

Reflective Essay- Library Award for Undergraduate Research

In December of 2015, after formally being accepted into the Government and Politics Honors Program, I began the task of formulating an honors thesis topic. When approaching such a long and time consuming project, it was important to me that I write on an idea that I found to be not only interesting but also applicable to today's society. I had taken a course that semester taught by my thesis advisor, Frances Lee, in which we read John Lewis' civil rights memoir, *Walking with the Wind*. After reading it and already having a previous interest, I decided to address the complex situation of civil rights in America. After a couple of months of defining and narrowing this issue, I produced a question that I sought to answer: has the civil rights movement been successful? In the next year, I would complete months of research and writing that resulted into a 115-page senior honors thesis.

Within this paper, I analyzed whether or not the civil rights movement, a culmination of activities and demonstrations that produced the 1964 Civil Rights Act, 1965 Voting Rights Act, 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act, and 1968 Fair Housing Act, was successful in creating change in the economic conditions of African Americans, voting rights of blacks, and desegregation of America. I utilized primary sources such as speeches and interviews from prominent civil rights leaders in order to establish that these three issues were the goals of the movement. I then created bivariate analyses from sources such as the United States Statistical Abstract and the United States Census in order to evaluate whether in the immediate aftermath of the civil rights acts, the years after, and today, had the movement been successful in creating improvements in wages, income, poverty, and unemployment of African Americans, voting

rights and political representation for African Americans, and the desegregation of schools, housing, and public places.

My sources, as previously mentioned, were primarily online sources. I knew that my data would for the most part come from the United States Census because of the time period in which I had to begin was in the 1940s. Therefore, finding data from that far back would require an official log of American statistics. During the spring of 2016 I began my research. I collected data on the three areas I wanted to address and began formulating them into graphs and tables. I used these graphs and tables in order to highlight how the various civil rights acts impacted these issues over certain periods of time. I was strict in only using professional and primary sources for my more descriptive information and for my data I wanted to mainly use official census data. When using these sources, I sought great assistance from my thesis advisor. She provided me with a vast amount of information on how to organize them, how to cite them, and how to use them most effectively in order to truly show the information that I wanted to highlight. My research process became much simpler from her help, as well as the help from my defense committee, Professor John McCauley and Professor Kris Miler. It was a fluid process that would take different directions each and everyday as a result of different ideas I developed along the way. I really had to scrutinize my sources and limit how many I would use. Within my paper, I used upwards of 30 graphs and tables, while I had far more in my arsenal to use. I had the task of deciding which ones were most relevant to my argument and which ones would not truly get my point across.

The entire process of writing and researching this project was one of commitment and patience. The hardest part was not writing the paper, but was organizing my research and devising a way in which I would present it. With the vast amount of information I collected and

with the broad topic I chose, deciding where I would place what graph and how I would describe it, or deciding when I would bring in a certain quote or piece of information, was the hardest part. Such a process that I completed has provided me with experience that I will be able to utilize in my future academic or professional career. I now know what it takes to complete such a long project. Looking back on my research experience, I would try to use more text-based resources. I would use the library more often because of the historical books it has and the time it dates back to. I would use more primary source information directly from the time period I would be researching. But in the end, I found that writing this thesis was a gratifying experience. I produced a piece of work that I take pride in. I worked for an entire year on one project, developing my writing skills and research knowledge in order to complete this project. While scary at first, writing this thesis was well worth my time. I hope that others will enjoy reading it and build upon it in order to get a better understanding of why race relations in America are still tense.