

***Engaging History Majors in Intensive Archival Research: Assessing Scaffolded Curricula for Teaching Undergraduates Primary Source Literacy Skills***

By Claire Strom and Rachel Walton. Society of American Archivists, Case Studies on Teaching with Primary Sources, 2020. Case No. 16.

[https://www2.archivists.org/sites/all/files/TWPSCase\\_16\\_Engaging\\_History\\_Majors.pdf](https://www2.archivists.org/sites/all/files/TWPSCase_16_Engaging_History_Majors.pdf)

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The use of primary sources is a historian’s “bread and butter,” and it is often an archivist or special collections librarian who serves as the steward of this type of source material. In history education and “[w]hen used creatively, primary sources can personalize the learning process, helping students to understand their own history and connect to larger issues,” writes Susan Veccia.<sup>1</sup> Apart from occasional reading room chats, archivist-historian collaborations usually happen indirectly—each of them working separately and within the confines of their respective professions. But when they decide to collaborate directly, great things can happen, as occurred at Rollins College (Winter Park, Florida) within the framework of a 2018–2020 “Pathways to Diversity” grant from the Associated Colleges of the South. Here, Rachel Walton, digital archivist and records management coordinator, and Claire Strom, Rapetti-Trunzo professor of history, decided to incorporate one of the grant’s main objectives, “to provide primary source literacy and student engagement opportunities with archival materials,”<sup>2</sup> into a series of two scaffolded history courses. The courses in question were a Researching American History class (200-level, Fall 2018) and the program’s capstone course (400-level). “The goals of both courses’ archival projects,” Strom and Walton explain, “centered on teaching undergraduate history majors how to effectively incorporate archival work in their research assignments and emphasized a full spectrum of Primary Source Literacy Learning Objectives.”<sup>3</sup> The grant’s focus was on the history of integration at southern liberal arts colleges. As the grant-aligned topic for the 200-level class, the professor chose “African American education from the Civil War (1865) to the Civil Rights Era (1965).” For their archives-related capstone project (a 400-level course, taught twice), students were tasked with developing “an online exhibit to be added to the Archives’ web collections.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Susan H. Veccia, *Uncovering our History: Teaching with Primary Sources* (Chicago: American Library Association, 2004), 2.

<sup>2</sup> Strom and Walton, “Engaging History Majors,” 3.

<sup>3</sup> Strom and Walton, “Engaging History Majors,” 3.

<sup>4</sup> Strom and Walton, “Engaging History Majors,” 5.

In “Engaging History Majors in Intensive Archival Research: Assessing Scaffolded Curricula for Teaching Undergraduates Primary Source Literacy Skills,” Strom and Walton discuss their approach to team-teaching these major archival research projects and reflect upon their assessment results. After a short introduction to the institutional contexts of Rollins College and its College Archives as well as the project itself, the authors demonstrate how the grant objectives and the course goals connect to the larger framework of primary source literacy theory, in particular the relevant learning objectives of SAA and ACRL’s *Guidelines for Primary Source Literacy* (1.C. – Conceptualize; 2.D. – Find and Access; 3.B. – Read, Understand, and Summarize; 4.A. – Interpret, Analyze, and Evaluate; 5.C. – Use and Incorporate).<sup>5</sup> They then briefly describe the nature and requirements of 200- and 400-level history courses at Rollins College, such as the increasing quantity and complexity of primary source use and the need to focus on the development of primary source literacy skills at the 200 level. Well-illustrated “Results” and “Lessons Learned” sections provide analysis and reflections as well as plans for the future.

While primary source use at the 200 level was more preselected, structured, and guided, the 400-level seniors were given more freedom and room for creativity: in a ten-week period, they had to develop a grant-aligned topic represented in the Archives’ holdings, identify and digitize the selected primary sources, populate Dublin Core elements and create other descriptive metadata, and deliver a historical narrative for their online exhibit synthesizing and contextualizing the displayed primary sources for the general public. After each of the three classes, the archivist and the professor reviewed the results together, applying an assessment rubric directly derived from the five referenced *Guidelines for Primary Source Literacy* learning objectives and also surveying each class for feedback. Both rubric and survey are attached to the case study as Appendices 2 and 3.

The assessment data clearly show an improvement of various primary source literacy skills from the 200 to the 400 level, although Strom and Walton are cautious enough to attribute these results not entirely to their staggered approach, as students may have picked up these skills in other classes as well. The greatest challenge to the interpretation of the assessment results is probably the small size of the student group (only four) who took both classes in sequence. Strom and Walton note, “The fact that this data set is so small meant that the instructors could not realistically assess whether the primary source literacy skills acquired at the 200-level truly served as a springboard for their learning in the later capstone course. However, comparing their earlier scores to their later scores shows a direct

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<sup>5</sup> *Guidelines for Primary Source Literacy* (Society of American Archivists and Association of College and Research Libraries’ Rare Books and Manuscripts Section, 2018), <https://www2.archivists.org/sites/all/files/GuidelinesForPrimarySourceLiteracy-June2018.pdf>; Strom and Walton, “Engaging History Majors,” 3.

reflection of learning and achievement as a result of these two archives-heavy assignments.”<sup>6</sup>

Strom and Walton’s case study is a perfect example of the power of primary source-based higher education as well as the difficulties of assessing the true impact of that power—that is, of measuring the effectiveness of a particular primary source-focused instructional design. This particularly applies to a scaffolded, drawn-out learning process. The authors had to admit, for example, that seniors’ scores went slightly down for the competencies 3.B. (reading and summarizing primary source information) as well as for 1.C. (conceptualizing their research project), which they relate convincingly to the seniors’ unfamiliarity with Dublin Core metadata standards as well as the reduced level of guidance and preselection for the 400-level assignments.<sup>7</sup> These minor shortcomings are, however, part of the primary source literacy learning process. I would argue that even though it is not always possible to establish a causal link between a concrete instructional design feature and an assessed learning outcome, the measurement of increased primary source literacy skills overall as well as their positive impact on student knowledge creation is what matters most and should encourage instructors to incorporate primary source-based learning into their course design. It is not up to only one archivist and one history faculty to cause that change; rather, it depends on broader collaboration between the humanities and special collection departments.

Projects like Strom and Walton’s provide students with an engaging, hands-on primary source research experience that results in a different product than a typical capstone paper. From a student perspective, the close contact with archival work, in particular the development of a public-facing archives-based project, helps develop primary source literacy that they can apply to a broad range of jobs: the experience brings the archivist/special collections librarian as well as various public history professions (museums, national parks, etc.) into view for the soon-to-be history graduates facing an academic job market that will only be able to absorb a fraction of them.

Last, but not least, examples from the survey feedback show<sup>8</sup> the students’ growing awareness of archival silences due to gaps in the record and consequently a growing awareness for the “curatedness” and associated biases of archival collecting, especially when it comes to marginalized people. This understanding of “the impact of curatorial activities on the evidential and informational value of [primary] sources” has been identified by Daines III and Nimer as one of the central tenets of cultural heritage/primary source literacy.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Strom and Walton, “Engaging History Majors,” 8.

<sup>7</sup> Strom and Walton, “Engaging History Majors,” 7–8.

<sup>8</sup> Strom and Walton, “Engaging History Majors,” 7.

<sup>9</sup> J. Gordon Daines III and Cory L. Nimer, “In Search of Primary Source Literacy: Opportunities and Challenges,” *RBM: A Journal of Rare Books, Manuscripts, and Cultural Heritage* 16, no. 1 (2015), 27.