

## Engaging Past and Present: Service-Learning in the College History Classroom

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SERVICE-LEARNING as a pedagogical approach has become a popular trend in undergraduate teaching. According to Robert Bringle and Julie Hatcher, service-learning is a “course-based, credit-bearing educational experience that allows students to (a) participate in an organized service activity that meets identified community needs and (b) reflect on the service activity in such a way as to gain further understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility.”<sup>1</sup> More simply, as the name implies, service-learning combines high-quality learning with high-quality service. Service-learning enterprises ask students to make connections between activities with the community and their academic work in the classroom.

Universities employ service-learning as the academic arm of their civic engagement efforts.<sup>2</sup> Although no single definition of civic engagement exists, most people agree that it encompasses a wide variety of activities that enable people to participate in the processes of democracy, in both formal and informal arenas.<sup>3</sup> College campuses connect with their communities in a variety of ways, such as community-based research, internships, volunteerism, and service-learning. While part of this larger effort, service-learning differs from other forms of community involvement in two main ways. First, in service-learning, community members, not the university or its representatives, identify the need

for the project. Rather than the university imposing the venture on the surrounding community, the campus avails itself. Second, service-learning is academic and is integrated fully into the coursework. The undertaking acts as another type of fundamental course text from which students learn. Students engage the experience and put it in conversation with the other parts of the course.

This article describes the design and implementation of a service-learning project and the role the university library and other campus professionals can play in supporting service-learning initiatives. The article then analyzes the successes and problems with the course design and makes suggestions for improvements. It shows that relationships among librarians, archivists, and historians can play an instrumental role in incorporating service-learning into the study of history. In the process of this examination, the article offers an example of how to engage the past and the present, and even more importantly, how to teach undergraduate students about the connections between the two.

### **The Place of Service-Learning**

While the importance of community-based endeavors in cultivating civically engaged students is not a new concept in higher education, service-learning as a pedagogical approach is just beginning to take hold widely. As a result, supporting organizations, as well as a new set of scholarly literature on the subject, has materialized to aid professors and their universities in successfully conceptualizing and implementing service-learning. Room to grow exists in both arenas.<sup>4</sup>

Service-learning scholarship, as part of a larger literature on community engagement, has grown over the past twenty years, with much of the studies exploring the theoretical underpinnings of the enterprise, as well as assessing the effectiveness of programs. Perhaps most notably in terms of scholarly literature is the *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning*, a peer-reviewed journal founded in 1994 by the University of Michigan.<sup>5</sup> The *Michigan Journal* features articles written by faculty and service-learning educators on research, theory, pedagogy, and other issues related to curriculum-based service-learning in higher education. Responding to increasing interest in such scholarship, the *Michigan Journal* has gone from publishing annually to circulating twice a year, and the acceptance rate for its articles hovers just below fifteen percent. Also notable in the scholarship is the American Association for Higher Education's (AAHE) series of edited volumes on service-learning in the disciplines. Twenty-one volumes make up the series, with each edited by a specialist in the volume's particular discipline.<sup>6</sup>

Even so, a noticeable gap exists in the scholarly literature examining the role of service-learning in discipline-specific courses. The scholarship drops off in the discussion of humanities courses in general, and in history courses in particular. The *Michigan Journal* has yet to publish an article explicitly linking service-learning to history courses, though the AAHE's series does include a volume on concepts and models for service-learning in history.<sup>7</sup> History courses are also underrepresented in sample syllabi.<sup>8</sup>

The lack of scholarship on service-learning in history, and in the humanities in general, raises several questions. What relevance or worth does the study of the humanities have in the world outside of the academy? In what ways is community engagement efficacious as an instructional strategy in history courses? How can historians find community partners who are interested in historically based projects? And, finally, why have so few history professors engaged in service-learning projects with their classes?

Historians already tackle the issue of civic engagement through the growing field of public history, described by the National Council on Public History Board of Directors as "a movement, methodology, and approach that promotes the collaborative study and practice of history; its practitioners embrace a mission to make their special insights accessible and useful to the public."<sup>9</sup> Universities run public history degree programs to train students to orient their research toward non-academic audiences. While the connection between public history and civic engagement seems natural and can be explored and cultivated, professors of all types of history courses should explore service-learning as a strategy in particular. This article examines an experiment in integrating service-learning into a traditional, non-public history course, and argues that service-learning can be a meaningful component of studying history.

