WHAT DIFFERENCE DOES 100 YEARS MAKE?

WHITNEY WELSH (RESEARCH SCIENTIST, SSRI) HAS BEEN LEADING A RESEARCH PROJECT ON PANDEMICS IN COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE WITH STORY+, A SUMMER RESEARCH PROGRAM AT THE JOHN HOPE FRANKLIN HUMANITIES INSTITUTE. STUDENTS HAVE RESEARCHED TOPICS SUCH AS DIFFERENT APPROACHES TO STUDYING PANDEMICS, THE HISTORY OF DURHAM, AND QUALITATIVE METHODS.

Why was this Story+ project a good fit for summer during the pandemic?
Welsh: Studying pandemics in the middle of a pandemic gave students a unique insight into the actual experience of living through an event like this that they would otherwise be unlikely to get from archival materials alone, and a unique opportunity to apply what they learned from the project to what is going on around them. They used what they observed and what they were going through in their everyday lives to better understand what was happening in 1918, and likewise, they utilized what they learned about 1918 to better understand what is happening today.

Why did you want to lead this project?
Welsh: One of my areas of specialization is comparative/historical sociology, and this project draws upon the expertise I have gained from working in that field, but in a new way, with the topic of comparative pandemics. It also dovetails nicely with several projects I’ve been working on recently that focus on the history of Duke and Durham.

Can you give us an overview of what students were researching?
Welsh: The project was a qualitative exploration of Duke’s and Durham’s responses to the 1918 influenza pandemic and the current COVID-19 outbreak, using archival and contemporary sources. Students created a timeline and summary of the local experience of each pandemic, then used those descriptive accounts to compare and contrast the responses to the pandemics and the contexts, then and now, in which they occurred.

How important was collaboration?
Welsh: The sheer volume of material the students needed to analyze made a division of labor, and therefore collaboration, essential. The raw data we worked with touched on practically every aspect of the local milieu in 1918 and 2020, and the different perspectives the students brought to the material caused them to focus on different topics and issues within the broader dataset. By sharing what they noticed that others may have missed, the project team as a whole, gained a better understanding of the contexts in which these pandemics are unfolding, and hopefully more insight into why the responses evolve as they do.

What do you hope students gained from participating?
Welsh: In terms of content, I hope students gained some knowledge of the history of Duke and Durham, insights into what has changed and what has remained the same after a century of profound technological and cultural changes, and an appreciation for how context shapes both history events and our interpretation of them.

Methodologically, I hope they gained a better understanding of the fundamentals of research design, qualitative analysis, and case study methodology, as well as some acquaintance with different approaches to studying pandemics.

Why is social science research important?
Welsh: Social science research is fundamentally about human relationships, which in turn, underlie every aspect of society. It’s particularly relevant at this moment, when we are attempting to determine the best way for our society to move forward in the face of a public health emergency, the resultant economic crisis, widespread social unrest, and acute political polarization. Social interactions are at the core of all of these problems, and must likewise be the focus of any possible solutions.

Duke’s Social Science Research Institute is responding to the COVID-19 crisis by taking steps to initiate and coordinate research projects and get students involved.

Story+ is a 6-week paid summer research experience for Duke students interested in exploring interdisciplinary humanities research topics and methodologies.