

Garrett Gust
gustgh
LAURE Award Reflective Essay

Tapped: The Insider Perspective of the Craft Beer Movement

The Western Program (Individualized Studies Program) encourages students to pursue their passions and equips them with methods of inquiry to realize those passions in practice. My Western Major focuses on how people interact with places and environment. My year long research sought to focus on the craft beer movement sweeping the country. Ethnographic interviews with participants in the movement allude to the significance of craft beer to individuals and society as a whole. But participants in isolation of their role in the movement lacked perspective on larger trends surrounding craft beer. My research attempts to analyze the movement and how it is enacted on the individual level.

Cultural anthropology informed the base of my research. Ethnography provides a set of methods to understand movements and individuals. Thus, the most direct route I formulated was to approach the craft beer movement through its consumers. Before I even began, I wanted to frame the craft beer movement as a whole. Only then could I harness the explanatory potential of individuals. Geography, economics, sociology and marketing supplemented the anthropological research to form a base of understanding the larger movement that I was researching.

I knew ethnography was the best methodology in approaching the movement. But a meeting with the departmental librarian expanded my scope early on in the project. We created a web. In the center was our research goals or topic, branching off like spokes of a wheel were all the related disciplines I considered related or necessary to my question. Geography quickly became a wheel of its own — I would need to understand aspects of the movement independent of individuals. Economics expanded as consumption and industry trends appeared on my web. Imagery associated with craft beer evoked marketing. When wondering about populations interacting with the movement, sociology was utilized.

With the literature review completed — and in my mind, fairly thorough — I set out to find consumers to interview. The third and fourth day of my data collection seriously tested my research design. I had the opportunity to attend the Middletown Area Society of Homebrewers (MASH) and the Sustainable Brewing Workshop hosted by the Department of Supply Chain and Management. Although the participants at these events were indeed consumers of craft beer, they took active roles in producing it, professionally and as a hobby. This was a perspective that I had not intended on documenting. My entire project pivoted at this point, and I became aware of gaps in my research.

Immediately after completing interviews, I headed back to the libraries and the databases. I met with an advisor/mentor on my project, Kevin Armitage, and was encouraged to embrace these perspectives, but to consult more research to develop my research design. I reached out to professors in Management, Anthropology and the Western Program to gather ideas on how to incorporate producers in my project. The research was most helpful. This sort of active participation and subsequently consumption, became not only a pleasant surprise during my research, but a key point in explaining some of the nuances of the industry. I had focused on the industry in my research, but more to help frame my project, now it was driving it.

I divided my interviewees into three different categories: Consumers, Professionals and Homebrewers. Now my data could be compared across all aspects of the movement, instead of just those how were consuming the end product. I was able to study the entirety of the craft sector. Turns out, the meaning of craft beer is closely intertwined with the actual modes of productions. Pivoting in my project allowed me to analyze structural responses of craft beer to the rest of the industry. Looking back, my project would have been severely limited had I not consulted resources on processes of production.

The pivot was not easy. My project was still fresh, my research design was hot off the press, so to say. But using strategies I was taught with evaluating resources helped me to evaluate participants in my study. Of course, it would have been easy to rely heavily on works in anthropology or cultural geography that had studied beer. The encouragement I received from my class and professors led me to evaluating the sources in my literature review equally. It was not enough to rely on works regarding beer, so the economic theories, geography trends, marketing research and sociological data all had equitable time and effort put into evaluating them. It is a wonder I did not transfer this practice immediately into my research design, but I was fortunate enough to catch my mistake early.

The Western Program has taught me to have an interdisciplinary perspective. Although “interdisciplinary” is a buzzword, the core curriculum of my program and the individualized sections of my major have led me to do research in the physical sciences, social sciences and humanities. Not only did I have the experience of reading and writing these disciplines but the ability to navigate the multitude of databases for each. Hours were spent thinking on my keywords, scanning dissertations, reviewing periodicals and newspapers, sifting through chapters in books, and nearly tearing my hair out waiting for OhioLINK requests to come through (though in the end, OhioLINK was one of the only reasons I met all my deadlines).

My project has progressed nicely through data collection and the analyzing phase is soon to come. Looking back, the process not only saved my research design, but had me emailing, calling and attending office hours of professors in various disciplines. The scope of my project and the research informing it have far exceeded my

expectations of when I drafted a proposal the first few weeks of Fall Semester. It has been a wonderful opportunity to practice the methods and test the theories I have spent my college career studying, as well as discovering new ones.