

STUDENT HISTORIANS AS INTERNS IN COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS

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Community history as a pedagogical technique for college history courses is currently a popular subject of discussion among educators.¹ Conferences² and articles³ focusing on the use and value of oral and family history, field investigations, photographs, films, museums, and local archives in the study of United States history are increasingly common. But not all types of local history student projects have been included thus far in this discussion. For a number of years students in other social science disciplines, especially sociology and political science, have been able to combine academic learning with direct experience via internships in local agencies and institutions. This paper reports on my successful use of internships in urban history and urban problems courses, a subject area where they have rarely been tried. This effort to introduce internships into history-oriented courses is made all the more interesting by its successful application at two very different colleges.

Student internships were used at Gramh Junior College, a two-year, private, technically-oriented, open-admissions college in the heart of Boston, and at Union College, a four-year, private, arts and sciences, highly selective institution situated on a well-planned campus in the midst of Schenectady, New York. Both schools are coeducational and residential colleges.⁴

Although some 30 percent of the students taking my courses at Gramh were black, the typical student was white, from a working-class background, in possession of limited reading and writing skills, and the first in the family to attend college. The counterpart at Union was white, from a suburban, professional background, with above average skills and academic training.⁵ At Gramh the internship method was used from 1973 to 1976 in an introductory Urban Politics course designed for sophomores; at Union it was used in 1977 in Urban Problems: A Historical Perspective, an upper-level history course attracting a large percentage of seniors. Classes were small at both schools, averaging twenty students.

The courses were structured relatively uniformly. Each included class lectures, discussions, required readings, examinations, and an urban studies project. The form of the project varied; archival research, oral and family histories, films, and internships, as well as an option to read a number of related books, were all acceptable. Student participation was emphasized. Students were encouraged to meet with me to plan and discuss their projects; periodic progress reports were given in class; and near the end of the semester they presented to the class an oral summary of their experience and findings. In a final project--in most cases a paper ranging from 10 to 25 pages--students examined and evaluated their topics from a historical and current perspective.

The internship project aroused the most interest and stimulated the most successful results. At Gramh about equal numbers of students selected either

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While teaching and writing history seem to be highly individualized processes, their form is deceiving. The author wishes to thank the many colleagues who shared with him their thoughts on teaching methods and all the students who participated in and evaluated these experiments in community history.

the reading option or the internship. At Union, where extensive required reading was already part of the course, students chose archival research or internships, the former twice as often. The greater incidence of students at Grahm selecting internships is partly the result of my wider contact with local organizations in Boston, which made placement easier. Oral and family histories were rare, partially the product of the political focus of each course. Only one student--at Grahm--had the skills or interest to make a short film.⁶

All of the community history projects achieve remarkably similar and worthwhile goals. Each taps different local sources of information, all of which are usually accessible, underused, and abundant. Each engages students directly in the process of historical inquiry, introducing them to the problems and skills of research design and the verification, gathering, and evaluation of data. Each possesses the potential for viewing American history from the bottom up; oral and family history are best for this, but internships, depending of course on the nature of the agency, can also provide a means for studying the activities of those whose voice has not been officially recorded.

In two areas the internship offers tremendous opportunities. First, it broadens the learning environment beyond the classroom. It puts students into a new but also structured environment, with a multitude of new stimuli which students often find quite exciting. As such it provides students with both a better understanding of urban problems and a basis in immediate experience from which to form and express opinions in class and informal discussions. Second, internships are another way that students, and the college and its faculty indirectly, can play a small but constructive role in the surrounding community. In addition to what they learn for themselves, interns are assets to the agencies with whom they work. A few examples will illuminate.

At Grahm students worked at least three hours per week in such diverse organizations as the Cambridge and Boston Public Schools, Zero Population Growth, Boston Little City Halls, neighborhood-based community and tenant organizations, and the Boston Indian Multi-Service Center. Students working in the School Volunteers Program served as tutors in reading, mathematics, and French and as recreational directors in after-school programs. In their reports they described in diary form their specific activities (which most found rewarding and equally exhausting) and evaluated the School Volunteer Program: how and why it was started, its organizational structure, its objectives, methods, and role in the urban community. One student worked in a Boston Little City Hall, compiling an annotated list of available neighborhood social service resources. His final report included the list as well as a critical analysis of Mayor Kevin White's touted program. A number of students worked with various tenant organizations, as the tenant movement in the Boston area was very active and vocal in the years 1973 through 1976. They distributed leaflets of upcoming meetings and demonstrations, showed films to community groups, and did research. Again, final papers included a summary of their activities and an analysis of the organization in which they worked.

