



Guest Editorial—“Building Research Communities During a Pandemic”

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This editorial is adapted from Prof. Millar’s presentation “Humanities Research in Covid Times” organized by UO’s Center for Latino and Latin American Studies.

What does it mean to do research during a global pandemic? Many of us have grappled with challenges and tragedies over the past year, but we also acquired new skills as our educational lives shifted largely or entirely online. Students and professors have learned to use online technologies to create new scholarly communities, to share resources, and to work around limitations to accessing faraway materials. Together, we have explored new kinds of engagements with our scholarly topics through avenues that we might not have discovered if our research had not been interrupted by the Covid-19 pandemic.

Over the past year I also found myself reconnecting with the basic research skills and working around limitations that I first encountered as an undergraduate. In my fields of Caribbean and African literature, my research relies on travel to distant archives and libraries, which usually do not have online collections or even online catalogs. I study books that are sometimes sold only locally and don’t make their way onto global book retail websites. I depend on interlibrary loans from the networks of US and international libraries that share materials through the mail. None of these research pathways has been fully available over the past year. I had to figure out how to change my focus, adjust the scope of my projects, reach out to online communities of other scholars for help, and in one case, acknowledge in my footnotes that there were resources I knew existed that I simply could not include in my bibliography. I did what I could in the circumstances and filed these changes away as new directions I could return to in the future.

Undergraduates make original research contributions to their fields with many of the same constraints, but these can often provide future learning opportunities. One of the most valuable parts of my undergraduate research experience was beginning to learn how to be part of a scholarly community. My senior year of college, one of my professors invited me to present a paper at our university conference, where undergraduates and faculty participate on panels together. I drafted and redrafted my paper and practiced my presentation so it was as polished as I could make it. However, I found the most engaging part of the experience was the part I had not rehearsed: when the audience asked questions. They brought up aspects I hadn’t considered and offered new perspectives on my analysis.

Similarly, during my undergraduate thesis defense, my professors asked me questions that I had prepared for through my research and writing, as well as some that I couldn’t yet answer. These questions stayed with me and helped guide my research as a graduate student and a professor. Through both my first conference presentation and my first major research project I learned that scholarly research is an ongoing activity, and one in which we collaborate with others in our fields, whether we are part of a team of researchers and authors or writing our own papers. We can be satisfied with finished projects after we have presented them, published them,



or successfully defended them. At the same time, finished research projects become an opportunity for new audiences to engage with our research, and for new questions to arise that can help us think in new directions.

The pandemic has emphasized these lessons for me, and, I think, for many undergraduates. Our research has often benefited from the connections and collaborations that became possible through Zoom and other online platforms, and the willingness to share and help each other as we all figured out how to reach our research goals amid the challenges of the covid era. Undergraduates should feel proud of their research accomplishments carried out under difficult circumstances. They can also be proud to carry with them in their post-college lives valuable lessons in collaboration and adaptability and being open to future opportunities to put their research skills to new uses.