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Julia Rogers Research Prize Reflection Essay

When I reflect on the value of library research, I am transported back to my first year at Goucher during the fall of 2016, when a beloved History professor introduced our class to the notion of “discourse” in academia. The texts we read during our college career, she explained, are essentially conversations between academics within a given discipline, or “discourse community.” When one theorist quotes another, they are responding to or building upon another’s ideas: they are adding their voice to the conversation. Our research papers, then, are the means by which students are able to make our voices heard within these conversations. Through researching and writing our papers, we are engaging with history’s great thinkers. In the process of creating the paper that I have submitted for the Julia Rogers Research prize, I, in essence, entered into a conversation with my academic idols: transnational feminists such as Jacqui Alexander, Audre Lorde, and Chandra Mohanty. It was through the process of researching and expanding upon their ideas that I gained entrance into this academic discourse community.

When I began to view research as an engaging form of academic discourse, the college library was transformed from simply a repository of information to an almost mythical toolbox through which I could access the necessary instruments to engage with my most revered of scholars through space and time. Goucher’s Library provides resources which carry the remarkable ability to ensure that anyone, whether a college Freshman or the foremost of academic scholars, can authentically engage with one another in conversation.

My submission for the Julia Rogers Research prize is the final paper for Professor Irlene François' course, WGS 420: Transnational Feminist Theory. This paper utilizes transnational feminist theory to analyze the Women's Mosque Movement of Cairo, Egypt, as depicted in Saba Mahmood's *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*. Aided by the scholarship of Jacqui Alexander, Leila Ahmed, and Lila Abu-Lughod, I advocate for a radical transformation of the supposed analytical certainties of secular-liberal feminism through a transnational feminist reading of the piety movement.

In crafting this paper, I heavily relied on our library's resources to focus and direct my research. In the beginning stages of my research, I looked to Goucher's library catalogue. Rather than scouring the internet for information that may very well be biased or unsubstantiated, the library catalogue ensures that I am provided with information which is peer-reviewed, factual, and of academic quality. The multitude of databases available to Goucher students enabled me to fine tune my search by format, subject matter, or publication type. I was able to quickly locate relevant entries about everything from the creation of the neoliberal secular state to Islamic precepts of agency. I utilized encyclopedia databases such as Oxford Reference to situate my argument within a specific socio-political and historical context relevant to my topic.

As a neuro-diverse student, I am primarily an aural, verbal, and kinesthetic learner. When researching, print materials are indispensable as they allow me to physically engage with the information by annotating and underlining texts. Similarly, the research librarians are a vital resource because over the course of our meetings I can verbally process my ideas and ask clarifying questions, unlike I could with a textbook or a computer search. On the rare occasion that our library does not have the sources I am looking for, I can have relevant media sent to me

through the inter-library loan program, which shares materials from academic institutions across Maryland.

One major insight I gained while working on this paper was to begin the research process with an open mind. During my research phase, although I had a general structure for my argument, I was not completely wedded to any particular conclusion or point of view. By remaining receptive to all sides of an argument, I was able to avoid confirmation bias and gain a holistic view of my topic. Another crucial aspect of my research was ensuring that I drew from a diverse range of feminist perspectives. The brand of Western, secular-liberal feminism popular in America cannot be mapped on to women's movements abroad. Likewise, as a middle class, white American woman, the lens through which I view the world has been tinted by my positionality. In order to better understand the Women's Mosque Movement and the life-worlds of its pietists, I prioritized scholarship which would offer a historical analysis of the position of women in Muslim societies, written by female Muslim scholars.

The library resources at Goucher College enabled me to diversify my perspective. Thanks to my research, I was able to interrogate my own beliefs about women's empowerment, locate the hegemonic origins of those beliefs, and come to adopt an authentically transnational feminist perspective. Importantly, the research also enabled me to be in dialogue with the very theorists whose work inspired a transformative shift in my perspective. Without the Goucher Library, I would not be able to add my voice to the transnational feminist conversation.