### **Making Service-Learning History: A Case Study in Course Design**

SUNY Fredonia is a comprehensive, public, liberal arts university located in Chautauqua County in Western New York with an enrollment of approximately 5,700 students. Like many other colleges and universities, Fredonia requires all undergraduate students to complete a capstone seminar in their major area of study.<sup>10</sup> The senior-level class varies in structure, requirements, and outcomes across the university, as each department devises a culminating experience appropriate to its discipline. For example, the History Department offers seminars in which the students engage in original primary research. Using that basic framework, individual instructors develop the topics and assignments for each specific seminar.<sup>11</sup>

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Figure 1: Student-generated Zotero database of local history research materials.

While there is strong, campus-wide support for integrating community engagement into courses, doing so in a history course meant forging new territory.<sup>12</sup> After consulting with the campus's service-learning coordinator, the professor examined a few possible topics with a potential community partner, the Fenton History Center, a regional museum and research facility.<sup>13</sup> The Fenton's director articulated the need for more information on certain immigrant populations in Chautauqua County's two urban areas, and she expressed a desire for students to contribute to the body of research on these topics. Based on these needs and recommendations, the professor identified the study of local history as the most useful connection and service to the community. As a next step, she met with a university librarian who assisted in developing the project design, assignment scaffolding, and research objectives tailored to the content of the course. In addition, Fredonia was hosting a national urban history conference that semester, and in order to tie in the course, the topic of the professor's capstone class became "Doing Local Urban History."

In response to the community needs stated by the Fenton's director, the professor identified two service-learning projects, which became infused in the course's four main learning objectives.<sup>14</sup> For the first project, the class of fifteen upper-level history majors created a web-based guide to locate and identify local area research collections, groups, and contacts. The students developed the finding aid using Google Docs, a free office suite that allows users to create and edit documents online while collaborating in real-time with other users.<sup>15</sup> Second, the students generated an online database, containing 272 citations and annotations for both primary and supporting secondary materials using Zotero, a free, open-source tool developed by George Mason University's Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media (Figure 1). Zotero enables researchers to collect, cite, and share research resources.<sup>16</sup> Both the guide and the database created new access points for local history materials that could be shared with the Fenton and other local archives and historical societies. The creation of these tools aimed to assist researchers and students with locating archival sources and collections relevant to local immigrant populations.

The students also provided a service to the History Department by proposing future service-learning projects. Each student wrote and presented a grant proposal for a local public history project based on their primary research and secondary reading. In order to support the students in developing an understanding of the purpose and mechanics of grant writing, a grants development specialist for the university presented a writing workshop on the "ins and outs," and "dos and don'ts" of authoring a grant. The proposed projects varied in conception and scope. One student proposed a week-long summer camp about the Underground Railroad



**Figure 2:** History students present their work at SUNY Fredonia's Reconsidering the City Conference, Spring 2010.

in Jamestown, New York. Another outlined an oral history project with Latino migrant workers. Their ideas provided a means by which students and the History Department could conceptualize the continuation of the students' inquiries and ways that research could serve the community, with the ultimate goal of laying a foundation for future service-learning initiatives.

Employing service-learning also met the History Department's goals for a capstone course. As the class progressed, the students discovered how historians develop new research projects and engage their investigations both in and beyond the university. Their explorations culminated in projects that engaged with the local community and were presented not only through their Zotero databases and local repository finding aid contributions, but also in two public forums: the "SUNY Fredonia Urban History Conference: Reconsidering the City" and SUNY Fredonia's annual "Student Research and Creativity Exposition," which serves to promote and support student scholarly activity and creative work across the campus.