At Union the types of experiences were similar, with students interning in both public and private, mainstream and social change agencies. Even though contacts in my first year at Union were fewer than those in Boston, Union students had little difficulty finding appropriate agencies needing volunteers. Students worked for the Schenectady Community Action Program, Planned Parenthood, and the People's Advisory Service, a voluntary, anti-poverty/social change organization. One student, working with the City of Schenectady Bureau of Planning, compiled a listing of historical maps available in the various local archives. The Bureau felt that a listing of

maps tracing the spatial growth and development of the city would be an important research tool for future planning reports. (It should prove invaluable as well to all future studies of Schenectady's past.) For his final project, this student submitted a copy of the listing plus an analysis of the Bureau and the role of urban planners in contemporary Schenectady.⁷

In another instance, two students worked as researchers for Urban Fellows Institute, a research group, funded by public and private community action agencies, then studying welfare programs and welfare reform in Schenectady County. The project papers of the two Union students describe the history of welfare programs and reform in Schenectady from the earliest Dutch settlement to the activities of a local chapter of the National Welfare Rights Organizations in the late 1960's. Their research and analysis is the major portion of the Institute's report on welfare reform.

While implementing the internship is relatively simple, especially in courses with small enrollments, the "participant observer" method is not without problems. Demands on time are high for both student and teacher. Students in a one-semester course spanning fifteen weeks at Grahm or ten weeks at Union must begin their internship almost immediately, and even then 30 to 50 hours at an agency is often insufficient for them to complete their assigned tasks. Correspondingly, at times agencies are unwilling to exert energy training students who volunteer for such a short time; this may result in students being given less-fulfilling tasks, such as answering telephones, typing, or running errands.⁸ For the teacher who is offering this internship as but one element of one of his or her courses, close supervision of the internship experience and continuous contact with community organizations is nearly impossible. This, however, is not as important as one might think. I have found my time and efforts better spent preparing a list of local organizations seeking volunteers and discussing with students aspects of their projects, especially their difficult role as both participant in and critic of the agency.⁹ While this lack of close monitoring subjects the internship to abuses by students and agencies, in four years of using this technique there have been less than a handful of serious complaints from either side.

Another problem for history teachers is the tendency for the internship method to concentrate on current rather than historical phenomena. Obviously, as a research technique it is not well-suited for reaching back to the distant past and is thus most appropriate in courses which consider their subjects in the twentieth century, before which many current organizations did not exist. In 1975 and 1976 several students at Grahm worked for bicentennial commissions and in 1977 a number of students at Union expressed interest in working for a local history society. But these types of history-oriented positions are limited; most internships at community organizations are oriented toward the present. Consequently, developing a history of the organization requires from students research efforts beyond their daily activities at the agency and beyond the most readily available agency literature and interviews with current administrators. At Union, where the course emphasized historical themes and where many of the students in the course were history majors, students were more inclined to do the necessary extra research. Still, many noted that the internship was too time consuming to permit substantive research on the organization's origins and historical development.¹⁰

Overall, internships are an effective and successful method for teaching college history. In addition to those qualities already mentioned, a few others are especially noteworthy. It enlivens the study of history, an important asset given declining interest among students in traditional national approaches to U.S. history. Course evaluations run higher where this option is offered and not infrequently students praise the internship experience

as the most rewarding aspect of the course. For example, students described their experiences as "valuable," "vital," and "important." The method also integrates academic and experiential knowledge with scholarly readings and lectures. As one student noted, "My project helped me place some of the theories into the real world and allowed me to take the real world into some of the theories."¹¹ Moreover, in appropriate history courses the blending of historical research on community organizations with "participant-observation" techniques can be used to develop a truly multidisciplinary social science offering. As noted earlier, at most colleges internship opportunities are offered in disciplines, usually sociology and political science, which rarely address historical aspects of the subject under study. But internships concerned with the past as well as the present can put "flesh and life into history" and history into the study of community processes and organizations.

Some teachers of history may conclude that the internship does not adequately contribute to "historical learning." Obviously, the more multidisciplinary a course the less it can concentrate on one mode of inquiry. Nevertheless, despite differences in the quality and nature of student experiences, the internship and research combination clearly enhances historical learning by requiring students to consider that "their" contemporary urban organization is the product of both its historical origins and its historical development over time.

Lastly, this non-traditional approach to the study of urban politics and urban history attracts and is appropriate for students from different backgrounds and with varying degrees of knowledge and fundamental skills. Its successful implementation at both Grahm and Union, despite differences between the schools, their student bodies, and their communities, attests to its wide appeal and replicability.¹²

NOTES

¹"Community history" has achieved wide popularity and recognition without much effort at defining the term. I offer the following: community history is both a process of research and a field of study. As a process of research, it is the gathering of data through interviews, family reconstitutions, field investigations, participant-observation, and the use of multi-media equipment, in addition to the more traditional methods of research in written sources in libraries and archives. As a field, it is a sub-discipline of history which longitudinally studies populations or spatial units sharing a common characteristic or collective life. For a similar definition and analysis of the process of defining the term "community organization," see Meyer Schwartz, "Community Organization," in Harry Lurie, ed., Encyclopedia of Social Work (New York, 1965), 178. Also helpful is Philip D. Jordan, The Nature and Practice of State and Local History (Washington, D.C., 1958).

