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## **Supporting Primary Source Instruction in the Undergraduate Classroom at Bowling Green State University: Summary Findings**

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SUPPORTING PRIMARY SOURCE INSTRUCTION IN THE  
UNDERGRADUATE CLASSROOM AT  
BOWLING GREEN STATE UNIVERSITY: SUMMARY FINDINGS



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## Introduction and Background

This report presents the findings and recommendations of research conducted as a part of a study on Teaching with Primary Sources at Bowling Green State University (BGSU) during the Fall 2019 semester. It is worthy to note that this research project was conducted prior to the COVID outbreak. Along with a cohort of over two dozen institutions as part of a national study coordinated by Ithaka S+R, members of the BGSU library faculty conducted this local study with faculty who teach undergraduates with primary sources in the classroom. This report draws only on interviews conducted at BGSU.

After describing the methodology employed, this report will present our findings covering four major themes identified in interviews: difficulties with primary sources, learning to work with primary sources, the role of librarians and archivists in primary source projects, and connections to information literacies. The report concludes with recommendations.

## Methodology

Following protocols and methodology established by Ithaka S+R, this research was conducted by Special Collections faculty members Colleen Boff, Stefanie Hunker, David Lewis, and Michelle Sweetser in Fall 2019, following approval from BGSU's Institutional Review Board. This research was made possible through funding provided by BGSU University Libraries, including costs to join the cohort, as well as all transcription expenses.

This research project examined the teaching support needs of instructors working with primary sources at the undergraduate level. Interview subjects must be paid by an academic department to teach undergraduates as the instructor of record<sup>1</sup> and needed to engage in teaching that facilitates student interaction with primary sources in a range of formats. For the purposes of this study, primary sources were defined as “historical or contemporary human artefacts which are direct witnesses to a period, event, person/group, or phenomenon, and which are typically used as evidence in humanities and some social science research ... sources analyzed as cultural artefacts rather than as data ... or as inspiration for literary or artistic composition.”<sup>2</sup>

Each member of the project team has an affiliation with one of BGSU's Special Collections units; as each unit serves different clientele, we were able to tap into knowledge about primary source instruction that occurs across a range of disciplines. The investigators initially generated a preliminary list of interview subjects and requested additional candidates through emails to the Deans of the College of Musical Arts, the College of Education and Human Development, and the College of Arts and Sciences. Individual emails inviting participation in the research project were distributed

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<sup>1</sup> Interviewees could include tenure-track and tenured faculty, adjunct instructors, graduate students serving as the instructor of record, visiting professors, etc.

<sup>2</sup> Ithaka S+R. *Implementation Guide: Supporting Teaching with Primary Sources*, 6.

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in mid-September 2019, with one-on-one interviews taking place in October and November 2019. See Appendices I and II for recruitment emails.

We conducted a total of 13 interviews with instructors from eight departments at BGSU: History (3), World Languages and Cultures (2), Musicology/Ethnomusicology (2), English (Rhetoric and Writing) (2), Art History (1), Ethnic Studies (1), Cultural and Critical Studies (1), and Media and Communication (1). A wide range of faculty rank was represented, including Associate Professor (5), Professor (2), Instructor (3), Lecturer (1), Senior Lecturer (1), and graduate student (1). The project team recorded all interviews and followed the semi-structured interview protocol developed by Ithaka S+R, which included questions on pedagogical training, course design, finding primary sources, and working with primary sources in the classroom. See Appendix III for the interview guide.

After sending interview recordings to a transcription service, members of the project team de-identified and corrected the transcripts before sending them to Ithaka S+R for their use in preparing a national report. Each project team member initially coded the same transcript and met to discuss the process. Once concerns were addressed, all members of the project team worked independently to code the remaining transcripts, employing their own categories. The team then created a joint list of emergent themes and met to select themes to be addressed in the final report. Each member of the team wrote one section of the report, focusing on a single theme as they reread all of the transcripts again. The research team developed the recommendations within this report while collaboratively revising and editing sections detailing our findings.

## Findings

### Difficulties with Primary Sources

For a variety of reasons, faculty often develop their own collections of primary source materials that they utilize within their courses and curricula. They also frequently suggested during our interviews that the selection of primary sources that they are able to utilize in the classroom have been limited in significant ways, due to a number of factors, including:

- Primary sources may not be available on a given topic
- Primary sources may not be available locally
- Students need training and support to engage with the sources faculty want to share
- Technology and media obsolescence make potential sources unavailable or unreliable

This section aims to provide further detail about these challenges that play a role in determining the primary sources that faculty employ in the classroom and provides some limited recommendations about how librarians and archivists can help to minimize these factors.

#### *Primary Sources May Not Be Available on a Given Topic*

Many archivists acknowledge that the archival record preserved in memory institutions typically represents those in power and, as a result, lacks primary sources created by those without power.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, while history happens around us on a daily basis and those events are documented by the media, there is a recognizable lag before the primary sources documenting those events are available for research and consideration in an archival setting.<sup>4</sup> Students' interest is often piqued by current topics and faculty seek to capitalize on this engagement, recognizing that there are problems inherent in a reliance on media interpretation of events. In the words of one interviewee, "If it's something really recent, then that can be difficult. And even journalistic sources - no offense to journalists - but you can't always trust that the quotes are accurate." Recency

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<sup>3</sup> The literature is too vast to represent here, but we recommend works by Howard Zinn, Helen Samuels, Terry Cook, Verne Harris, Randall Jimerson, Jeannette Bastian, and Michelle Caswell as starting points for those interested in the shifting recognition of archivists' participation in these power structures (as opposed to the neutral recipient of documentary evidence) and the importance of being seen within the historical record.

