Collaboration with faculty and library special collections: Increasing student engagement with primary sources.

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Abstract:

Amazing things happen when a social science librarian, a special collections librarian, and a political science professor collaborate to introduce students to the world of primary sources. Teaching how to find and use primary sources has been a difficult topic for librarians and teaching faculty and this poster will demonstrate a unique approach to this age-old problem. This successful experiment in teaching information literacy grew out of the distinct frustrations each of the three collaborators experienced when teaching about primary sources in a college course: The subject librarian was growing bored of only teaching primary sources with databases without any hands-on examples; the special collections librarian wanted to find ways in which the library’s extensive special and rare collections could be integrated into courses across campus; and finally, the professor was getting tired of students using poor quality (or not even using) primary sources in their final papers.

Integrating the library’s rare and special collections into this political science course significantly changed how we taught about primary sources in political science research. As as a result of this collaboration, students handle items from the library’s special collection that are related to the class topic of colonialism. The special collections librarian brings into class items such as college textbooks, slave narratives, zines, diaries, and even artist books with publication dates ranging from 1860s to current. This collaboration demonstrates that library collections are meant to be used and not simply stored away and bragged about to library donors without being used by campus scholars.

Each semester this course has four sessions in which the librarians co-teach the information literacy and research process. In the fall of 2017, IRB approval was obtained to measure student learning and feelings about the overall research assignment. This collaboration has seen a dramatic increase in student engagement, excitement, and understanding of primary sources and their proper use within the research process. Overall, with the trio willing to take on major risks in significantly changing the way this course is taught, there been significant positive payoffs: Better grades, better papers, higher engagement, and even a faculty teaching award. Further, this collaboration has deepened the professional relationships between the librarians and the faculty member. This example of thinking outside the box has provided the subject librarian a tangible example in promoting the library, library instruction, and other library services to other faculty.