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Inspiring Asian American Awareness Through Archival Research: A Gonzaga Case Study

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Inspiring Asian American awareness through archival research

A Gonzaga case study

The recent rise in anti-Asian violence in the United States necessitates urgent and immediate scholarly engagement and classroom interventions. The fact that Illinois and New Jersey are the only two states to make Asian Pacific American history a mandatory part of public school curricula¹—and only did so in 2022—should trouble anyone who believes in equitable representation and education.

Drawing on the expertise of two librarians and one political science professor, we created an assignment in the spring 2022 semester—for the first “Asian American Politics” seminar ever offered at Gonzaga University—that combined physical and digital resources for a new kind of archival journey into Japanese American incarceration and internment.

How we worked together

At the end of the fall 2021 semester, the Asian American Politics instructor reached out to the liaison librarian for Political Science about collaborating on the course in the spring. This was an upper-division seminar for 12 students, most of whom were political science majors. The instructor was keen to build on the research he had been doing with students on the need for more Asian American–inspired courses.² We met to discuss possibilities for assignment design that would draw on library resources and deepen students’ understanding of the research process. Because one of the primary topics of the course was Japanese American internment, we decided to pursue developing an assignment that incorporated one or more of the library’s special collections relating to Asian American history.

A few weeks later, we visited the University Archives and Special Collections department in Gonzaga University’s Foley Library. We met with the special collections librarian and looked at two collections relating to Asian American history for possible use in the course. After a closer look, the three of us realized that one of the collections contained former student records, so we had to rule it out due to FERPA. However, the second collection of interest, the Victor McLaughlin Papers, seemed like a perfect fit for the course.

The Victor McLaughlin Papers contain records and materials related to the World War II internment of Japanese Americans at Minidoka War Center in Hunt, Idaho.³ This small collection was created and collected by Victor McLaughlin, a War Relocation Officer at the camp. The papers include McLaughlin’s correspondence, official documents, and newspapers. The bulk of the collection consists of copies of the *Minidoka Irrigator*, the camp newspaper

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Screenshot of the Asian American Politics LibGuide.

written and published by the Japanese American internees between 1942 and 1945; however, the holdings at Foley are predominately from 1945.

Once we viewed the collection ourselves and had a better understanding of the materials within it, we began planning the details of the assignment and how the two librarians would be involved throughout the semester. One of the assignment’s outcomes was to introduce students to primary source research. To prepare students for the project, we introduced them to the University Archives and Special Collections at the start of the semester. The special collections librarian taught a session about primary source research, showed the students how to handle the fragile newspapers, and gave students a tour of the vault. Afterward, the students were given time to explore issues of the *Minidoka Irrigator* at their own pace, and we encouraged them to take notes about anything in the newspapers they found interesting or that stood out to them.

At the same time, the liaison librarian for Political Science created a new online research guide that contained resources related to the main topics covered in the course.⁴ Midway through the semester, the liaison librarian visited the class to share information about digital special collections that the students could use to supplement their research with the physical materials in the Victor McLaughlin Papers. Given that the physical collection at Foley does not contain a complete run of the *Minidoka Irrigator*, showing students where to find digital copies of additional issues housed at other institutions expanded their access to the newspaper.

Students were required to meet at least once during the semester with the liaison librarian for a research consultation, which was feasible due to the small class size. We decided to include this requirement to ensure that all students received individualized support tailored to their specific paper topic and to their level of research experience. Because students could

- Japanese American Internment
- Korean Adoption
- Asian Americans & Political Participation
- Citations

Key Terms

Primary Source: An original record of events, such as a diary, a newspaper article, a public record, or scientific documentation.

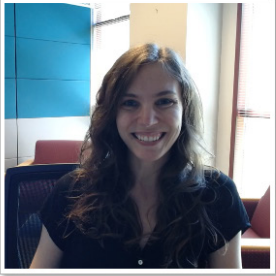
Secondary Source: Materials such as books and journal articles that analyze primary sources. Secondary sources usually provide evaluation or interpretation of data or evidence found in original research or documents such as historical manuscripts or memoirs.

Database: A collection of information stored in an electronic format that can be searched by a computer.

Archives: 1. A space which houses historical or public records. 2. The historical or public records themselves, which are generally non-circulating materials such as collections of personal papers, rare books, ephemera, etc.

*All definitions are from the "Multilingual Glossary for Today's Library Users" by the Association of College and Research Libraries-Instruction Section (2018), and are used under a CC-BY-NC license.

Your Librarian



Shayna Pekala

Key terms page from the Asian American Politics LibGuide.

fulfill this requirement at any time of their choosing during the semester, the consultations occurred at the point of need.

Why it worked

We asked students to write a paper on Japanese American internment that drew heavily from the archives to tell a story from the perspective of those incarcerated. The assignment included three graded components: a research consultation, a draft, and the final paper. We believe the assignment worked so well for several reasons.

