Exploring Diversity and Student Political Activism through Archival Research

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Abstract

In 2011, the American Political Science Association stated that integrating issues of diversity, inclusiveness, and equality into political science curriculum and pedagogy was crucial to the success of the discipline in the twenty-first century. Although consensus is forming about the need to teach diversity, the question of how to do this effectively remains open. This article describes an archives-based assignment in an introduction to American government course created by the authors of this article—a professor of political science and the college archivist—that includes greater understanding of diversity and engaged citizenship as learning objectives. For this assignment, students are immersed in archival material about their own college and tasked with analyzing the political actions of previous generations of students as the civil rights and women’s movements emerged, as the student population became more diverse, and as the campus reacted to national and local events relating to racial intolerance and injustice. By examining their college’s political past—both the conflicts that animated the community and the student-led efforts to make the campus more inclusive—current students engage with issues of diversity and political activism in a way that helps them better understand themselves and their role as citizens in a democratic nation.

Learning Objectives

One objective of this assignment is to cultivate an understanding of diversity, defined by our college’s diversity requirement
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as having students “recognize human diversity and analyze the sources and consequences of inequality, marginalization, and privilege.” To achieve this objective, the American government class in which this assignment takes place draws on an intersectional pedagogy. Starting from the premise that “inequality is deeply entrenched in the policies and institutions of American democracy” (Junn 2004, 255), the course uses supplemental readings and structured class discussions to foreground “power and processes.” It draws on multiple identities including race, ethnicity, and gender as a lens for understanding each topic (Rasmussen 2014, 102). Exploring the causes and consequences of inequality and the lived experiences of marginalized groups is crucial to understanding every topic in the course from the US Constitution, which institutionalized the enslavement of black Americans, to federalism, which allowed and continues to allow states to disproportionately deny citizens of color the right to vote.

The archives assignment builds on the idea of “empathetic scaffolding”; that is, that students are best able to learn about potentially contentious issues such as diversity when they see a connection between the material and themselves (Bauer and Clancy 2018) and to have students engage in primary-source research about issues of marginalization and privilege at their own institution. Nutrick (2018) describes archival research this way: “Students encounter documents that reveal the history of the very streets they walk…. Through their encounter with the archives, students learn to read closely, delve deeply, and connect personally and intellectually to their research.”

A second objective is fostering engaged citizenship. By researching how their student predecessors voiced their concerns about diversity and inclusion and advocated for change, current students begin to think about themselves as political actors, identify changes they would like to enact, and assess different approaches to affecting change. Furthermore, having students piece together their own narrative based on primary sources helps them develop critical-thinking skills, which are vital for informed citizenship in our polarized political context (Yaco, Brown, and Lee 2016, 419).

THE ASSIGNMENT AND THE ARCHIVAL EXPERIENCE

After learning about the foundations of American government and the ways that privilege and inequality manifest in our political system, students enter the archives to begin their own primary-source explorations of how these issues are apparent at their own college. The professor and the archivist worked together to produce 10 different topics, including the civil rights movement, the black experience, gender equality, LGBTQ rights, and American Indian symbolism. (See the online appendix for the full assignment.) Students are given a set of questions to guide their research, tailored for each topic, but all of which ask students to identify and assess student political activism around issues of diversity. For example, for the topic “On Being Black at Hartwick: 1967–1970,” the guiding prompt was as follows:

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archivist demonstrates the difference between a book search on the online catalog and searching Hartwick’s online archival finding aid. She explains that books, as secondary sources, often interpret events for the reader, whereas primary sources are interpreted by the researcher. The students also receive a research-agreement form to read and sign, agreeing to the standard archival regulations: use of pencils only, gloves when working with photographs, no food or beverages, and careful handling of all documents. Rather than balking at these restrictions, students embrace the regulations as reflecting the unique work of researching with primary sources.

Most scholarly archival research requires months of reading through documents, only occasionally discovering relevant evidence. As an introductory archival experience, we provided a wide variety of primary sources—minutes of meetings, reports, newspapers, audio recordings, and photographs—grouped by relevance to the preselected topics. This strategy ensures that students are immersed in relevant documents without denying them a serendipitous discovery. Despite this preparatory work, students often were overwhelmed by the volume of archival information. Although notetaking is encouraged, the college archives also allows researchers to use phone cameras to take digital images of documents, thereby expediting their research. All of these challenges allow for enriching teaching moments in a primary-source research laboratory—the archives.

The students’ next challenge is to complete a short written assignment constructing a preliminary thesis statement about diversity and political action related to their topic using quotations and other archival material to support their argument. This low-stakes, in-class assignment allows for the professor and archivist to provide tailored guidance to each student during the next archival session.

Students spend a total of three class periods (approximately 3 hours) in the archives, with access to the professor and the archivist for guidance in notetaking, citations, and development of their argument. Students then have the opportunity to return to the archives on their own. Many students come to appreciate and enjoy the archives during the course of the assignment. They return to work on their project but also to research other topics that they have discovered through their initial visits, thereby gaining a richer sense of their college’s history.
The students’ papers and presentations on this topic demonstrated that their archival research deepened their understanding of topics covered in class, such as the ways that racial inequality was embedded into the laws of Southern states and the role of collective action in pressuring the government to enact legislation.
“I think the colored students have a lot of nerve presenting Dr. Netzer with a petition of demands... Why should my taxes increase to give $35 to these lazy bums so they can stage sit-ins, and spend the money for LSD and marijuana? ... Another thing that makes my blood pressure rise is the demand that 200 colored students be brought here for the freshman class beginning in 1969... Why should the college lower the standards for them?”

A response to the black student demands by a group of white Hartwick students took a different approach but was similarly racist and demeaning. They published an article in the student newspaper titled “WASP Demands of Hartwick College Administration.” The demands included having alcoholic beverages in residence halls, furnishing dorm rooms with mink carpeting, and allowing students to take all courses pass–fail. Present-day students reading this article were sometimes confused and only later realized that the white students were mocking the demands of the black students. They were shocked at the level of derision regarding demands that now seem reasonable.

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Research documents how raising issues relating to diversity, inequality, and marginalization can produce student resistance (Bauer and Clancy 2018; Rasmussen 2014); indeed, some discomfort emerged in response to this assignment. In one instance, a student studying the reaction of the college to the Rodney King verdict commented that she felt uncomfortable discussing these issues “because I am white.” The archivist then pointed her to an article in the student newspaper titled “Racism Is a White Problem,” which helped her better understand that racial discrimination is not simply a problem for students of color. In other cases, doing this research brought to mind students’ own experiences dealing with subtle or explicit discrimination. This assignment allowed them to place their experiences within a historical context and seemed to provide a constructive way to process their experiences and work with others to continue making the campus more inclusive.

Junn (2004) argued that civic education can be most effective when starting from an understanding of the inequalities pervasive in the American political system. We believe our assignment does just that. Whereas some students connected more personally with the assignment than others, all students confronted the reality that their own college—similar to most institutions of higher learning and government institutions—was originally structured around white male privilege. Although progress has been made toward greater equality, inclusivity, and tolerance on our campus, as in American politics more broadly, this progress was not inevitable. Indeed, a central theme running throughout student papers and final-exam answers was a recognition of the work their student predecessors had done, individually and collectively, to raise awareness about injustices and to advocate for change, as well as thoughtful explorations about how that work can be continued.

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL

To view supplementary material for this article, please visit https://doi.org/10.1017/S104906519001690

REFERENCES

Note: All archival citations are from the Paul F. Cooper, Jr., Archives at Hartwick College.


