

CASE #33

Archives and Campus Dialogue: Using Archival Sources to Engage Undergraduates in Contemporary Campus Debates

AUTHORS

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LEARNING OBJECTIVES ENGAGED BY THIS CASE STUDY

- 4.B. Critically evaluate the perspective of the creator(s) of a primary source, including tone, subjectivity, and biases, and consider how these relate to the original purpose(s) and audience(s) of the source.
- 4.C. Situate a primary source in context by applying knowledge about the time and culture in which it was created; the author or creator; its format, genre, publication history; or related materials in a collection.
- 5.A. Examine and synthesize a variety of sources in order to construct, support, or dispute a research argument.
- 5.C. Cite sources in accordance with appropriate citation style guidelines or according to repository practice and preferences (when possible).

CASE STUDY LOCATION University of Arkansas Libraries
Fayetteville, AR
<https://libraries.uark.edu>

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Introduction and Institutional Context

This case study describes an ongoing collaboration between Hannah King, humanities and social sciences librarian at the University of Arkansas Libraries, and Brian Hurley, history instructor and assistant director for academic engagement in the Student Success program, which began in Fall 2024 with an initial course-integrated library instruction session for Hurley's section of HIST 20103, American History, 1877–present, and has continued with similar visits each subsequent semester. Hurley's goals in bringing his first-year students to the library to work with archival materials each semester are to introduce them to curated, guided original research; provide opportunities to connect historical issues with current events; and cultivate a sense of belonging and purpose by accessing campus resources.

The University of Arkansas Library system includes four branch libraries in addition to the primary research library, the David W. Mullins Library, which houses many of the Libraries' collections, services, and personnel. Frequent cross-divisional collaboration is a strength of the Libraries; collaboration between King, a teaching librarian in the Research and Learning Division, and staff and collections from the Special Collections Division made the classes highlighted in this case study possible. To facilitate Hurley's learning goals, King designed class sessions around manuscript materials from the J. William Fulbright Papers, one of the more than 1,400 processed archival collections stewarded by Special Collections. The Fulbright Papers span over three decades and include speeches, correspondence, photographs, and other records documenting Fulbright's career. At the suggestion of a colleague from Special Collections, King and Hurley chose to use Fulbright materials for this collaboration because of their relevance to a recent and ongoing campus dialogue.

In 2021, students and faculty at the University of Arkansas began examining and discussing the historical legacies of those for whom buildings, programs, and colleges were named. Without much debate, the name of former professor and governor who presided over the 1919 Elaine Race Massacre, Charles Brough, was removed from a dining hall. More controversial was the discussion surrounding former university president and long-serving US senator J. William Fulbright. Fulbright, for whom the college of arts and sciences is named and of whom there is a statue on campus, had long been admired for his stances questioning US involvement in Vietnam and his establishment of the internationally renowned Fulbright Fellowship Program. In 2021, however, in light of the racial reckoning following the killing of Minnesotan George Floyd by a police officer, attention turned to Fulbright's role in authoring and supporting the Southern Manifesto, a document that denounced the *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling and called for continued segregation in schools. Calls were made to remove the statue of Fulbright and change the name of the college. Ultimately, both statue and name were left in place with some historical context added, but this remains a salient issue for students learning and debating the history of the country and institution. Hurley sought to engage undergraduate history students in this ongoing discussion by partnering with the University Libraries to design a writing assignment and class archival research visit centered on engagement with archival materials documenting this portion of Fulbright's senatorial career.

Narrative

For this assignment, students in Hurley's class were asked to use some secondary/tertiary sources, but mostly primary sources found in the archives to answer the question of whether or not the name and image of J. William Fulbright should continue to be used by the University of Arkansas. Students prepared for their visit to the archives with textbook reading for historical context, newspaper articles about the 2021 debate, biographical information on Fulbright, and primary sources related to *Brown v. Board of Education* and the Southern Manifesto. They engaged with these by answering written questions and taking part in classroom discussion.

The primary sources used in the class visits to the library are all part of the J. William Fulbright Papers Second Accession and, in fact, all come from two specific folders (series 71, box 10, folders 1 and 2). Prior to the class session, King selected about twenty-five relevant manuscript items and pulled them out of their folders to facilitate concurrent use of the materials by the approximately twenty students in the section. Manuscript selections included drafts of the Southern Manifesto (some with Fulbright's notes and edits), a Fulbright-authored response to the document, and constituent correspondence representing Arkansans' wide-ranging views on school integration and reactions to Fulbright's endorsement of the Southern Manifesto. When selecting documents to use in the class, King focused on materials that could provide insight to Fulbright's thoughts on the issue, as documented in his handwritten notes and edits, his typed response to the Southern Manifesto, and his responses to constituent letters, as well as correspondence from Arkansans residing in different regions of the state and representing varied backgrounds and viewpoints.

The structure of the archival session has evolved each semester in response to observations and student comments about what they most enjoyed or would have found useful. As of the Fall 2025 iteration of this collaboration, King starts the class with an introductory lesson on citing records from archives after students in previous semesters reached out following the class with questions about citing the sources with which they'd worked. Students then spend the majority of class time engaged in self-driven exploration of the archival materials. They are encouraged to move around the room and explore the range of archival materials available before selecting a few to focus on in their analysis. Hurley and King also circulate throughout the class and draw students into deeper engagement with the sources by making observations and asking questions about the content and materiality of the sources. Students make notes about, take photos of, and collect citation information for a minimum of two sources so that they are equipped to integrate analysis of them in their papers. The class session wraps up with time for students to share reactions about their experience of conducting archival research, a built-in moment of assessment and reflection for King as a teacher librarian.