The research and the resulting posters produced by the groups varied in their focus. One group of students conducted an analysis of how urban

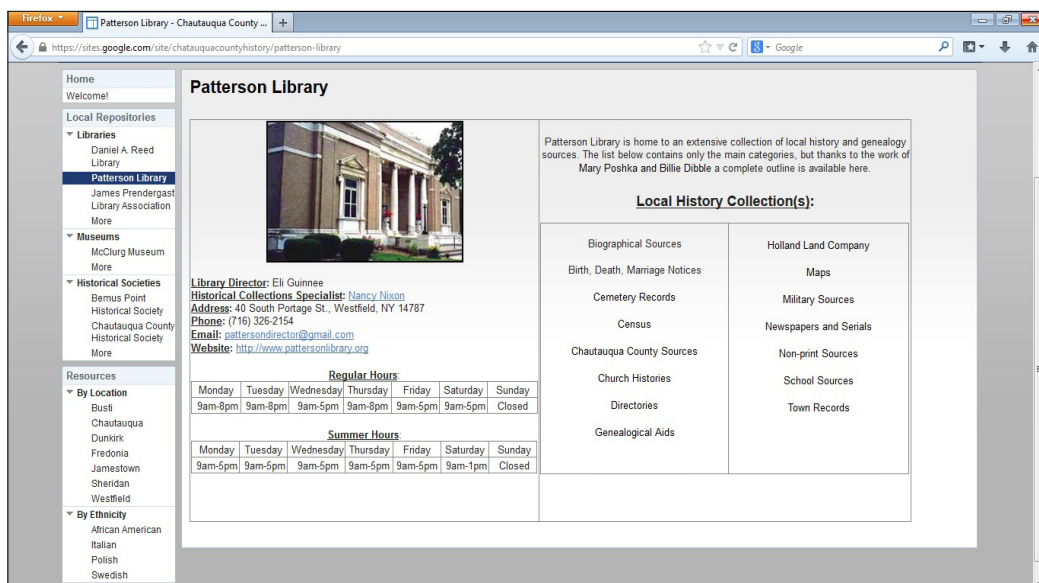


**Figure 3:** History students present their work at SUNY Fredonia's Reconsidering the City Conference, Spring 2010.

renewal destroyed the physical neighborhood where Italians had lived in Jamestown, New York, concluding that the community persisted by maintaining ties through its churches. A second group of students engaged the reasons for difficulty in finding Latino representation in the historical record (Figure 2). A third focused on the historical and geographical differences that suggest explanations for the phenomenon in which the local city of Jamestown, rather than another local town, Dunkirk, New York, has sustained a black population (Figure 3). While delving into their research, students explored what it meant to present historical analysis in a public forum. They read writings on theoretical and methodological approaches to public history. They engaged in conversations on ways to formulate and display their arguments. In doing so, they considered the goal of their study, as well as its presentation to their audiences. Through their learning elements of information architecture and visual design, the students came to understand the complexities of presenting material in different rhetorical situations.

At every stage of this capstone course, the partnership between historian and librarian was important, and the librarian played an integral role in





**Figure 4:** Website of local history repositories and research topics, created by a history student intern, Fall 2010-Spring 2011.

facilitating the service-learning projects. She was actively involved throughout the entire course, including teaching three workshops during the semester. These sessions assisted students with the information literacy skills needed to access necessary material effectively and efficiently. The first workshop provided an introduction to Google Docs and Zotero, emphasizing their collaborative features. Using Zotero, students learned to create a system for organizing their findings, differentiating between the types of sources cited and understanding the syntax of citations for a wide range of primary and secondary sources. The second librarian-led session provided an introduction to archival research, annotated bibliographies, and finding aids. During this period, students learned about how information is organized and accessed in an archival setting, and were provided with criteria for evaluating the reliability of source materials. The librarian devoted the third session to communicating research through effective poster design. In this meeting, the students learned to present their research processes and conclusions visually, and they further developed the technical skills needed to aid in the development of their research posters. These skills not only matched the desired outcomes of the instructor, but also the standards laid out by the university's regional accrediting body, the Middle States Commission on Higher Education.<sup>17</sup> Along with gaining the



technical skills of these programs, students contemplated the worthiness of an intellectual community in building such projects. They learned how to work both as individual researchers and as part of a research team.