<sup>4</sup> Issues of restrictions in private archives and the delay in transfer of records by creators notwithstanding, most archival repositories have significant delays in making material available to the public. As Greene and Meissner wrote in their seminal 2005 article, "More Product, Less Process: Revamping Traditional Archival Processing," "processing is not keeping up with acquisitions and has not been for decades, resulting in massive backlogs of inaccessible collections at repositories across the country (and across all types of archival institutions). It should be dismaying to realize that our profession has been struggling with backlogs for at least sixty years." While many institutions have instituted changes in their processing practices as a result of Greene and Meissner's article, backlogs remain.

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poses challenges for faculty and students who want to use primary sources related to events that are still unfolding.

In other disciplines, the importance of oral/aural sources results in a lack of written records. For example, an ethnomusicologist described the challenge inherent in learning to play in African drumming traditions without written sources or direct access to teachers.<sup>5</sup> Western promotion and tenure systems do not reward the musical transcription required to make these works usable within classroom and community settings, meaning that the work rarely happens. As this faculty member indicated, “You need somebody to do that preparation work for that, and I think since that doesn’t count for tenure or getting a job, then those materials are very hard to come by.”

As a result of the lack of sources in the archival repository, interviewees have developed a variety of strategies to surface these stories in the archive: examining court records documenting the points of intersection between LBGTQ+ peoples and the judiciary or reading the narrative of an indentured servant from England as a point of entry to understanding a woman’s experience of gendered motherhood in slavery in the colonial period. Other faculty members work with students to initiate and manage oral history and ethnographic projects that fill in the gaps in the archival record.

### *Primary Sources May Not Be Available Locally or May Not Be Online*

As the university’s curriculum is international in scope and faculty members’ research interests are truly global, it is impossible for the BGSU Special Collections Department to collect primary sources in all of the areas where faculty teach. Some survey classes address such a variety of topics or geographies that it would be difficult for any archival repository to have strengths in all of the areas addressed. Faculty recognize that an educational institution in Northwest Ohio cannot collect everything, but they still want their students to have opportunities to engage with primary sources. Thus, many faculty we interviewed create their own collections of primary source documents for classroom use or find creative ways to marry other local and regional archival collections with their area of expertise. For example, one faculty member reported driving students to Chicago so that they could have the opportunity to physically examine manuscripts from the period and region under study.

Digital collections can fill some of the gaps in local representation of topics, but identification of useful digital repositories requires an investment of time that faculty are sometimes unable to make, and many expressed concern that materials presented online may not be representative of the topic and, in many cases, lack important contextual information. Those faculty members who want to limit sources to local collections also struggle with students who identify resources that are unavailable locally through Google or other search engines. Faculty are aware that students utilize Google to locate sources, and many teach strategies to improve search results and address issues of evaluating resources. For students, who are novice archival users,

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<sup>5</sup> For further reading on teaching and learning in the world music ensemble classroom, see Solís, T., ed. (2004). *Performing Ethnomusicology: Teaching and Representation in World Music Ensembles*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

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their Google search results introduce for the first time the notion that some resources do not exist in digital formats. One faculty member described it as a foreign concept for her students, as they do not know how to interpret online descriptive records without attached digital representations; it does not even occur to them that they might need to go to the library to interact with an original.

Finally, faculty indicated that while they are aware that there are other archival repositories in the region with potentially relevant materials, they are generally unfamiliar with those institutions' holdings. Many do not have the time to assess the value of a class visit or interaction with the repository; transportation and limited classroom time pose additional challenges to introducing students to archival resources throughout the region. One art historian, however, tasked with developing a practicum course embraced the course as an opportunity for exploration, saying "a lot of what I had to do since I'm not an expert in 19th or 20th century Toledo, is teach myself quite a bit. And the way I did that was to tap into the vast network of local historians and local archival collections ... since I wasn't truly familiar with the contents of these archives." As one history professor suggested, those who want to teach with primary sources would be wise to consider from the outset how to build a class around locally available primary sources, identifying the sources first and then building a course around them rather than the other way around.

### *Students Need Support to Meaningfully Engage with Sources*

At times, students do not have the requisite skills to engage with the primary sources that faculty would like to utilize for courses and assignments. Information literacy skill gaps are addressed later in this report but there are other barriers that warrant mentioning here.

One issue cited most frequently was the use of a foreign language in the original primary sources. In most cases, students are not fluent in the languages utilized in the primary sources. As one faculty member shared, "... all of the primary information is in a foreign language and there is like 0.05% of the students that could access the information in the documents. And so, it's sort of a moot point." Faculty then resort to selecting alternative primary sources that are available in English or sources that have minimal linguistic components. Others invest personal time in creating or seeking out translations that allow for use of the source by novices. For those who rely on audio or visual recordings, subtitles or captions may be a determining factor in whether a source can be incorporated into their classes.

Furthermore, students struggle to read primary sources and need opportunities to develop paleography skills. Several interviewees described work that they perform to make primary sources more accessible to their students, such as one who indicated, "I transcribe it for them. I keep the spelling and punctuation as it is. Except where I think they won't be able to follow it. Then I'll modernize spelling and punctuation. I want them to see what that original document looks like. They always see it on a PowerPoint slide. But what they have to actually deal with is the transcription, and sometimes even modernization of punctuation just so that it makes sense to them." Clearly, transcription



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work takes time and several interviewees indicated that it is often simply better to use alternate sources.

