

Tia Williams

Library Research Award – Senior Thesis

My interest in research was in part born out of a passion for my home community of New Orleans. Throughout my time at the University of Notre Dame, I read and completed coursework in the Education, Schooling, and Society (ESS) program about the complicated and structural issues and inequities within educational systems, such as those in New Orleans. In this time, I also learned that through research, one can contribute in actionable ways to improve those impacted by the weight of these issues. From these experiences and reflections, I decided to write a thesis in ESS focused on the educational landscape in New Orleans following Hurricane Katrina.

As this project began taking shape, I consulted Leslie L. Morgan, our education librarian. I spoke with Leslie on the phone briefly before our meeting about my interests and topics, simply focusing on New Orleans education and Hurricane Katrina. During this first meeting, she not only guided me through the databases and resources that the Hesburgh Library had available online, such as ERIC and Web of Science, but she took the time to share representative texts with me. These texts, including journal articles and reports about my topic from the resources Leslie shared, allowed me to begin mapping how the moving parts of the research were connected. Based on the type of research I was conducting – a meta-analysis at this point in time – Leslie also offered my advisor and I a short course on how to utilize RefWorks to manage the large amounts of data I was collecting and reading and referred me to Eric Lease Morgan, who became an integral resource in this work.

Leslie shared that Eric's program, a distant reader, proved useful for seniors with similar projects in the past, especially for keeping track and analyzing data. Upon meeting with Eric in

the Center for Digital Scholarship, my interests were still broad. I had an idea of what the story I would uncover about New Orleans public education would be, but I was unsure of what path to take. I began with literature collected via electronic searches through OneSearch through the University of Notre Dame, Web of Science, and ERIC by the Institute of Education Sciences, using the search terms ‘New Orleans’ AND ‘public schools’. The search was bound for publication dates between 2005 and 2023, and source types including peer-reviewed journal articles and book chapters. This produced 2,737 results which Eric helped me save as TSV files to be compiled into a study carrel for the distant reader.

At this point, Eric and I had conversations about what my question was and could transform into. He assured me that I had valuable information to share and that in learning to navigate the work using the distant reader, I would come to understand the literature and my research more fully. Eric had me set up an account with the Center for Research Computing so that I could not only observe what he was using the distant reader to do but also have hands-on experience.

With this, I was able to conduct an initial search for the term ‘orleans’ in which citations were pulled that contained the term in the title, keywords, or abstract. This was done to confirm that the citations pulled from the databases and search engines aligned with the search terms and main topic of this research. The search produced 586 of the total 2,737 sources. A subsequent study carrel containing these 586 sources was created and searched accordingly. This iterative process of searching and confirming allowed me to piece together the story of New Orleans public education following Hurricane Katrina, as, with Eric’s help, I was able to see data such as which keywords were most used, how publications surged in certain years, and even how well

the distant reader searches were allowing me to grasp what I was trying to through wordmaps Eric formed. I was in fact reaching the deeper understanding that he explained I would.

With these weekly meetings with Eric and guidance from my advisor, Dr. McKenna, I was able to write a thesis that I felt proud of and that I believe can make real change for the students and New Orleans. The final product of this work was a comprehensive review of literature about New Orleans education from 2005-2023 that – with the details found through library resources – offers a richer picture of how students, teachers, and community members were impacted by Hurricane Katrina and the subsequent charterization of the school system. Beyond this work, these library resources helped me navigate a new methodological approach that will be invaluable in my future, especially as I pursue my Ph.D. in educational research and policy in the fall. This process has been a reminder of how research can and should be done in community to create work that goes far beyond the individual.