### **The Work Continues**

Once the capstone class ended, its work extended into other courses and projects. Since the original seminar, four other history courses adopted the Zotero-based assignment and contributed to the database project. Each of these courses incorporated the study of local history, though the topics varied widely, including diverse themes such as the history of SUNY Fredonia and the history of grape growing in Chautauqua County. As a result of these initial projects, history professors have also begun reaching out to local organizations to identify other needs within the community. For example, several faculty members teamed up with the Fenton Historical Society for a service-learning project where students created digital exhibits of local history resources for Chautauqua County's bicentennial.

Through the university's internship program, one history major began a related project to make the course-generated materials more accessible to a public audience. Working with the same librarian and professor, the student assumed an enormous undertaking that itself could be broken down into several large tasks. First, he made the original Zotero entries uniform. As can be expected, the original work had been uneven in both depth and quality. While scrubbing and aligning each entry, the intern also determined categories for the material and added searchable tags. The next step will be to build a website so that educators and researchers can easily access these materials. Local history organizations can then link their websites to the interface.

The new website, along with presenting the student-generated Zotero database, will serve as a portal for local history research (Figure 4). It will link to different institutions' sites and will provide additional information that will be useful to researchers. To gather this material, an intern will visit local libraries, historical societies, and archives. During each visit, the student will interview the site's director or curator in order to uncover the collections of local significance available at their institution, tips for conducting local history research using their collection, and potential local research topics for which their collection would be useful. During the visit, the student intern will also take photos of each location so that future visitors can gain a sense of the building, special architectural features, reading rooms, and collections. Looking toward the future, the website will offer a compendium of local history research topics, collections, and tips for conducting local history research. In addition, it will further the

service-learning enterprise by listing projects that local organizations have proposed or would like completed.

### **Reflection on the Pedagogical Approach**

Through this community-based approach to course design, the students provided meaningful service to the History Department, university, and community, while doing the more traditional work of historians. The course design and assignments took the students out of the comfort zone of a traditional history course, and as a result, the professor was met at first with fear, resistance, and skepticism. Students expressed anxiety over the dramatic departure from the more-traditional research paper assignment. In the end, however, what made the course expectations manageable for both students and the professor was that each assignment scaffolded on the next, building on one another as the students acquired skill sets.<sup>18</sup> The numerous experiential student-centered learning techniques employed, such as facilitated group-learning strategies and use of collaborative technologies, helped the students make necessary connections between their academic work and its potential impact in the local community.<sup>19</sup>

Once again, the partnership between the classroom instructor and university librarian served as a central component to the success of the course, and could be an important relationship to cultivate in future service-learning endeavors. For this particular project, the librarian did this in several ways. First, she oriented other professors to the service-learning begun in the capstone course and then aided them in integrating it into their courses. The librarian also worked closely with the student intern who moved the project forward.

While historians and librarians have long linked instruction, a lot of room remains in making these collaborations more productive. Furthermore, the growth of information technology necessitates the expansion of such associations, because professors have incorporated information literacy as a desired outcome and librarians have a growing expertise in this area.<sup>20</sup> As a result of this instruction, students develop their academic and professional skills, including their approaches to scholarly research. Students become more familiar with the library and its services, which then encourages them to seek assistance outside of class for more in-depth development of their research and technical skills. Having this additional campus support also seems to alleviate some of the anxiety the students feel when encountering research assignments and presentations that fall outside of familiar formats.

In the future, in order to improve upon the quality of these service-based undertakings, an effective measurement of a course's service-learning

component needs to be developed. Students evaluated the class through a standard form used across the university. While the students rated the course highly, it would be informative to ask students to reflect directly on the service-learning aspects of the course in order to assess the ways in which service-learning helped to meet the course objectives. This diagnostic should collect from students whether they gained a broader appreciation of the discipline, a deeper understanding of the course content, and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility. Additionally, an assessment tool needs to be developed and administered to community partners in order to gauge their satisfaction with the completed project and also to gather information on projected future needs. Improving upon the communication flow with the community partners and establishing more formalized assessment practices will have a positive effect on sustaining relationships and building upon projects for the long term.