Finally, faculty understand that it takes time to engage with primary sources in the classroom, that they need to cut back on the volume that they share with students so that they are not overwhelmed and to allow time to engage in reading, reflection, and discussion. As a result, they have to omit many potential sources from consideration. As one interviewee indicated, it can be a challenge “to find material that is appropriately sized to use in class, because a lot of stuff will be like, here's this whole scrapbook, or an entire diary, or a collection of 100 letters ... I've found that a single letter, one, maybe two, entries of something, a specific text, a short speech [works well].”

### *Technology and Media Obsolescence Make Sources Unavailable or Unreliable*

As faculty members invest time in selecting sources for use in their classroom and in developing lectures and content around those resources, they have a vested interest in their long-term accessibility. Faculty in a number of fields, including Popular Culture, World Languages and Cultures, Media/Communication, and Music all expressed concerns that “something might be there this semester and then it's not there next semester” and that “a lot of things are on YouTube, but you have to check them on a regular basis because they disappear as quickly as they pop up.” As a result, they resort to a variety of work-arounds, including developing their own collections of media and obsolete technology to facilitate access when it is no longer available in the classroom, or they accept the vulnerability of the situation and the ongoing need to identify new resources, as does this faculty member:

*For example, there was some documentary about the history of M\*A\*S\*H the TV show, which was great. It had all the people who were on M\*A\*S\*H talking about it. It was never put on DVD. It was never put online. I've got a VHS tape of it, which I can show the clips. But I can't use it anymore. That's okay. I can work around it. But I mean, it's just you got used to that.*

One faculty member expressed concern about long-term impacts on the archival record, including “which kinds of primary sources are we going to have, and which ones are we going to lose,” but remains optimistic about the work being done to capture ephemeral or at-risk materials, such as tweets. Another indicated that they have concerns about how to make audiovisual materials accessible for those who have impairments, suggesting that materials that are not accessible (without transcripts or closed captions, for example) may not be utilized in a classroom setting.

There is an inherent tension between the desire of faculty to have students interact with primary sources as physical objects that were created by and have direct connections to people in the past and students' abilities to access the intellectual content of the source. Many faculty in our study strive to develop a sense of wonder and appreciation amongst their students and to foster a sense of adventure and discovery. As one faculty member

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indicated, “that connection with the primary document, it’s a big motivator for students. That’s why they really want to stay there.” To meet these objectives, faculty clearly prefer a physical, rather than digital, manifestation. For such an experience, they must rely on resources available at their local repository, where there is frequently a divergence between topics supported by locally available collections and courses that speak to global themes. While we, as archivists and librarians, might perceive institutionally- or consortially-based repositories of digitized primary sources as something of a remedy to this issue, digital collections will not deliver the physical experience that faculty claim as desirable. Because of this preference for a physical experience, digital collections are perhaps better suited to higher-level courses where students already or see the value of or the need to work with primary sources.

Although faculty are not always able to overcome challenges to incorporate the primary sources they desire into their classrooms, the faculty we interviewed seek out and employ a variety of strategies to “make things work.” As this project focused on faculty members who currently teach undergraduates with primary sources, it is impossible for us to know how many others found that the barriers and challenges were too high and abandoned the attempt to incorporate primary sources in the classroom. However, ways in which we can remove the barriers identified by interviewees in this study will likely benefit all who are interested in teaching with primary sources.

## Learning to Work with Primary Sources in the Undergraduate Classroom

Interviewees at BGSU discussed learning to teach with primary sources as an informal practice and reported learning techniques from colleagues or gleaning them from their own experiences as students. Most framed their learning as an “on the job” process or described it as happening “by osmosis” or through a process of “trial and error.” After discussing the interviewees’ formal education on teaching with primary sources, this section closely examines the “trial and error” practices of this group of instructors, finding common themes as the instructors discuss changes they have made to assignments and courses using primary sources.

### *Formal Education on Primary Source Instruction*

Formal pedagogical instruction is not routinely part of graduate education in the humanities.<sup>6</sup> Given the spotty nature of graduate instruction on pedagogy in humanities programs, it is unsurprising that no instructors that we interviewed reported receiving formal instruction on teaching with primary sources in the classroom. Many, however, gleaned lessons from their own classroom experiences at the undergraduate and graduate levels and a handful discussed professional development opportunities to which they had access after becoming faculty members.

Many interviewees discussed their graduate and/or undergraduate education as a primary site of informal instruction on teaching with primary sources. Several discussed their own introduction to research in their fields during graduate school in response to questions about learning to teach with primary sources; these experiences usually dovetailed with thesis or dissertation research projects. Interviewees largely agreed these formative research experiences provided models for using primary sources in their own teaching. A few also mentioned graduate courses on research methods, though no interviewees reported receiving any direct instruction on pedagogy during these courses. A few interviewees mentioned their own undergraduate experiences with primary sources as formative, though none made an explicit connection between those experiences and their current teaching practices. For many interviewees, though, undergraduate primary source experiences sparked their interest in their current fields.

Professional development on teaching with primary sources drew mixed reactions from this group of interviewees. Some lamented the lack of on-campus professional development opportunities for technology tools that enable primary source instruction or lack of faculty tours of on-campus repositories. Other interviewees mentioned the importance of campus professional development opportunities in developing their primary source assignments.

