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“Understanding and Withstanding” the Research Process

Glancing at my transcript, my independent research project appears to have only unfolded during the fall 2020 semester when I was enrolled in an independent study course. However, the process began three years prior, and the Miami University library system was integral to my work at every step.

During my freshman year, I completed the first intensive writing course required for my international studies (ITS) major. My class spent a day in King Library, where library staff gave us a major-specific overview of how to utilize online databases. They also taught us about commencing research: how to narrow a topic, decide on necessary evidence, search for sources, write, and revise. This lesson introduced me to how to effectively conduct college-level research, and it underpinned all of my research to come.

After returning from studying abroad one year later, I decided that before graduating, I wanted to complete an independent project to delve more deeply than is possible in ordinary classes into the national identity and migration topics that fascinate me. However, I felt extremely confused about how humanities and social science scholars—the disciplines where my interests lie—carry out original research. My lack of a lab, as a scientist might have, and the difficulty of conducting field work abroad blocked me from imagining what might be possible while I was an undergraduate. To learn more about research methods, I requested an ITS textbook that promised to provide an overview of the topic. King Library secured the book for me through an interlibrary loan, and after reading it, I felt prepared to begin my own work.

Starting in March 2020, I compiled a folder of research articles related to my interest in how Spanish-speaking migrants' identities change as they move to new places. I located and stored these articles in the Academic Search Complete database, which I accessed through the Miami Libraries website. Reading and annotating prior scholarship helped me develop a plan for my research methods. I had been selected to intern at the United States Embassy in Panama over the summer, so at that time, I was planning to collect evidence while abroad by connecting with migrant rights and services organizations in the country.

Unfortunately, as the COVID-19 pandemic worsened, my internship was cancelled. I would be remaining in the US, so my research topic and methods needed to shift. I spent several weeks drawing on what I learned in the freshman year research workshop and the ITS textbook. Eventually, I formulated a new topic: I would examine why Colombia and Mexico, with many similarities, are receiving migrants and asylum seekers at their borders differently. Colombia is generally regarded as welcoming Venezuelans while Mexico has approached Central Americans with less humanitarianism and more militarism.

To conduct this research, I utilized the database search skills I had learned at the library to construct my own database of newspapers from Colombia and Mexico. After reading scores of articles, and supplementing my findings with government publications, academic research, and reports from nonprofits, I determined that the countries differ in two key ways. First, Colombia understands why Venezuelans are fleeing and feels obligated to help them, while Mexico does not seem to possess this understanding or sense of obligation. Second, Colombia has autonomy within its geographic region to construct its own policy, while Mexican policy is constrained by actions of the United States. I was driven to undertake this research because policymakers and citizens must understand what aspects of their policies and identity determine whether

newcomers to their country will be able to integrate and succeed, or will rather be turned away with force or permanently marginalized.

After collecting evidence and constructing my argument, I began to write. Several months later, in October 2020, I had produced a first draft of approximately 40 pages. Although I was proud of my work, I was exhausted from the process and frustrated that I had written too much to submit my work for publication. I decided to take a break from my project for about a month, during which my research advisor, Dr. Sheila Croucher, read my piece and provided valuable suggestions. I received her feedback in early December feeling re-energized and recommitted to transforming my research into a piece with publication potential. Over the course of a week, I trimmed my writing by fifteen pages and ended up with a much stronger piece. I finally felt ready to submit my work for consideration for publication.

In February 2021, Tufts University informed me that they wanted to publish my research in their 2021 edition of *Hemispheres: Tufts University Journal of International Affairs*. In addition to being a great honor, this notification felt like assurance that the work I had done over the summer and fall to power through the challenges of researching and writing during a pandemic had been worthwhile. However, my work was not yet complete. I spent two weeks working through changes suggested by my editors. This process involved Miami Libraries once more: facing a deadline, I searched the library website to see if it had any resources regarding the definition of a term that I needed to clarify. The search showed me that King had a relevant book, and I took a quick trip to the library to take a photo of the related page and its publication information, and was quickly able to include the definition and citation in my piece before returning it to my editors.

While the knowledge that I am about to be a published author certainly sweetens my view of the years of work I put into my research process, I believe I would have been satisfied to have undertaken it even if my eyes were the only ones that read my work. In addition to hard research skills, I became more resilient, self-motivated, and comfortable asking for help from Miami resources. The libraries played a tremendous role in my final outcome, and I am incredibly grateful to have had access to them for the past four years.