

## Intensive Faculty-Student Research At the Library of Congress

By Gregory Wegner

Three faculty-student research teams convened for ten days this summer in Washington, DC to participate in the GLCA-Library of Congress Digital Humanities Student-Faculty Research Program. Two of the three research teams were from Hope College in Holland, Michigan (a GLCA member college), while a third team was from the Bratislava International School of Liberal Arts (BISLA) in Slovakia – a partner institution of the extended network of U.S. and international institutions known as the Global Liberal Arts Alliance (GLAA). This summer marks the second year of a program designed to support a type of faculty-mentored student research which more often occurs in the natural sciences than in the non-quantitative humanities and social science disciplines.

A key component this program is to provide undergraduate students with opportunities for sustained access to the Library's resources and staff at a level that is more commonly associated with advanced graduate students and distinguished senior scholars. As in its pilot year of 2012, this summer's program made it possible for faculty and students to engage with peers from another nation in the course of conducting their own research, thereby providing opportunities for intercultural exchange and enrichment.

Each faculty-student team was supported by a dedicated research staff member of the Library of Congress, as well as by a librarian of the team's home campus. The larger number of proposals received and the increase in staff support from the Library this year both attest to the value of this joint program and its potential to provide opportunities for faculty-mentored undergraduate research in liberal arts colleges both domestic and international.

### **Navigating Realms of Knowledge**

The first hours of the student-faculty teams in the Library were necessarily given to orientation and the development of research strategies. The Library of Congress is the largest library that has ever existed in human history. It has some 24 million books, in addition to extensive collections of films, musical recordings, legal and political documents, original manuscripts, dissertations, several million microfilms of periodicals, and some 700 subscription databases in digital form. About 42 percent of its collection consists of works published in languages other than English. The sheer volume of material can be overwhelming at first, though the teams quickly learned how to make most efficient use of their ten days on site, with the guidance of the Library's research librarians and reading room directors.

In learning to navigate the domains of knowledge resources at the Library, the research teams learned initially about the power of bibliographic tools – within the digital realms as well as in printed volumes. An early lesson to emerge was the value of seeking beyond key words in the search for relevant works on a topic. The teams learned that one of the first steps in

researching a topic is to discover how a topic is described by scholars and practitioners of a field, as conveyed in the Library of Congress subject headings and other bibliographic tools.

In addition to the general primer on research tools and strategies, the research teams received orientations from the leaders of particular reading rooms within the Library corresponding to their particular research topic – including staff of the periodicals collection, the law library, the European reading room, and others.

### **Strands of Inquiry**

The faculty-student teams chosen to participate in this program each identified a research topic that is broad and multi-faceted. While the professor who led a team had outlined the contours of a topic, each member of a research team pursued different avenues to shed light on a research theme. The process engaged a faculty leader and students alike in a process of new discovery, and each team met daily to compare notes and recount what each team member had encountered from the materials consulted. These exchanges helped each team member to understand his or her research in the larger context of the group project. Often a team's work shed light on dimensions of a topic that extended beyond its original perimeters, with the result that the conception of the topic itself came to identify different dimensions. In addition to the support provided by Library of Congress research staff, student-faculty teams were accompanied by a home-campus librarian, who assisted the team members in identifying relevant materials. This professional development experience also allowed the home-campus librarian to develop contacts with staff of the Library of Congress and to support a team's continuing research after returning to the home institution.

One of this year's research teams, led by Dr. Virginia Beard of Hope College, examined the phenomenon of homelessness in the U.S. from the time of the Civil War through the present. Team members studied newspapers, images from comic books, as well as data bases through the course of several decades to learn how the poor and displaced are regarded in the public mind and in terms of public policy. One member of this team approached the topic from the standpoint of mental illness and drug abuse. Another line of inquiry examined the fluctuations of thinking about homelessness, ranging from the individualistic American culture which regards poverty as the result of dissipation and laziness, to an understanding of the need for social programs and opportunities that help the poor find employment and productive engagement in society. This team found that the terms used to describe this population are nearly all pejorative: tramps, vagabonds, hobos, transients, bums. The term "homeless" did not emerge until the 1980s. The 1987 passage of the McKinney-Vento Homeless Persons Assistant Act represented a step by the federal government to recognize homelessness as social issue deserving of a major policy response.