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<sup>6</sup> A recent survey of professors in the State University System of South Florida indicated that nearly 80% of professors surveyed were not required to take courses to develop teaching skills during graduate school (Robinson & Hope, 2013). An earlier survey of graduate students noted that only 46.4% of students surveyed had the option of taking a TA training course (and only 68.9% of those took the course), and only 51.2% had access to workshops or trainings tailored to teaching in their disciplines (Golde and Dore, 2001)

### *Revising Courses and Assignments Involving Primary Sources*

Since many instructors we interviewed had no formal training in teaching with primary sources, they often discussed their experiences as a “trial and error” process of developing courses and assignments. Interviewers did not routinely ask specific questions about revision of assignments or courses with primary source content, but many instructors discussed their own revision processes during our interviews. Their comments indicate that simplification of primary source assignments was a common revision tactic, as was changing assignments so that students were better able to contextualize and interpret primary sources.

When interviewees discussed changing assignments or courses, most discussed simplifying assignments involving primary sources. The reasons for simplification were many and included coordination of group assignments, shortening the length of time students spend on assignments, an increase in the number of students enrolled in the course, or avoiding overwhelming students. As discussed in a previous section of this report, many instructors also reported revising assignments because students had difficulty finding and accessing useful primary source materials. One instructor succinctly noted their own simplification of an assignment during an interview: “Originally I tried to give them a lot more leeway in coming up as group with what their project theme would be. That was a mistake ... with intro level classes it helps to make it much more specific so that they don't feel overwhelmed.”

Many instructors also changed primary source assignments and coursework to support their students' abilities to contextualize and interpret primary sources. As one interviewee put it: “not all primary sources, in my opinion, are created equal, and so they all need their own preparation.” Some instructors noted difficulties in interpreting particular formats (maps or films, for example), and others included preparatory assignments to guide students to think deeply and critically about sources.

A small number of interviewees discussed student interest as a guiding factor in either initiating or revising primary source assignments. For the few that mentioned it, though, increased student interest and engagement with course concepts was an important motivating factor. As one interviewee noted, “when I started using more primary documents, it just seemed that students appreciated it so much more.” That kind of deep, meaningful engagement, though, may not happen during the initial phase of primary source instruction, when assignments may be too complex or difficult for students to contextualize primary sources with other course content.

### *Colleagues as Resources for Revising and Creating Primary Source Experiences*

Interviewees used disciplinary colleagues as resources to generate, revise, and refine courses and assignments using primary sources. Certain kinds of support from colleagues and professional networks were common, such as sharing syllabi. The responses from this group of interviewees portrayed assignment/course creation and revision as generally solitary, however, since it lacked intensely collaborative interactions with colleagues such as co-teaching or sharing primary sources.

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Surprisingly, none of the interviewees routinely shared their own primary source teaching experiences with others, even if many expressed willingness to do so.

Interviewees commonly received teaching materials or encouragement from on-campus colleagues. Some took over courses with primary source components from other faculty, others received support from colleagues, such as lesson plans and other teaching tools, and a few simply saw their departmental colleagues teaching with primary sources and were inspired to do the same in their own undergraduate courses. Some instructors have incorporated primary sources from departmental colleagues into their own courses, both as examples of the kinds of primary sources in their discipline, and as material for an in-depth project. Interviewees' experiences working with library colleagues is discussed in more depth in the next section of this report.

Interviewees discussed receiving fewer teaching materials from off-campus colleagues, mostly in the form of syllabi. A small number of interviewees discussed hearing about or receiving primary source materials for use in courses from disciplinary colleagues from outside the BGSU campus.

Even though many of the interviewees reported receiving help from colleagues, few reported sharing their own primary source teaching materials. One instructor noted they did not share because the projects had mostly pedagogical value, and another simply noted that, while many instructors routinely share their disciplinary research, few share teaching strategies: "I don't want to say there are no mechanisms to do that, but I don't think it's the first thing we think of as instructors."

While instructors reported little or no formal instruction on teaching with primary sources, our conversations with this group of faculty indicated they largely learned these skills on the job, using their own teaching experiences and, to varying extents, the input of colleagues to fill gaps in formal instruction. Additionally, instructors focused on their own disciplinary training in analyzing primary sources, particularly their own introduction to research methods during graduate school, as a model for their primary source assignments with undergraduates at BGSU.

Simplifying assignments in various ways has been the main strategy that BGSU instructors employed to revise their primary source assignments. This strategy suggests that many primary source assignments are initially too broad and may assume students possess information literacy skills that many do not have. While not indicated by our interviews, the converse is also possible: some primary source assignments may assume students do not have experience with some information literacy concepts when, in fact, they are competent or adept in those areas. Some academic departments at BGSU have developed a scaffolded curriculum in which students sequentially learn skills in finding, assessing, contextualizing, and analyzing primary sources, but most others do not. For departments or courses where primary source instruction could be "one shot," depending on which core and elective courses a student chooses, how does

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this simplification and lack of scaffolding affect BGSU students' developing information literacy skills?