### **Conclusion**

Service-learning can enliven history and other humanities courses. Universities should encourage this by providing resources to train professors in the pedagogical techniques of service-learning as well as having an infrastructure to support such endeavors. While the fit may not seem as obvious as with some disciplines, service-learning has a place in history courses, and not just ones designated as public history. Throughout the years, history courses have had students work with libraries, archives, and museums, and as a result, community partnerships remain rich with these types of institutions.<sup>21</sup> Other avenues for collaborations exist as well. Students could research and write a history of a community organization, could create a guidebook for a historic town or site, or could research and apply for historical markers.<sup>22</sup> They could study an issue historically while volunteering at a contemporary organization. While working with these other types of organizations may not be among historians' usual practices, reaching out and asking how a group of history students might serve could lead to innovative and unique learning experiences as well as new and productive community partnerships.

In undertaking a service-learning project, it is necessary to identify and maintain communication with community partners and campus collaborators, establishing a dialogue for identifying potential projects and learning goals for academic/community collaborations. Cultivating a strong network of campus support may help in establishing connections in the local community, gaining access to funding opportunities, and designing and implementing service-learning activities. When looking for collaborators, service-learning program coordinators and regional

organizations can assist by matching faculty, students, and community organizations for collaborative, service-based projects. Other campus colleagues may have unique local contacts, or at least be able to “talk the talk” of their discipline with local archivists, businesspeople, curators, and librarians throughout the community. Working with teaching librarians, campus instructional designers, and educational technologists can help with some of the legwork in designing and executing non-traditional assignments, providing support for the academic goals in history classes. Other institutional help may also be necessary to complete the service-learning goals, as they may require students to develop a skill set that falls outside the realm of disciplinary content knowledge. In these cases, campus colleagues can support the development of students’ professional skills, such as grant writing, technical skills, design skills, and public relations, just to name a few.

Service-learning opens up an avenue for teaching a wide variety of academic and professional skills. It has the potential to motivate students to become civically engaged and take an interest in their surrounding community. Historians should embrace this pedagogy because students who are immersed in these types of service-oriented courses become motivated to engage with the past, while serving the present.

## Notes

1. Robert G. Bringle and Julie A. Hatcher, “A Service-Learning Curriculum for Faculty,” *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning* 2, no. 1 (Fall 1995): 112-122.
2. John Saltmarsh and Edward Zlotkowski, “Putting into Practice the Civic Purposes of Higher Education,” in *Higher Education and Democracy: Essays on Service-Learning and Civic Engagement*, ed. John Saltmarsh and Edward Zlotkowski (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2011), 2-3.
3. John Saltmarsh, “The Civic Promise of Service-Learning,” in *Higher Education and Democracy: Essays on Service-Learning and Civic Engagement*, ed. John Saltmarsh and Edward Zlotkowski (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2011), 29.
4. Organizations such as Campus Compact and the National Service-Learning Clearinghouse have made sample assignments and syllabi available. Campus Compact, a national coalition of college and university presidents founded in 1985, is dedicated to campus-based civic engagement and service-learning, and provides numerous resources for faculty interested in community-based approaches to learning, <<http://www.compact.org>>. The National Service-Learning Clearinghouse offers a comprehensive repository of service-learning literature in both K-12 and higher education institutions, <<http://www.servicelearning.org>>.
5. Ginsberg Center, *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning* (MPublishing and the University of Michigan Library, 1994-present), <<http://ginsberg.umich.edu/mjcs/>>.

6. "Library Resources by Series: 'AAHE's Series on Service-Learning in the Disciplines,'" *National Service-Learning Clearinghouse*, <[http://www.servicelearning.org/library\\_resources\\_series/AAHE%27s%20Series%20on%20Service-Learning%20in%20the%20Disciplines/](http://www.servicelearning.org/library_resources_series/AAHE%27s%20Series%20on%20Service-Learning%20in%20the%20Disciplines/)>.

7. The history volume is Ira Harkavy and Bill M. Donovan, eds., *Connecting Past and Present: Concepts and Models for Service-Learning in History* (Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing, 2005). In one chapter, historian Albert Camarillo describes how history students in a Homelessness and Poverty course at Stanford read historical monographs on issues in American history while also volunteering at homeless shelters. Albert Camarillo, "Reflections of a Historian on Teaching a Service-Learning Course about Poverty and Homelessness in America," in *Connecting Past and Present: Concepts and Models for Service-Learning in History*, ed. Ira Harkavy and Bill M. Donovan (Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing, 2005), 103-115.

