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Course-Embedded Research Grant Assessment
Fall 2013: Senior Seminar (HIST 4430)

This Mellon Initiative grant was awarded for a revised research component in my Fall 2013 senior seminar, the capstone course for history majors. My goal was to get students to conduct smarter bibliographical searches and to engage the best sources possible as they wrote their 20-25 page research projects. Accordingly, I devoted approximately 30-45 minutes of classroom time each week to research methods and strategies for writing longer papers. I also required weekly written assignments: in the first part of the semester, these assignments focused on bibliographical searching and citing sources in Chicago Notes-Bibliography style; in the second part of the semester, students wrote annotated bibliographies, a research prospectus, and a detailed outline.

I have now taught this course three times at Trinity, and I can say definitively that the papers written by my Fall 2013 students were the most historically sophisticated, well researched, and meticulously prepared. While this group of students was strong from the outset, I am confident that the revised research component of the course contributed to their outstanding performance on the final paper. I believe that three aspects of my revised assignment proved especially effective:

- **Practice compiling bibliographies.** At the beginning of the semester, students compiled a list of fifty scholarly sources on medieval death (the topic of the course) using at least five different search methods; once they selected their research topic, they compiled another bibliography of twenty new sources on that topic; and once they began writing, they were required to access additional sources that were cited in the sources they read. Because they were asked to find so many sources—rather than simply meeting a fifteen-source minimum for their final paper—students had the luxury of choosing the most appropriate sources from a wide corpus of scholarship which they had compiled themselves. In the bibliographies for the final papers, every single source was scholarly and on point; several students found and used important seminal works; and a handful of students tracked down obscure sources that provided insight into their topics. This was the most tangible and important improvement I saw, when compared to previous semesters.
- **Articulation of research goals and argument.** In the month leading up to the final paper's due date, students produced a research prospectus and a detailed 8-10 page outline of their argument. We spent a good deal of class time going over the prospectus assignment: in addition to discussing what exactly a prospectus was, students completed a worksheet (attached below) in which they articulated the major questions, sources, and arguments they planned to address in their research. I provided less guidance on the

outline assignment, asking students to simply provide an overview of their historical question, research, argument, and possible conclusions arranged in bullet points (so that the points could be easily rearranged as students revised and strengthened their work). Together, these assignments helped students think through their papers before they began drafting and allowed them to articulate how exactly they would use their primary and secondary sources. In the final papers, most students did an outstanding job engaging with the historiography of their topic and using their sources as jumping-off points for their own ideas—another significant improvement from previous semesters.

- **Discussion of research and writing strategies.** When I designed my course revision, I planned occasional discussions of strategies for writing a long historical paper. Early on in the semester, however, it was clear that students were anxious about producing such a large project. Remarkably, they were less concerned about the research than they were about the writing. Accordingly, I allowed extra time in each class meeting for students to raise concerns and questions about the writing process—conversations which became more intense as the semester progressed. Some discussions broached questions about citations and quoting; others focused on the process of drafting and revising; and students repeatedly asked me how I approach different aspects of my own research writing. My goal in these discussions was to demystify the writing process and create a space for students to think about their own approach to writing. While it is difficult to quantify how productive these conversations were, it is clear from the quality of the final papers that students approached the writing process thoughtfully, with an intent to synthesize, argue, and communicate effectively.

These new assignments required an enormous amount of instructor preparation and grading, and my students were required to do a great deal more work than in previous semesters. However, I am confident that this group of students approached their final research projects differently than other groups had in the past. They rose to the challenge, and I was genuinely impressed with the results of this revised research component.

4. Which sources have been most influential on your thinking so far? Choose 3-5 sources and for each one, answer the questions on the next page.

List the author and title	Summarize the main argument in 1-2 sentences	Describe how the source has influenced your thinking in 1-2 sentences

5. What questions do your sources raise? What are the big historical problems that your authors grapple with concerning this topic?

6. What points of consensus have you discovered in your research? On which points do your authors tend to agree?

7. What points of contradiction have you discovered in your research? On which points do your authors tend to disagree?

8. What gaps are there in the scholarship you've read so far? What questions about the existing scholarship would you like answers to?

9. What are your big ideas and questions about your topic? Where do these ideas and questions fit in the wider corpus of scholarship on your topic?

10. You may use your own phrasing, but the final paragraph of your proposal should include some variation on the following two statements, which you should sketch some answers to now:

In this paper, I propose to investigate...

I will consider the following historical questions...