Learning to teach with primary sources is a *disciplinary* process for most professors we interviewed, steeped in practices and conversations within specific disciplines or informed by the culture and practices of specific departments. In addition, despite some interaction with colleagues and use of syllabi that are available on listservs or accessed via web searching, syllabus and assignment creation remains a solitary process for most professors we interviewed. These trends and the desire expressed by some interviewees for more avenues for interaction and sharing during course planning, point to a useful intervention for academic librarians as professionals who often manage collaborative projects and whose knowledge may span multiple disciplines. What could happen to this process on our – or any – campus if there were more intentional ways for instructors in different departments and disciplines to connect? And, since these kinds of connections are new and often not rewarded by tenure and promotion structures, how can we incentivize instructors to participate, and make the potential benefits of such collaboration clear?

The informal process of learning about primary source instruction suggests some areas for growth for BGSU Special Collections, including instructional sessions for BGSU graduate students who intend to become faculty on teaching with primary sources, a more coordinated, formalized mechanism for instructors to share resources on primary source instruction, and increasing library support for instructors, particularly in the areas of assignment and course development.

### Working Relationship Between Faculty and Librarians/Archivists

During the course of our interviews, faculty members ascribed several different roles to librarians and archivists while creating and implementing assignments using primary sources. Faculty responses suggest that the most prominent role they ascribe to librarians and archivists<sup>7</sup> is that of caretakers of the scholarly record responsible for the preservation and organization of our collective cultural heritage. Additional roles for librarians and archivists surfaced and include descriptors such as “partner or team member,” “resources for help or connection,” “friend,” or “collaborator.” In a few interviews, faculty members discussed no interactions at all with the library or with librarians or archivists.

It is apparent that librarians and archivists at BGSU have strong support among teaching faculty. Several faculty members spoke positively about the library and librarians and archivists: one noting that they are lucky to have “such a student-centered resource,” and another who actively encouraged their department to use the library for course assignments. Another, when asked for advice on planning primary source assignments, also discussed the library: “Meet with librarians ... email them, set up an appointment and just talk through. The librarians and archivists always have good suggestions for projects for how archival materials can be used.”

Faculty work with librarians and archivists included teaching undergraduates about primary resources. The work of librarians and archivists providing access to primary sources is discussed in an earlier section of this document; this section focuses on the use of librarians and archivists in preparing for and executing classroom instruction. In interviews, faculty described seeking input from librarians and archivists to shape their syllabus or design specific assignments. In terms of classroom instruction, one faculty member described their work with librarians and archivists on a digital gallery assignment as a partnership. Other faculty brought librarians and archivists to work with classes when they needed to find and analyze print primary sources for assignments. When using digital primary sources, faculty often taught students these skills without the assistance of librarians and archivists. There was no evidence of faculty requesting librarians and archivists to teach within an online learning environment. Further discussions with faculty about what kinds of resources are available digitally, even from our own collections, might prove fruitful in discovering why this might be. In a post-COVID teaching environment with remote and hybrid approaches to instruction and limits on physical interaction with archival resources, we may discover a shift to include librarians and archivists in online learning opportunities.

Faculty interviews provided particularly useful insights when it came to course integrated instruction using primary sources. Some faculty members had students work with librarians and archivists to find and analyze sources in upper division courses after primary source experiences with small, curated collections of sources in survey courses. Other interviewees planned and executed their primary source assignments using their own collections of primary sources and without involving librarians and

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<sup>7</sup> Interviewees sometimes referred to librarians and archivists by name or by referencing “the library.”

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archivists; one faculty member felt it was too confusing to bring someone else in to work with their class. Similarly, we found little evidence of librarians and archivists teaching information literacy concepts, as described in the next section.



### Information Literacy Connections

Most faculty described information literacy in the context of assignment design, their role in teaching these skills, or their perception of student abilities but none of them explicitly used information literacy as a term. They did, however, frequently use the terms that constitute commonly understood definitions of information literacy in the library profession<sup>8</sup> such as “locating,” “evaluating,” and “citing” information. When explicitly asked, several interviewees saw information literacy as the primary focus of their assignment design and an essential framework to teach students how to work with primary sources in their courses, again often without using the term information literacy. In some instances, faculty referenced their own disciplinary frameworks that resemble competencies that shape what it means to be an information literate person. For example, one faculty member described their work with students as “guiding them through different levels of doing rhetorical analysis and then asking increasingly sophisticated questions.”

Faculty perceive that students struggle with the basics of how to find information, how to evaluate primary and secondary information sources, and how to determine the origin of sources for citation purposes. They also expressed the need to help students develop critical reading skills. Some interviewees speculated that students are not able find, evaluate, and cite sources adequately because they are pressed for time, they have developed skimming habits that are difficult to break, or they have many distractions competing for their attention. The ability to reflect on what they can learn from an artifact in order to develop further research questions to pursue was frequently observed by faculty as a developing skill among students as well.

### Locating Sources

Interviewees frequently mentioned that students’ ability to locate information, especially related to primary sources, was initially hampered by the assumption that everything is online. If the faculty did not bring them to the library, faculty assumed, judging from previous experience, it was unlikely that students would come on their own. Further, the concept of an archive is simply not in students’ realm of experience, especially first year undergraduates; interviewees frequently described students as feeling confused and anxious when navigating an archive. As one interviewee explains, “One of the biggest hurdles is just purely their unfamiliarity with this type of research. For a couple of weeks and occasionally still, they will mix up archive and artifact as terms because they’re just utterly unfamiliar with the concepts at all. They are really nervous about trying to do primary source research because most of them have never encountered or been asked to do that type of research before, based on kind of how they’ve responded in class and

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<sup>8</sup> American Library Association. (1989). *Presidential Committee on Information Literacy: Final Report*. <http://www.ala.org/acrl/publications/whitepapers/presidential>; Association of College and Research Libraries. (2015, February 2; Adopted by the ACRL Board, 2016, January 11). *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education*. <http://www.ala.org/acrl/standards/ilframework>; Association of College & Research Libraries Rare Book and Manuscript Section and Society for American Archivists (ACRL RBMS-SAA) Joint Task Force on Primary Source Literacy. (2018). *Guidelines for Primary Source Literacy*. <https://www2.archivists.org/sites/all/files/GuidelinesForPrimarySourceLiteracy-June2018.pdf>.