²Two conferences are especially noteworthy. The Newberry Library, Chicago, held the first of three scheduled annual conferences on "The College Teaching of State and Community History," January 13-16, 1977. In December, 1976, one of the four day-long conferences of "Experiments in History Teaching: A Harvard Danforth Program for the New England Community" was devoted to the subject of teaching local history. This conference resulted in part in the publication of Experiments in History Teaching, ed. Stephen Botein et al. (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1977).

³For written sources see Joel Eastman, "Putting Life into the Study of the Past: Local History Materials in the Classroom," New England Social Studies Bulletin, XXIX (Winter, 1972), 5-6; Donald D. Parker, Local History:

How to Gather It, Write It and Publish It (New York, 1944); Raymond A. Mohl and Neil Betten, "Gary, Indiana: The Urban Laboratory as a Teaching Tool," The History Teacher, IV (January, 1971), 5-17; Michael H. Ebner, "Students as Oral Historians," The History Teacher, IX (February, 1976), 196-201; Donald R. Goldfield, "Living History: The Physical City as a Teaching Tool," The History Teacher, VIII (August, 1975), 535-56; Thomas J. Schlereth, "The City as Artifact," AHA Newsletter, XV (February, 1977), 6-8; David H. Culbert, "Undergraduates as Historians: Family History Projects Add Meaning to an Introductory Survey," The History Teacher, VIII (November, 1973), 7-17; D. W. Meinig, "Environmental Appreciation: Localities as Humane Art," The Western Humanities Review, XXV (Winter, 1971), 1-11; and Clifford Lord, Teaching History with Community Resources (New York, 1967). Also, I should call attention to Alan H. Feldman, "Local History and Its Educational Uses," (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, forthcoming), a detailed proposal of which the author let me see.

⁴The graduate programs at Union attract a sizable percentage of commuting students. Most of the students in my courses at Grahm and Union, however, did not grow up or permanently reside in the local community.

⁵This data on students in my courses is not based on a written survey or sample and thus serves only as a rough estimate for comparing the type of student at each school.

⁶Community projects were used in a number of other courses at Grahm. In "American Government," for example, most students chose to work in election campaigns. In "Ethnic Minorities in American History," all students wrote family histories. At Union most students in the first semester of the urban history course, "Urban America," wrote papers on topics related to Schenectady's development. The two students who researched welfare history in Schenectady for the Urban Fellows Institute (described in text) began their internship in this course.

⁷My course and this specific project are discussed in a recent issue of the Union College alumni publication. See Dan Forbush, "A History Class Uses Schenectady as an Urban Laboratory," Union College, LXVIII (July-August, 1977), 18.

⁸An internship covering more than one semester would counteract some of these time limitations. Douglas D. Alder, "History Teaching Innovations" (unpublished paper made available by the American Historical Association, 1977), 4, lists an internship program at Lewis and Clark College, Portland, Oregon, where students intern for some six months in their senior year.

⁹Finding organizations seeking volunteers and placing students is not a formidable task. In Boston, for example, there are agencies which place volunteers and agencies and newspapers which publish guides for volunteer opportunities. Students are responsible ultimately for securing an assignment, and few have much difficulty doing so.

¹⁰At Grahm, in order to lighten somewhat the student's workload, two class hours every three weeks were used by students for additional research or discussions with me instead of class meetings.

¹¹All student quotes taken from course evaluations, Union College, Spring, 1977.

¹²Presumably the internship should succeed in courses other than urban history and in non-urban college environments. The types of agencies, however,

would be somewhat different. In order to give the reader a better feel for the types of agencies at which students worked, I am including the following list. Course syllabi are, of course, available on request.

Examples of Student Internships: Boston Indian Multi-Service Center; Boston Little City Halls Program; Boston School Department, Volunteer's Program; Boston Wind, Cambridgeport Homeowners and Tenants Association; Cambridge School Department, Volunteer's Program; City of Schenectady Bureau of Planning; Fenway Area Tenants Union; Human Service Planning Council (Schenectady); Middlesex County, Deputy Commissioner's Office; Office of the Attorney General of Massachusetts (Consumer Affairs); Office of Children; People's Advisory Service (Schenectady); Schenectady Community Action Program; Schenectady County Planning Department; Somerville Media-Action Project; Urban Fellows Institute (Schenectady); and Zero Population Growth.