy of readings and assignments, it would be helpful to not have to absorb the cost of every page I print at the library, barring purchase of a printer and ink for my own room. Instead, perhaps the library could place a printing threshold for each student, and progress towards that mark can be tracked over a semester through one's student account that is used to print resources at the printing stations around campus. This would facilitate printing while managing the volume covered by the university. Other than this, conducting my research at the library was a pleasant experience greatly aided by the technological services and supportive library staff.