Results

Assessment for these collaborative sessions has evolved each semester. In the initial fall 2024 class, King used an exit ticket poll to gauge student perceptions of the effectiveness of the class by asking, "On a scale of 1–5, how prepared to do feel to use primary sources in your paper for this class?" The student response to this survey was overwhelmingly positive with all students selecting either 4 – prepared (n=7) or 5 – very prepared (n=13); however, upon reflection, King realized that this

feedback didn't provide insight into how engagement with primary source had impacted students and also did not suggest pathways to improve her effectiveness as a teacher librarian.

Driven to collect more authentic assessment and to iteratively improve her teaching effectiveness, King sought narrative feedback from Hurley. Based on Hurley's observations and feedback, this primary source assignment has led to greater student interest, more engaged debate and discussion, and higher-quality writing than any other class assignments and projects. In-class discussion has been robust, but students have also reported that they talk about this assignment with friends and roommates. The nature of the resources—many of which are correspondences from individuals—seems to provide them with a new perspective on history as not just material in a textbook but as a compilation of experiences of people not unlike themselves. This perspective allows for greater personal connection. The opportunity to engage with the primary sources and expectation that they will arrive at their own conclusions and assessments further allows them to see themselves as active producers of history rather than passive consumers.

Moving forward, there will be ample opportunity to continue and build upon this sort of project. As the issues informing the Fulbright legacy remain, King and Hurley will continue to use this project with future students. Other controversial topics with related archival materials—such as the events surrounding Governor Brough and the Elaine Race Massacre—could be the subject of similar assignments. Archival work related to campus history and controversies (both in person and digital) could also be woven into an introductory history course in smaller doses on a weekly basis. This type of student archival work would even be beneficial in a stand-alone course such as a variable credit seminar in the University of Arkansas's "UNIV" course listing, allowing for more explicit focus on the student success and belonging goals that can only be obliquely addressed in a one-shot instruction session.

Lessons Learned

While preparing for the first iteration of this class collaboration, King learned about and employed the guidelines for Ethically Teaching Primary Sources that Reflect Histories of Violence, Hate, and Oppression.¹ Specifically, King implemented the suggestion to flag and provide warnings about materials with potentially disturbing or harmful content (in this case, a few constituent letters containing racial slurs) and the suggestion to present students with options for if and how they would engage with such materials. King placed these letters on a separate table from the other correspondence, added a brightly colored slip of paper near the letters as a visual cue, and warned students about the content, emphasizing that engagement with these letters was optional.

These sessions also helped King to learn that when working with early-career undergraduates in the archives, it can be helpful to pre-select materials and pull them from folders. This practice is particularly useful if the goal of an archival visit is for students to analyze the content of primary sources from the archives, as opposed to learning about archives and their structure. Limited class

¹ RBMS Instruction and Outreach Committee Outreach Toolkit Subcommittee. "Ethically Teaching Primary Sources that Reflect Histories of Violence, Hate, and Oppression," 2021, <https://tpscollective.org/guidelines-toolkit/ethically-teaching-primary-sources-that-reflect-histories-of-violence-hate-and-oppression/>.

time forces teaching librarians to be strategic about which learning outcomes are most relevant and important for a given class session. In the lessons described here, the focus is on engagement with the materiality and content of archival materials, rather than on the mechanisms of how archives are arranged and accessed. King's frequent collaboration with upper-level, research-based humanities classes (for example, Historical Methods), allows for scaffolding additional archival research skills into the humanities curriculum at later points in students' careers when they are more immediately relevant and applicable.

Encouragingly, the work produced from this project consistently exceeds that of other assignments in Hurley's class in quality and positive response from the students. The discussion that arose from the examination of the sources when in the archives, as well as in-class discussion at the end of the project, was thoughtful, free-flowing, and focused. Several students even reported that they engaged in intense, ongoing debates on this subject with friends outside of the class. The written work, while displaying similar structural and grammatical errors, contains a greater depth of thought than other written assignments. That the sources are physical and students work with them in person also makes it more challenging (and less efficacious) to use resources such as ChatGPT/AI. Overall, the student work and engagement when working with archival sources has been the highest quality of any of the assignments in Hurley's class.

Beyond historical content and archival research, there are important takeaways from this project related to student success. Many first-year students at an institution such as the University of Arkansas struggle to find the value in their general education courses. This is especially true when they can take very similar courses for less money at nearby community colleges. Engaging with resources like Special Collections adds actual value to their class experience and ensures that they are taking advantage of the resources that they pay for in their higher tuition. Students also seem to appreciate that the institution trusts them to handle and work with unique and often valuable materials. Many students, especially those from first-generation, lower-income, and otherwise minoritized populations often feel as though resources such as archives are not for them. Inviting them into these spaces early in their college careers can make them feel more comfortable in the library and in Special Collections and can also help to foster a greater sense of belonging on campus in general.