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the questions that I've gotten, it just seems totally alien to them." Some reported that students would give up quickly when their catalog or database searches failed. One faculty member reported their students failed to connect an archival finding aid with physical items in the library collection, expressing surprise that the finding aid did not always link to digital images. As one faculty member described it, "there's this artifact that exists physically in the library but it's not digital. That's a foreign concept to them. If they can't find it online, it doesn't exist." Overall, basic search skills appeared to be lacking, including skills like how to generate keywords or what search tools to use beyond Google or Wikipedia. There was significant evidence of faculty spending class time introducing students to these basic search skills.

### *Evaluating Sources*

Use of questionable information sources among students was a frequent observation. There were multiple comments that suggest students lack the ability to assess the quality or validity of the information source, especially those freely available on the internet. As one faculty member describes, "I've had students try to do papers, say, on Japanese internment, and they just pull together all this weird stuff that it's really questionable, and it's hard to get them to understand that, just because they can pull something off a site, doesn't mean it's the best thing to use or that it's representative, all that kind of thing."

In order to teach students how to evaluate primary sources one faculty member spends two class sessions teaching students how primary sources are produced. They ask questions such as "How are they generated? Who generates them? What is the audience they are aiming at? What do we need to know to understand the bias or the perspective in the source? What are our obligations to investigate the people that produce these sources?" Another faculty member teaches students to think about the perspective of the person as producer of a primary source, particularly around artifacts created by and for Black communities in the United States. Another faculty member used memes, a familiar form to most undergraduates, as a starting place to ask students to think about intended audience with unfamiliar primary sources.

### *Citing Sources*

Faculty perception of students' discomfort with citing primary sources was consistent. In interviews, faculty noted that students struggle with distinguishing between a primary source and another version of that source. For example, they are not sure how to cite a digitized photograph of a painting in a museum versus the original painting that resides in the museum. Surprisingly, there was no mention of struggles with the mechanics of using a citation style guide. The struggles seem to singularly reside with correctly referencing the provenance of an object. Several faculty expressed their commitment to modeling sound citation practices by including references in handouts they supplied to the students. As one faculty member describes it, "every handout there's a source here, so the students know where it came from... There's never any question about where it came from. I'm pretty scrupulous about citation."

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The role of the faculty member in teaching information literacy skills seemed to overshadow that of the librarian or archivist in our study. As librarians and archivists, we created LibGuides, provided tours, pulled materials and were referred to frequently by faculty with high regard. However, faculty almost exclusively taught information literacy competencies. There were many examples of faculty modeling search behaviors most frequently in the form of doing online demonstrations of search strategies. Faculty usually began the search process with a simple keyword search and modeled the messiness of doing a live search to show students their thought process in discovering more keywords to use, evaluating sites on the fly and crafting additional search questions. This modeling of information literacy habits did not appear to be scripted or predetermined, nor was it done by a librarian or archivist. Again, this seems to point to the similarities between what we as librarians and archivists define as information literacy and what faculty in other disciplines deem essential when learning the skills, abilities and dispositions of working with information and primary sources in their respective fields.

## Recommendations

### *Work Together to Fill the Gaps*

We should continue to shed the notion of neutral observation and engage in archival outreach that brings in a diverse set of records and work to ensure the creation of records that will fill gaps in repositories' current collections.

As faculty members are already training students in ethnography, oral history, and other methodologies to create records where none exist or where they are locally unavailable, we should partner with them to explore opportunities to bring such records into the archives. The University Libraries can further support these efforts by underwriting or supporting workshops and training opportunities, making equipment available for loan (recording devices, cameras, scanners, etc.), and providing platforms for the delivery of and interaction with content captured through these efforts, regardless of whether they can be formally ingested into the archive. Additionally, we should educate faculty and students about the administrative paperwork that would be required from the archives' perspective to facilitate long-term preservation and access to these important resources.

Similarly, there are opportunities for teaching faculty to work with BGSU librarians and archivists on outreach; a potential project could address perceived gaps in the record through collaborative outreach to community and organizational leaders to encourage archival donation. Throughout these efforts, archivists must be mindful of inherent power structures represented by their positions and the organizations they represent.

As students are frequently interested in current events that are not yet documented in archival spaces, we can employ a number of strategies to become more responsive to their needs and interests. This might take a variety of forms. For example, we could:

- Engage students in the process of creating the archive, employing tools and strategies such as DocNow, Archive-It (educational partnership), or the contribution plugin for Omeka, and educating students about the ethics and rights surrounding such efforts. Many institutions, including BGSU, quickly implemented COVID-19 documentation projects in the spring and summer of 2020 and can build on these experiences, as well as the resources created by SAA's Tragedy Response Initiative Task Force.<sup>9</sup> This kind of work, however, will require a significant investment of time and a strong collaboration between the faculty and the archivist or librarian.
- Prioritize the processing, description, and access of unprocessed collections in which there is student research interest.
- Collaborate with faculty to develop classroom exercises with learning objectives that help students develop skills in interpreting, analyzing, and evaluating sources, as these skills can help minimize the perceived problems in interpretation.

