

**The Adventure of Research –
“the Freshman Thesis”**

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Last spring (as I have mentioned in this space before), I had the pleasure of teaching a freshman seminar, "The Aims of Education." The experience was tremendously rewarding, providing an opportunity to work very closely with a group of students whose enthusiasm, energy, and skills were truly impressive. Among the pleasant outcomes of the class was the quality of the final papers produced by the students. I would like to share a few of those works with you.

Although Princeton served as a touchstone throughout the course, the seminar focused more broadly on the development of higher education in America. For their final work, however, the students were required to complete a research project utilizing the Princeton University Archives. Thus, the background they had acquired in the general development of higher education served as a context, in which to place a more specific study of Princeton's history. I was enthusiastic about the students doing original research utilizing primary materials, and they were excited about this prospect as well.

Assistant University Archivist Nanci A. Young readily agreed to help. A special session of the seminar met in the Mudd Library, where the university's archival holdings are housed, and Nanci made a fine presentation, introducing the students to the vast array of materials to be found in archives and explaining how one goes about identifying materials relevant to a given research project.

The particular topics students chose to explore ranged widely, but some basic patterns emerged. Some studied particular personal interests. A runner, for example, explored the history and development of the track team. A student interested in literature studied the early curriculum of the English department. An engineering student examined the way in which, in the construction of the Chapel, architectural intentions interacted with broader educational or ethical intentions. Several students studied topics of perennial interest at Princeton, such as the development of the club system, the institution of the Honor Code, and the introduction of coeducation. And a few students became interested in particular pockets of Princeton history, such as the military preparation immediately preceding World War II or the origins of the Woodrow Wilson School.

One student particularly involved with the Student Volunteers Council did an extraordinary study of community service at Princeton. As she notes in her introduction, "True, the SVC emerged only 27 years ago, but it inherited a rich 150-year tradition of three different Princeton organizations: the Student Christian Association (1946-1967), the Student-Faculty Association (1930-1946), and the long-lived Philadelphian Society (1825-1930). Their titles reflect their purposes, which changed as social events and values permeated the University." The ensuing 45-page paper (documented with more than 150 footnotes and more than 30 bibliography items) traces the history of these organizations with both thoroughness and insight and represents an outstanding piece of research for a first-year student to undertake and complete.

Another student focused on a single era (and figure): the presidency of Francis Landey Patton. "Studying the details of President Patton's administration," she wrote, "is fine practice in the art of separating fact from fiction. Read any Trustee or Faculty Minutes taken upon his resignation and his death. Read any of the newspaper articles written during or immediately following his lifetime. Listen to the first faculty song written in his praise. Look at the marvelous dormitory erected in his honour by his adoring students of 'the Golden Nineties.' What you will find is a multi-media depiction of a man who was respected and loved, a far-sighted leader, an able administrator, and a kind teacher Then turn to the history books. What you will find is not pretty Patton is remembered as 'a wonderfully poor administrator' Why the anomalies? Where does the truth lie?"

This student's work is exciting, in my view, because she had indeed found and read so many varied sources -- and because, in the course of undertaking such original research, she confronted the elusiveness of the past and the difficulty of pronouncing upon its "realities." More than one student expressed both frustration and revelation at how difficult it was to extract "the truth" from sources that did not provide a narrative (like a history textbook) but required the student to construct his or her own narrative, from the scattered fragments of the past.

The sense of genuine discovery that this archival work fostered was perhaps most eloquently expressed by a student who studied the records of the 19th century "Princeton Scientific Expeditions." These were, in the words of the student: "a slew of field expeditions, consisting of students and faculty alike, to research various fields of science . . . these expeditions carried Princetonians to the far reaches of the civilized world . . . The knowledge they obtained proved to be immensely valuable to themselves, and especially in the case of the geological expeditions, to the university itself."

A similar pioneering spirit emerges in the preface this student wrote to his study: "I would like to use this space to mention a few things about the experience it has been researching and writing this 'Freshman Thesis,' if you will. First, like most of the other members of the seminar, I have never had the chance to collect such unique data from such unique sources. It truly was exciting and quite amazing to look at and actually touch pictures, documents, and other paraphernalia of the expeditions that were created over 100 years ago! At times, it just amazed me that some of the log books I was holding in my hands had actually been to such places as the remote reaches of the American west and Newfoundland. It was astonishing to me that these journals had been through all of the hardships that they themselves recollected. What a unique feeling!

"Oh yes, I have one more small, but important thing to add to this prologue. Looking back on all the research papers that I have had to write over the years, I must genuinely confess that this one was by far the most entertaining and enjoyable."

That sentiment describes my own experience as well, in teaching these remarkable students.