

Revealing a Narrative Through Research: Reflective Essay

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After three semesters of pondering what mark I wanted to leave on the Honors Humanities program with my Keystone Project, I was motivated to educate myself and others about the struggles of newly arrived immigrants in the United States to foster a greater understanding of this “other” community growing in Maryland.

As a permanent resident of Germantown, I marveled at the large Latino community in Gaithersburg whenever I visited. Walking through the main street in town, one might realize that two cultures exist — the pre-independence architecture and infrastructure of a small agricultural town was being lived in by immigrants who started making their journey to the country in the 70s. In old town shops labeled *Cafe*, *Antiques*, *Diamond Drugs*, *Barber Shop*, etc. loud Reggaeton music played while Spanish-speaking customers conversed about the community soccer games, a Salvadoran cousin’s christening at the local catholic church, or picking up *dulces* from the nearby Guatemalan bakery. While I observed a thriving community on the surface, my awe generated curiosity to devise a research question: How have the lives of 1.5 Generation Latino youths in Gaithersburg, MD been impacted by their immigration journeys from their country of origin to the United States, especially during the peak development years of their adolescence?

I contacted every museum in Gaithersburg and spoke with local historians. There is no historical information presented later than 1970, and there is no concrete record of Latino immigration to the city. After reassuring town librarians that I would share my findings for Gaithersburg’s historical records, I realized that my research project had a mission: a missing story needed to be told about the newer, Central American, residents of this town.

Once I decided on my project topic and mission, I asked Dr. Getrich where to start. Dr. Christina Getrich taught my Immigration Policies, Immigrant Lives (ANTH 264) course and is a

sociocultural anthropologist whose research examines the health, well-being, and incorporation of mixed-immigration status families in the U.S. Dr. Getrich's mentorship prevented me from becoming hyper focused on numerical data — whether the number of community leaders I researched, high school students that participated in my focus group, or survey respondents was enough. Instead, she advised me to focus on qualitative rather than quantitative quality in my writing because my goal was to describe the complexities of community members' lives, not simply count the number of Latino youths. If it were not for our meetings, my research essay would not have the academic storytelling elements to it that most anthropological articles have, such as quoting individual interviewees on their experiences, revealing community conversations to expose opposing perspectives, chronicling Gaithersburg's immigration growth, providing original photographs for visual representation of the community, and drawing future policy suggestions from my findings. Dr. Getrich reminded me of my mission, to tell an untold story, not through numbers, but through narrative.

In relation to my paper's sources, the Honors Humanities program prepared me to do long-term research projects by analyzing a variety of readings to write a concise paper. Each semester, research guides, such as Honors Humanities librarian, Jordan Sly, gave a presentation walking students through the research process. For example, when I wanted to find a journal article about how immigration experiences affect the lives of youth when transitioning from adolescence to adulthood, I knew to use the WorldCat UMD database's advanced search option and search for "youth", "adulthood", and "transition to" in the "title" search index, search for "immigrant" in the key word search index, set the publication year between 2010 and 2021 to ensure the immigrant youth were my age, and set the format to articles only. The first source that appeared was a scholarly journal article written in 2011, by Roberto Gonzales, titled "Learning

to be Illegal: Undocumented Youth and Shifting Legal Contexts in the Transition to Adulthood”. Since WorldCat labeled the source as peer-reviewed and included each term I requested in the title or abstract, I selected it and ended up citing it three times in my paper.

While they exposed students to the plethora of sources available to us through the school, the research guides also encouraged us to create primary sources of data. I first struggled with finding community leaders in Gaithersburg whose work focused on 1.5 Generation Latinos, unfamiliar with reaching out for informational interviews, especially during a peak of the Covid-19 pandemic. Dr. Sarah Humud, the Associate Director of Honors Humanities taught me that the squeaky wheel gets the oil, motivating me to craft a multitude of cold emails and follow up within five days of the email being sent if left unanswered. Soon, I had Zoom interviews scheduled every week with nonprofit coordinators, community religious figures, and afterschool program officers in Gaithersburg high schools. I ultimately learned that my ability to portray my passion for a project persistently will help me establish relationships with others who could advance my goals. For example, my research experience motivated me to create an advocacy/awareness club for Latina immigrants and partner with multiple Latinx organizations financially and promotionally simply by reaching out through cold emails.

Reflecting back on my research experience, I would have used the statistical consulting services available to me through the library, especially in survey design, data cleaning, and analysis. I believe this is a program that can be utilized for the end of a research project that few students are as familiar with as programs created for starting their research. Just like research guides give presentations to classes about source selection, students will benefit from in-class workshops on data collection, design, and analysis. I emphasize the ability for these workshops

to take place in the classroom, rather than offered as library consultations, because they will reach more students and require their engagement.

In conclusion, the Honors Humanities program, experienced professors, and library research guides helped me transform my general interest in my community into a tangible research article that advises U.S. immigration policymakers and finally tells the story of Latino immigration in Gaithersburg.