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<sup>9</sup> The resulting toolkit, *Documenting in Times of Crisis: A Resource Kit*, is available at <https://www2.archivists.org/advocacy/documenting-in-times-of-crisis-a-resource-kit>.

### *Work Together to Acclimate Students to Archives & Primary Sources*

As faculty frequently cited their lack of time to learn about and explore collections and a lack of classroom time to introduce repositories, we should consider new and additional means of archival outreach to increase awareness and use of their holdings. This work can take a variety of forms. For example, we could:

- Create introductory videos that students watch before a classroom visit that provide information such as overviews of reading room policies, how to search the finding aids, how to request materials, etc. These videos would allow students to spend the majority of their class time interacting with primary sources.
- Hold open-houses or one-on-one appointments to discuss individual teaching needs and introduce collections to faculty members. These could also be limited to one repository or coordinated regionally to introduce a broader range of people and resources to one another, perhaps through Archives Crawl/Bazaar or Doors Open models.<sup>10</sup>
- Provide services to make collections of primary sources curated by faculty members available to others.
- Provide services to support remote instruction with primary sources, such as digitization and delivery of content for course-specific purposes, or Zoom/WebEx instruction sessions to deliver content to classes unable to travel to a repository with relevant materials.
- Create regional networks of archives that share information about holdings through topically-based digital portals or guides and facilitate the loan of materials amongst repositories, emulating cooperative access programs elsewhere.
- Initiate collaborations between teaching faculty and librarians or archivists to identify and implement scaffolded experiences in departmental curricula allowing students to gradually build experience and facility working with primary sources, while also allaying concerns some faculty may have regarding students being confused about librarians and archivists working with them in class.

### *Work Together to Support Teaching*

Many of the faculty we interviewed noted their undergraduate and graduate coursework was formative, both for their academic careers and their work with primary sources in their disciplines. Our interviews also indicate a lack of formal instruction on teaching

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<sup>10</sup> While many such events are focused on introducing members of the public to archival repositories and their holdings, the model could also be adapted to introduce a more specific audience, such as faculty and students. For Archives Crawl examples, see the Los Angeles Archives Bazaar (<https://laassubject.org/archives-bazaar>), the Oregon Archives Crawl (<https://portlandarchives.wordpress.com/crawl/>), and the Austin Archives Bazaar (<http://www.austinarchivesbazaar.org/>). Doors Open / Open Doors programs include Ohio Open Doors (<https://www.ohiohistory.org/preserve/state-historic-preservation-office/ohio-open-doors>) and Doors Open Milwaukee (<https://historicmilwaukee.org/doors-open/>).

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with primary sources at the graduate level. We propose the following actions to better support teaching with primary sources:

- Seek out collaborations with instructors in undergraduate research methods courses in the humanities to support students' continuing work with primary sources in later coursework and capstone projects.
- Collaborate with the instructors of pedagogy courses for humanities graduate students, where there is interest, in order to give emerging instructors formal training and experience in teaching with primary sources.

### *Work Together to Support Faculty Research*

As the work of identification, selection, reproduction, transcription, and translation can be time-consuming and unrewarded within faculty promotion and tenure models, we should serve as advocates for our teaching faculty colleagues and provide opportunities, where possible, to help incentivize work that puts the primary sources in our care in front of students in the classroom. We could encourage this kind of work with projects like the following:

- Work with donors to create research grants to provide faculty with funding or release time to explore the archives.
- Serve as a bridge to transcription and captioning services (particularly for time-based media), to community resources for translation of materials that might otherwise be inaccessible, and to technological equipment in our labs that can help to ensure that resources selected by faculty members remain playable. Within our own workflows, archivists and librarians can prioritize the digitization, captioning, and translation of material that will be used immediately, and in a coordinating role for outsourcing, we can tap into economies of scale unavailable to individual faculty members.

### *Work Together to Enhance Student Learning*

Teaching practices and course assignment development are generally a solitary process, as evidenced by the spotty nature of collaboration among colleagues on primary source teaching, minimal input from librarians and archivists in the creation and revision of assignments, and lack of professional development on primary source instruction. However, some departments have developed a “culture” of sustained, thoughtful primary source instruction in their undergraduate programs that could serve as an exemplar. Based on what we have learned from this research endeavor, we will explore the possibility of establishing a Learning Community where librarians and archivists meet regularly with teaching faculty to bridge some of the gaps described in this report.

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## Appendices

### Appendix I: Email Recruitment Text

Subject. BGSU's study on teaching with primary sources

Dear [first name of instructor],

The BGSU University Libraries Special Collections Department is conducting a study on the practices of humanities and social sciences instructors in order to improve support services for teaching undergraduates with primary sources. We are interviewing instructors whose undergraduate students engage with primary sources in any format, such as by conducting research, analyzing sources as evidence, or curating collections of sources.

Would you be willing to participate in a one-hour interview to share your unique experiences and perspective? Interviews would take place on campus at a time to be arranged.

Our local BGSU study is part of a suite of parallel studies at 25 other institutions of higher education in the US and UK, coordinated by Ithaka S+R, a not-for-profit research and consulting service. The information gathered at BGSU will also be included in a landmark capstone report by Ithaka S+R and will be essential for BGSU to further understand how the support needs of instructors in teaching with primary sources are evolving more widely.

