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Library Award for Undergraduate Research

Reflective Essay

My essay, titled “Building a Safer Cycling Community: The Baltimore/Washington Bicycle and Pedestrian Path,” was written in response to an assignment in my Fall 2013 ENGL393 (Technical Writing) class. We were told to write about sustainability, but not only as it relates to the environment. We were also free to write about the preservation of a culture or restoration of equity in some aspect of daily life. When we had chosen a topic, we were to write a research plan of how to accomplish our goals for achieving new sustainability levels in that field. Even with so broad a topic, I luckily had an idea in mind. I had just returned from a cross-country cycling trip with the 4K for Cancer, a program to benefit the Ulman Cancer Fund for Young Adults. During my 4000-mile journey, I experienced many problems that commuting cyclists have to deal with every day: unpaved roads, potholes, and angry drivers. Cycling is an incredibly sustainable mode of transportation, but is largely underutilized because of the dangers associated with sharing the road with larger and faster vehicles. A good solution to cycling dangers is to move cyclists to a safe off-road path, so I started to look into the intricacies of building a path like this from Baltimore to Washington, D.C. – the two cities closest to College Park. I knew that this would be a good area to write about given my experience, but I was concerned that there would not be a lot of research available.

Fortunately, I had the help of my professor, Mrs. Amanda Olson from the English Department at the University of Maryland, College Park and one of the campus librarians, Ms. Robin Dasler. Mrs. Olson helped me and the rest of my classmates to focus our thesis statements and to figure out what type of research we would need to strongly support our arguments. My draft thesis statements highlighted my main idea, but Mrs. Olson helped me to also introduce other elements, such as a solution and recommendation. We also went to an informational session held in McKeldin Library by librarian Robin Dasler. Ms. Dasler gave us helpful hints of what type of research to look for as well as introduced us to ResearchPort, especially the more helpful catalogs for sustainability research. I found most of my sources from the catalog GREENR (Global Reference on the Environment, Energy, and Natural Resources). I was delighted to see that I was not the only one interested in cycling as a more sustainable way to

travel and found many articles discussing cycling in cities, the dangers of cycling, and the health benefits of this more sustainable mode of travel. I had not thought about using GREENR in particular, but Ms. Dasler's advice led me to my most valuable source of references. Once I was introduced to GREENR, I still had hundreds of articles to sift through. Cycling was more popular than I had thought, especially overseas. Because I had worked to narrow the focus of my research, I only chose articles that specifically supported paragraphs I had planned in my outline. I used the provided abstracts to get an idea of the journal articles' main topics. Using the information in such journals as *Urban Studies* and the *American Journal of Epidemiology* and other news articles, I was able to show that my plan for sustainable cycling was possible.

Using Researchport extensively, reading abstracts critically to find which articles were most helpful to my paper, and refining my research essay in multiple drafts as I did for this assignment will be very helpful to me in my future career. I have recently accepted an offer to a PhD program in Human Genetics, where I will be a part of many journal clubs and will have to write many other research papers. Though the topic of this essay was not directly related to my field, the skills that I learned through this assignment are invaluable. Sifting through a lot of data and a lot of related research will be very important for finding relevant support for any grants that I might write to support my research and especially for my doctoral thesis. Notably, I wrote a plan of action based on information I acquired from GREENR sources; I saw good things in other cycling paths and applied them to my own plan. This type of information usage will be particularly useful to me, as I plan my own experiments based on the proven methods in scientific literature. My future as a geneticist will be strengthened by my ability to present my research to wide audiences and scientific journals, an ability that I practiced in this essay.

Though I found my research experience an easy one because of Researchport, I think that the library would benefit from hosting more informational sessions like that one I attended with Ms. Dasler. I would not have reached out for this information if I hadn't been taken there for class, but it helped me immensely in writing my essay. While most students know that the librarians are available and want to help, most also do not know the best way to contact them or what types of questions to ask. Informational sessions, especially if affiliated with a class project or research paper, would help more students to utilize the library's resources. Judging my personal experience, the personal guidance of a librarian and the help of an experienced professor can push a research paper to new heights.