First, the assignment required students to engage physically with the library too—visiting as a group first and then individually. Multiple students discussed the value of physically holding a newspaper, which provided a connection to the past that cannot be replicated just by viewing archives online. As one student wrote in a reflection, “Just to feel the old paper in my hands, was a feeling of joy.” Another said, “To feel the old paper in my hands, to know that I was holding a piece of history, was awesome in itself.” Part of the final rubric was also asking students to reflect on internment from a perspective different from that of Lorraine Bannai’s *Enduring Conviction*, a mandatory text. One student commented on this, writing, that “it was one thing to read stories in history books . . . but an entirely different experience to *have* the articles in my hands, to smell the old paper smell, to feel the crinkly paper in my fingertips.”

Second, the mandatory research consultation with the liaison librarian was invaluable. While some students took it more seriously than others, some had multiple consultations with both the liaison and Special Collections librarians. Several students commented on how beneficial it was to have a research guide just for the course, and how the liaison librarian made them think about research arcs they had not considered. According to one student, “The amount of knowledge she has as a librarian was super helpful in finding extra topics and resources. I never would have thought to explore the idea of Japanese American Veterans.

Or to look at the government's perception of Japanese American soldiers during and after World War II. She also gave me the advice to look at letters from citizens to see what they are saying about the perception of the soldiers.”

Third, this project introduced the library to the students in a way that made the undergrads reevaluate what archives and college libraries can offer. One student wrote, “This paper required me to familiarize myself with resources available at Foley, for which I am thankful as it has proven useful in various other classes. It also has honed my skills with smart searching.” Another wrote, “The traditional archives made this process more personal because it was not just looking at data but people's actual stories, which are heart wrenching and made me want to keep digging and learning more.” One student commented on the sensation of sitting in the silence of Special Collections, gingerly handling a newspaper that was written only 550 miles away in Jerome County, Idaho, and “nothing left but a reeling sensation coming from the images of the war-torn world.” A graduating senior also wrote about her gratification in doing this project just weeks before commencement: “I am glad I was able to be in the presence of so much historical content. Not everyone can say they have sorted through original prints of an internment newspaper and examine their contents. I felt like I was going back in time as I read war reports in the present tense and saw ads with dated aesthetics.”

Lastly, seminar participants had the freedom to develop their own research agenda. This generated a flurry of final paper topics, including women's lives in the camps; pre- and post-war trauma; the lives of Japanese American soldiers; mental health and suicide in the camps; postwar experiences with resettlement; internment newspapers and marketing; intra-camp education; and economic opportunities for the incarcerated.

Lessons learned

The special collections librarian pulled all the hard copies of the *Minidoka Irrigator* for the students to examine. In hindsight, only a select few issues needed to be available for the experience of handling the primary documents. Newspapers by nature are very fragile, and repeated handling could cause their condition to deteriorate. Each time the class is taught, different issues could be pulled to not put stress on the same newspapers. Students could do their research using the digital copies.

During the class session in the University Archives and Special Collections, the students were given a tour of the vault. This experience was well received by the students, as they were surprised by what is housed there. This awareness of what can be found in archives will continue with them as students and as lifelong learners.

Another unexpected outcome is that when working with McLaughlin's correspondence, some students could not read the cursive writing and asked the special collections librarian to read it for them. One student took photos with her phone to take home for a roommate to translate. Students today are not learning cursive writing in school, so it is like a foreign language to them.

How others can implement something similar

We believe this project can be replicated at other colleges and universities through our collaborative model. It really only requires one dedicated faculty person and at least one research librarian (if the library does not have a special collections librarian or archivist). In theory, this project could be done by accessing only the digital copies of the *Minidoka*

Irrigator, which are freely available through the Library of Congress collection, Japanese-American Internment Camp Newspapers, 1942 to 1946.⁵ Students could still do primary source research but would not have the opportunity to handle the original papers, which our students felt was an important aspect to the assignment. Libraries that do not hold any internment records themselves could seek partnerships with other local libraries that do have them, including public libraries or neighboring universities, as well as visit any of the 10 wartime relocation centers in Arkansas, California, Colorado, Idaho, Utah, and Wyoming.⁶ If it is not feasible to bring students in contact with any original materials, perhaps the assignment could be more focused on creating new materials to add to the collection, such as conducting oral interviews with formerly interned Japanese Americans.

We also recognize the value of this project was in how it helped first-generation students “discover” what libraries can offer, but also giving them the onus of responsibility to create an original research project on a marginalized community and topic.

In conclusion, we believe that all colleges have a responsibility to educate students on Asian American history, which is a preemptive step in ending anti-Asian bias. As one of the seminar participants wrote in her final paper, “This paper has prompted me to learn all I can at Gonzaga University so I can do my part, in the future, to ensure our country does so much better going forward.” ❧

Notes

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2. Caroline Corker, Holden Smith, Maddie Sontag, and Shyam Sriram, “Letter to the Editor: On the Importance of Asian American Inclusion,” *Gonzaga Bulletin*, March 3, 2022, https://www.gonzagabulletin.com/opinion/letter-to-the-editor-on-the-importance-asian-american-inclusion/article_33e6708c-999d-11ec-903a-5fffce220273.html.

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5. Library of Congress, “Japanese-American Internment Camp Newspapers, 1942–1946,” accessed July 21, 2022, <https://www.loc.gov/collections/japanese-american-internment-camp-newspapers/about-this-collection/>.

6. National Park Service, “War Relocation Centers,” last updated July 31, 2021, <https://www.nps.gov/articles/000/war-relocation-centers.htm>.