A team led by Dr. Dagmar Kusa of the Bratislava International School of Liberal Arts (BISLA) in Slovakia researched the topic of cultural trauma and memory of displaced and minority populations – a topic that includes perspectives from history, psychology, political science, linguistics and other disciplines to explore the phenomenon of displacement that results from a traumatic event affecting the identity of a population. One particular focus of this team's work was how the use of language impacts political relations between Hungary and Slovakia

since the Treaty of Trianon of 1920, which reduced the boundaries of Hungary and left one-third of its population as a minority in regions controlled by other nations. The team consulted newspapers and a range of other materials to examine the impact of emotionally charged words and phrases in political discourse and the impact of such discourse on the current state of relations between Hungary and Slovakia. One member of the team consulted theoretical works on topics of cultural trauma, social suffering, and political suffering in search of concepts that could apply to the relationship between Hungary and Slovakia today. The members of this team will collaborate in producing a paper to convey their findings.

A third team, led by Dr. Deborah Van Duinen of Hope College, studied the topic of adolescence in the U.S. The group sought to discover how public conceptions of this age group have evolved over time, the kinds of literature written and published for teenagers through the decades, and the thinking that educators as well as civic and moral leaders have expressed concerning the guidance and instruction this population requires as it approaches adulthood. A recurrent premise in this literature is of teens as troublemakers in need of moral instruction and discipline. One team member researched prayer books written for girls and came to observe a notable change in how the conception of adolescent girlhood changed between the 1950s and '60s. Another team member examined 30 different Bibles published for teens between the 1890s and 2006, noting what things were included and emphasized, as well as the signals conveyed to readers by the color and formatting of Bibles through this period. One theme that the team discerned was the importance of literacy among adolescents, understood not just as the ability to read but also the capacity to discern and embrace the values regarded as staples of a moral society.

## **Power of Words**

A common thread running through all these topics was an interest in how a society understands a phenomenon or state of affairs – and in the language and the frames of mind invoked to account for such things as homelessness, adolescence, or the cultural suffering that can result from traumatic displacement and disenfranchisement. In each case the language used to describe a topic provides a telling index of social and cultural attitudes characteristic of a given time; as different conceptions of a topic change, so too does the terminology employed to describe a circumstance.

Each of these teams will continue its work through the course of the fall semester. The teams continue to communicate using digital technology, creating blogs, Facebook groups, and other means to convey their discoveries and the continued course of their thinking about their topics. In late November or early December the members of each team will convene in a digital environment to present research briefings outlining the shape of their individual and collective team projects.

The past decade has brought about an increasing emphasis on faculty-student research as an important element of liberal arts education. The GLCA-Library of Congress Digital Humanities Faculty-Student Research Program provides a powerful example of a program that involves faculty members and their students in a process of team-based inquiry and discovery in

the non-quantitative liberal arts. The program represents a notable step in extending the realm of possibilities for faculty-student research in the non-quantitative fields of liberal arts education.

### **Participants in the 2013 Research Seminar**

Three research teams participated in the GLCA-Library of Congress Digital Humanities Faculty-Student Research Program:

*Project Title:* A Political History of Homelessness

*Faculty Leader:* Virginia Parish Beard, Ph.D., Political Science, Hope College

*Home Campus Librarian:* Todd Wiebe

*Students:* Anais Felt, Odille Parker, Stephanie Rogers

*Project Title:* Politics of Memory in the Slovak-Hungarian Relations

*Faculty Leader:* Dagmar Kusá, Ph.D., Comparative Politics, Bratislava International School of Liberal Arts

*Students:* Veronika Klemková, Arnold Kiss

*Project Title:* Texts for Teens Over Time: An Exploration of Historical Constructions of Adolescence and their Effects on Adolescents' Literacy Sponsorship

*Faculty Leader:* Deborah Vriend Van Duinen, Ph.D., Education, Hope College

*Home Campus Librarian:* Patrick Morgan

*Students:* Sophia Hart, Izamar Mandujano, Teagan Quinnell

### Library of Congress Research Librarians

Three members of the Library of Congress research staff provided dedicated assistance to the research teams during their time on site at the Library in Washington, D.C. They were:

Jurretta Heckscher

Susan Garfinkle

Christina Pruzin

Faculty members who are interested in submitting a proposal for the 2014 GLCA-Library of Congress Digital Humanities Faculty-Student Research Program should contact Gregory Wegner, Director of Program Development at GLCA: [Wegner@glca.org](mailto:Wegner@glca.org).