

2011-2012 Grant Proposals

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"The Undergraduate Research Paper: Assessing Student Learning and Research in Introductory History Courses"

SOTL Research Grant

Project Description:

The independent research paper is a characteristic assignment in undergraduate history courses, particularly in first-year history courses. All first-year students at Stonehill write research papers for their 'Critical Encounters: History' course, and they will continue to do so in first-year history seminars. The first-year research paper is also central to our department's assessment plan, as we will assess student outcomes in part by comparing first-year research papers with students' senior theses. Many other history departments similarly rely on comparing freshman and senior research papers for assessment purposes.

While history faculty regularly assign first-year research papers and use them for assessment, writing such a research paper is a confusing and difficult task for most first-year students. High school history classes usually rely primarily on textbooks for course content, often to prepare students for standardized tests; high-school history students are implicitly discouraged from asking questions about historical events or formulating their own interpretations of existing evidence. As college freshmen, these students conceive of 'history' as a body of known, unchanging facts to be passively learned without question. As a result, they are at a loss when their history professors ask them to read primary historical documents closely and critically, to derive their own interpretations based on evidence, or to ask questions of the 'accepted' historical narrative - three new, unfamiliar skills that students need to write a history research paper. Conversely, in assigning such papers history professors take these skills for granted as natural and obvious, creating an understanding gap between themselves and first-year students.

Our study's goal is to help history faculty at Stonehill and elsewhere recognize, understand and breach this gap. We will use detailed questionnaires (administered anonymously to students at the beginning, middle and end of their first-year history course) to collect data about their high school history experiences, their preexisting ideas about history and research, and their thoughts as they go through the paper-writing process. We are particularly interested in assessing how well students understand their professor's goals and expectations for the research paper, and in the efficacy of various interim assignments (bibliographies, outlines, excerpts, peer review exercises etc.) professors often use in preparing students to complete the final paper. To our knowledge, no extant published SoTL study has previously addressed these specific questions; while history faculty regularly use research papers as assessment tools, they have not tended to examine carefully how best to design and use research paper assignments to impart the skills we hope to assess.

Timeline:

During the 2011-2012 academic year, we will be collecting data from participating students. In the summer of 2012, we will compile our findings in order to present them at a SoTL conference (possibilities include the ISSOTL conference in the fall of 2012 or the International Institute for SoTL Scholars and Mentors in summer 2012). During the fall of 2012 we will prepare our findings for publication in a peer-reviewed journal.

Benefits:

This project's most direct benefits are for Stonehill students, who all write a history research paper in their first year. It will prompt our history faculty to reflect on their approaches to the first-year research paper, making them more cognizant of the challenges our first-year students face and of more effective approaches they might take in assigning research papers. Our project will allow us to contribute to the ongoing discussion at Stonehill about student writing in the disciplines, fostering dialogue with faculty in other departments about ways we all could more effectively communicate our expectations to first-year students. Beyond Stonehill, we expect that our

project's findings will be of interest to a broad audience, especially as we are unaware of any existing study that has addressed the specific issues raised by the first-year history research paper.

Community Outreach Plans:

We anticipate presenting our initial findings at a department meeting in the spring of 2012. We would also like to present our work to faculty in other departments at an Academic Development day next year. As noted above, we plan to present our work at a SoTL conference and, subsequently, to publish our findings in a peer-reviewed journal.

Budget:

\$750.00 stipend (Beth Belanger)

\$750.00 stipend (Amy Houston)

\$500.00 travel to SoTL conference in 2012.

\$500.00 for a work-study student to compile and format raw data from student surveys.

Total: \$2500.00