8. Ira Harkavy and Bill M. Donovan, eds., *Connecting Past and Present: Concepts and Models for Service-Learning in History* (Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing, 2005).

9. National Council on Public History, "What is Public History?" *National Council on Public History*, <<http://ncph.org/cms/what-is-public-history/>>.

10. Gary Goldstein and Peter Fernald, "Humanistic Education in a Capstone Course," *College Teaching* 57, no. 1 (Winter 2009): 27.

11. In the past two years, professors from a variety of disciplines at Fredonia have infused service-learning into the curriculum. Not all of these have been at the capstone level, but several culminating courses in the humanities have employed service-learning projects and pedagogy. For an example of service-learning in an English capstone course at SUNY Fredonia, see Emily E. VanDette, "Engaging American Literature: Connecting Students and Communities," *Teaching American Literature: A Journal of Theory and Practice* 4, no. 1 (Fall 2010): 73-101.

12. While the number of courses incorporating service-learning remains relatively small, the numbers are rising and interest is growing, in large part due to campus outreach and professional development efforts coordinated at the institutional level. In 2009, the campus established the SUNY Fredonia Academic Community Engagement Center (FACE), which promotes campus and community collaboration in the areas of civic engagement, sustainability, service-learning, and community-based research, raising the visibility of service-learning as a pedagogical approach at the campus level. SUNY Fredonia, "Service-Learning at SUNY Fredonia," *SUNY Fredonia Academic Community Engagement Center (FACE)*, <<http://www.fredonia.edu/face/servicelearning/>>. Through FACE, a faculty coordinator acted as an instructional designer, supporting others in setting up frameworks for implementing service-learning in a variety of ways, offering professors both structure and flexibility in how projects could be included into the curriculum. In addition to the work through the FACE Center, the campus has also run a number of workshops through the university's Professional Development Center and its annual Teaching and Learning Conference. It has also tapped into regional resources such as the Western New York Service-Learning Coalition, which supports professional development and networking with regional community partners, <<http://www.wnyslc.org>>.

13. "Welcome to Fenton History Center," *Fenton History Center*, <<http://www.fentonhistorycenter.org>>.

14. The objectives were: examining local, urban, and immigration history; discovering the ways that historians develop new research projects; exploring how historians can engage their research in the context of the real world; and developing historical research and analytic skills.

15. "Overview of Google Docs," *Google Drive*, <<https://support.google.com/drive/bin/answer.py?hl=en&answer=143206&topic=21008&rd=1>>.

16. Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media, *Zotero*, <<http://www.zotero.org>>.
17. Middle States Commission on Higher Education, *Developing Research & Communication Skills: Guidelines for Information Literacy in the Curriculum*, (Philadelphia, PA: Middle States Commission on Higher Education, 2003), <<http://www.msche.org/publications.asp>>.
18. Katina Zammit, "The New Learning Environments Framework: Scaffolding the Development of Multiliterate Students," *Pedagogies* 5, no. 4 (October 2010): 325-337.
19. Gloria Brown Wright, "Student-Centered Learning in Higher Education," *International Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education* 23, no. 1 (January 2011): 92-97.
20. Dominique Daniel, "Teaching Students How to Research the Past: Historians and Librarians in the Digital Age," *The History Teacher* 45, no. 2 (February 2012): 261-282; Nancy J. Emmick, "Historians and Librarians: A Productive Partnership," *The History Teacher* 22, no. 4 (August 1989): 375-386.
21. Literature exists on students working with community libraries and museums. See for example: David Coles and Deborah Welch, "Bringing Campus and Community Together: Doing Public History at Longwood College," *The History Teacher* 35, no. 3 (February 2002): 229-236; Judith R. Saidel, Marion Thorstensen, and Peter S. O'Connell, "Historical Perspective, Imagination, and Writing: A Museum-High School Collaboration," *The History Teacher* 13, no. 3 (May 1980): 327-340.
22. E. J. Bourgeois II, "A Model History Course: History Practicum, Researching, Writing, and Publishing Local History," *The History Teacher* 32, no. 3 (May 1999): 381-394; Coles and Welch.