Living in the Library: My Research Reflective Essay

Entering Dr. Hendershot’s class was terrifying. Upon reading his syllabus, he required an intensive research project consisting of twenty to forty pages studying the level of lower courts’ compliance to the Supreme Court. Pursuing this research project, I spent vast amounts of time camping out on different sections of the library ranging from the fourth floor to Café Libro. Tackling a project as the group leader was one of the most challenging and rewarding accomplishments in my undergraduate experience. Most importantly for this purpose the library’s resources helped me to successfully complete my research and pull top marks.

The beginning of my project led me up to the fourth floor, down to the first floor, and back up to the third floor of the library. The first part of our assignment required the use of the legal library and the JSTOR database. My group chose the Supreme Court case Reed v. Reed to analyze for our project. I decided to read the entire case brief from the United States Reports on the fourth floor of the library. To find the case, I had to know the legal citation of Reed. According to LexisNexis-Academic, the citation for Reed is (404 U.S. 71). I had to look for Volume 404 of the United States Reports and find the case on page 71. I discovered that Reed deals heavily with gender discrimination rights and the level of rational basis test to determine whether a law is discriminatory. As a supplement, I went downstairs onto a library computer to research the legal consequences of the case. I found an interesting article from the JSTOR database written by current Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg titled “Some Reflections on the Feminist Legal Thought of the 1970s.” Because of her article I understood the long-term legal ramifications of what then was considered a moderately liberal ruling of the Reed case. Because of the case, Women would now have a voice within the courtroom. I gathered all of my materials
and squatted on a couch on the third floor to write down the facts of the case and articles. The research process had officially begun.

After reading the case facts, my group met in the computer section of the first floor of the library in order to generate a landmark-progeny database using Academic- LexisNexis. LexisNexis provided clear and current information of the progeny cases for Reed. Through LexisNexis, my group “Shepardized” the progeny cases of Reed which allowed my group to organize the cases by circuit, judge, and type of opinion. I created a database of this information using Microsoft Excel. My database provided the backdrop for the introduction of my research project. However, the numbers were not significant without context. I needed to understand the broader picture of the relevancy of our case.

Dr. Hendershot suggested the JSTOR database in order for us to gain a clearer depiction of the social climate during Reed. Our articles ranged from empirical research articles found within the American Journal of Political Science and qualitative law reviews found within The Yale Law Journal. My initial search for articles was difficult because too many journal articles popped up with broad search terms. I asked one of the librarians for advice to find better articles. She immediately directed me to JSTOR’s advanced search engines to limit our scope to the specificity of our project. My group and I were sifting through one hundred articles now instead of three hundred. The quality of our articles improved because they were more relevant and helpful to our project. My group then completed the introduction of our project on the third floor of the library. After searching long for my articles, I learned that specificity in research is essential to relevancy and efficiency. Eventually, at 10:00 p.m. on the third floor of the library, with our group huddled together, I typed the introduction that comprised of social commentary and the assumptions of our Reed database.
Three weeks later, my group met again in 110C of the library. After our compilation of data from LexisNexis and the writing of the introduction, our group imported the data into an SPSS database. The second part of our assignment was trickier as it required precise organization of data. The SPSS data allowed us to calculate the ideological points of the judges. If a judge did not have adequate information for us to calculate his ideological point, we then looked up the judge in the FJC’s Biographical Directory of Federal Judges on the library computers. We continued the process of coding different variables of each judge. My group learned the process of coding for certain variables through more articles found in the JSTOR database. Specifically, we looked at articles like “The Hierarchy of Justice: Testing a Principal-Agent Model of Supreme Court-Circuit Court Interactions” written by Donald Songer and Jeffrey Segal.

Using SPSS software, my group created different graphs and tables that depicted the level of compliance between the Supreme Court and the lower courts. Our graphs illustrated the application of three different models to our Reed case. My group and I met again in Café Libro with our laptops out and ready to write the analysis and conclusion portion of our research project. Drinking a Red Bull with tired eyes, my group finished our paper moments before the library closed at 2 a.m. I clearly remember scrolling through my forty pages of work, sitting back, and sighing a breath of relief. Upon finishing the final edits and revisions, I realized that I had completed what had once seemed impossible.

Through the process of research, I learned the importance of specificity, efficiency, and diligence. Even though I lived in different parts of the library for many weeks that semester, the completion of my group’s project was gratifying and thrilling. Research personifies numbers as a living organism that defines the backbone of research. The process was a difficult one, yet the skills I gained are priceless.