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Library Award for Undergraduate Research Essay

When I heard my Scholarly Writing in the Humanities professor utter the words “semester-long research project” last August, I was just about terrified. While I had mastered the art of combing through JSTOR and MLA International Bibliography for literary criticism, I knew practically nothing about gathering vetted scholarly research. For way too long, I’d furiously Google search in McKeldin, only remotely aware of the people and technology available at my fingertips to buttress my research with nuance and variety. Still, ENGL398L’s opportunity to pursue any topic in the humanities was an alluring reprieve from literary analysis.

With updates about my semester, I called my mom, an Information Specialist for Howard County libraries, recapping about the course and my hesitation to veer off the English track for my assignment. She laughed, telling me about how she stumbled across research about whether dogs and their owners look similar. “Practically any concept can be research, Sarah. Get out of the same-old literary stuff and do something interesting.” With this encouragement, I decided to dive out of my comfort zone and pursue a project in women’s studies, a field in which I’ve never taken a class. Ultimately, my final project was grounded in three ironies: it was inspired by literature, it involved sex (a subject I didn’t associate with scholarship), and it went in a completely different direction than I intended.

After hours of tirelessly combing through the women’s studies database finder to review sample journal articles, I took a break to study for English class by streaming a version of William Wycherley’s *The Country Wife* from Hornbake’s video collections.

When I started the video, I expected a lofty and inaccessible 17th century production. I was shocked to see that the characters were even more scandalous than my peers in college: they were having extramarital affairs and chugging alcohol recklessly. I smirked, wondering why the “kids these days” notion even existed, asking myself if millennials were really as sexually liberated and morally depraved as older generations assumed.

This question fuelled the “elevator pitch” I posed to my professor that voiced my desire to “explore notions of sexual moral decline.” After turning the pitch in, I was immediately plagued with doubt. Confident that discussing sex was part of pop-culture not scholarship, I feared that my professor would find my moral-decline theory too subjective and downright incorrect. Thankfully, the “too broad” comment Professor Forrester wrote on my proposal was not a rejection; instead, his feedback was the beginning of a mentor relationship. Like my mother, Professor Forrester encouraged me to explore new disciplines, even if they involved taboo material and pop-culture (which I learned can be valuable research). To narrow my scope, I focused on “hookup culture:” the alleged casual-sex atmosphere on college campuses I was fervently warned about by parents and peers. My guiding question was: *is hookup culture as detrimental as it seems?*

Inspired by Professor Forrester’s support, I decided to enter the research process with an open-mind, avoiding the temptation to selectively filter my sources based on what best suited my hypothesis. For primary sources, I used contemporary media examples of hookup culture (e.g. songs, movies, and television), as well as opinions and observations from millennials (e.g. blogs, social media campaigns, and videos). Because these sources are inherently subjective, I evaluated their meaning by

situating them in a context of conflicting opinions and perspectives. Rather than just relying on feminist blogs, for example, I surveyed Christian websites and college-themed Instagram pages.

Regarding secondary sources, I analyzed peer-reviewed journals and published books. To fact check these sources and their methodology, I tracked information by reviewing the sources in the bibliography as well. As if I was looking at a scatterplot, I searched for consensus and patterns while also accounting for counterarguments and outliers. My research was relentless and unending: it did not represent the pre-writing stage; it continually fuelled and challenged my writing process. While I utilized sources that comprehensively embodied information I saw repeatedly, I also engaged in conversation with research that was unique, incomplete, or anomalous.

Throughout the semester, three pivotal research discoveries informed my final product. Initially, I was tangled in primary sources questioning the ethics of casual sex. When I learned in Elizabeth Armstrong's "Is Hooking Up Bad for Young Women?" that college students don't hookup nearly as often as the media exaggerates, I was shocked and eager to investigate *why* even young people believe and debate this phenomenon. Professor Forrester guided me to look at parallel incidents, such as the AIDS epidemic, which inspired me to label hookup culture as a moral panic: a groundbreaking shift from my more decline hypothesis. After being led to Ambivalent Sexism Theory from an undergraduate research journal, I was equipped with an answer to my research question and a new understanding of how sexism operates in everyday life. Finally, I felt as though my journal article emulated the scholarship I modeled: it was uniquely mine, it bolstered--rather than regurgitated--other research, and it encouraged social change.

Because this research journey fundamentally altered my view of gender dynamics, it is by far one of the best academic experiences I have ever had. Perhaps my biggest regret is that I viewed my research as having an end point. I know now that no research is ever truly finished: learning is limitless and all around me, even beyond the books and databases. In fact, relying on deadlines or fixed theses is detrimental to the exploratory and curiosity-driven nature of scholarship. I know for future academic endeavors, I will leave myself the time and space to be directed by research and receptive to sources from conventional and unconventional places, even if they cause me to delete pages of work, rewrite my thesis, or qualify my argument.

Without the academic support at University of Maryland, I would not have been able to learn as freely and enthusiastically as I have. Because I was particularly compelled by undergraduate journals and submissions, I hope that the library website showcases and celebrates undergraduate work/journals on the homepage in addition to the DRUM database. I also believe that the libraries should feature student generated interdisciplinary research on blogs and social media, in order to enhance the accessibility of the works. Connecting my research to a cohort of young scholars has been an inspiring and relevant motivator in the same way that the library has been an indispensable tool.

Thank you for your kind consideration!