If you have any questions about the study, please don't hesitate to reach out. Thank you so much for your consideration.

Sincerely,

David Lewis ([drlewis@bgsu.edu](mailto:drlewis@bgsu.edu)) 419-372-9238 (principal investigator)

Colleen Boff ([cboff@bgsu.edu](mailto:cboff@bgsu.edu)) 419-372-7909

Stefanie Hunker ([sdennis@bgsu.edu](mailto:sdennis@bgsu.edu)) 419-372-7893

Michelle Sweetser ([msweets@bgsu.edu](mailto:msweets@bgsu.edu)) 419-372-8085



## Appendix II: Sample Recruitment Follow-Up Email

Dear [first name of instructor],

Thank you for expressing your interest in participating in this study. We can set up a time to interview you at your convenience. Please advise me of your availability in [time frame].

During the interview, I would like to ask you to share a copy of a syllabus from a course in which you teach with primary sources that we can discuss in detail. We will use the syllabus as a prompt to discuss elements of course design. I will not share or reproduce the syllabus except for research purposes, and the confidentiality of your interview will be maintained. Sharing a syllabus is optional and you can still be interviewed if you decide not to share one with me.

Finally, before the interview begins, I will ask you to provide verbal consent in order to ensure that you understand the study and are willing to participate in it. I am attaching the verbal consent protocol to this email in case you'd like to look over it now.

Sincerely,

David Lewis ([drlewis@bgsu.edu](mailto:drlewis@bgsu.edu)) 419-372-9238 (principal investigator)  
Colleen Boff ([cboff@bgsu.edu](mailto:cboff@bgsu.edu)) 419-372-7909  
Stefanie Hunker ([sdennis@bgsu.edu](mailto:sdennis@bgsu.edu)) 419-372-7893  
Michelle Sweetser ([msweets@bgsu.edu](mailto:msweets@bgsu.edu)) 419-372-8085

## Appendix III: Semi-Structured Interview Guide

### Starting the tape recorder

- Turn the recorder on using the slider button on the side – you will need to hold the slider to the on position for 1-2 seconds.
- Place the recorder between you and the participant, ideally facing both of you.
- Press the record button – the light around the button will flash, but you are not recording yet.
- When ready, press the button a second time. The light around the button will stay on constantly. You are now recording.

### Consent

- Confirm interviewee has read and agrees to the consent document.

### Background

- Briefly describe your experience teaching undergraduates. Examples: how long you've been teaching, what you currently teach, what types of courses (introductory lectures, advanced seminars) you teach.
  - How does your teaching relate to your current or past research?

### Training and Sharing Teaching Materials

- How did you learn how to teach undergraduates with primary sources?
  - Did you receive support or instruction from anyone else in learning to teach with primary sources?
  - Do you use any ideas, collections of sources, or other instructional resources that you received from others?
  - Do you make your own ideas, collections of sources, or other instructional resources available to others? If so, how? If not, why not?

### Course Design

- I'd like you to think of a specific course in which you teach with primary sources that we can discuss in greater detail.
  - Do you have a syllabus you're willing to show me? I will not share or reproduce this except for research purposes.
  - Tell me a bit about the course. Examples: pedagogical aims, why you developed it, how it has evolved over time
  - Explain how you incorporate primary sources into this course. If appropriate, refer to the syllabus
  - Why did you decide to incorporate primary sources into this course in this way?
  - What challenges do you face in incorporating primary sources into this course?
  - Do you incorporate primary sources into all your courses in a similar way? Why or why not?

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- In this course, does anyone else provide instruction for your students in working with primary sources? Examples: co-instructor, archivist, embedded librarian, teaching assistant
  - How does their instruction relate to the rest of the course?
  - How do you communicate with them about what they teach, how they teach it, and what the students learn?

### Finding Primary Sources

- Returning to think about your undergraduate teaching in general, how do you find the primary sources that you use in your courses? Examples: Google, databases, own research, library staff
  - Do you keep a collection of digital or physical sources that you use for teaching?
  - What challenges do you face in finding appropriate sources to use?
- How do your students find and access primary sources?
  - Do you specify sources which students must use, or do you expect them to locate and select sources themselves?
  - If the former, how do you direct students to the correct sources? Do you face any challenges relating to students' abilities to access the sources?
  - If the latter, do you teach students how to find primary sources and/or select appropriate sources to work with? Do you face any challenges relating to students' abilities to find and/or select appropriate sources?

### Working with Primary Sources

- How do the ways in which you teach with primary sources relate to goals for student learning in your discipline?
  - Do you teach your students what a primary source is? If so, how?
  - To what extent is it important to you that your students develop information literacy or civic engagement through working with primary sources?
- In what formats do your students engage with primary sources? Examples: print editions, digital images on a course management platform, documents in an archive, born-digital material, oral histories
  - Do your students visit special collections, archives, or museums, either in class or outside of class? If so, do you or does someone else teach them how to conduct research in these settings?
  - Do your students use any digital tools to examine, interact with, or present the sources? Examples: 3D images, zoom and hyperlink features, collaborative annotation platforms, websites, wikis
  - To what extent are these formats and tools pedagogically important to you?
  - Do you encounter any challenges relating to the formats and tools with which your students engage with primary sources?

### Wrapping Up

- What advice would you give to a colleague who is new to teaching with primary sources?
- Looking toward the future, what challenges or opportunities will instructors encounter in teaching undergraduates with primary sources?