

Plains, Peanuts and a President:
Using a Presidential Library to Teach Students
About Primary Source Research

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Presidential Libraries

During his second term in office, President Franklin D. Roosevelt realized the importance of preserving the vast amount of documents he and his staff had accumulated during his terms in office. Based on the advice of historians he began a tradition that has since become law, and developed a public repository to store, preserve and share evidence of his Presidency for future generations (<http://www.archives.gov/presidential-libraries/about/>). In 1955 Congress passed the Presidential Libraries Act to ensure that the people of the United States would have access to an important part of their history. This Act established Presidential libraries, administered by the National Archives and Records Service (now Administration), to preserve the papers of Presidents and their presidencies; to acquire historical materials, and to conduct oral history interviews with people associated with the presidencies (Kumar 200). The Presidential Records Act of 1978 declared the public as owners of all documentary materials made or received by public officials carrying out their official duties (Berman 230). White House officials, as well as the President are still allowed to have personal papers that are considered by law to be owned by the individual who created them. The Presidential Libraries are a great resource not only for scholars, writers, and academics, but for students and practitioners as well.

There are currently 11 Presidential Libraries located throughout the U.S. with 2 in the SECoPA region. As both a student and faculty member I have benefited from the use of one of these libraries and have witnessed the significant effect this type of research can have on students. The purpose of this paper is to explore the benefits of researching at presidential libraries and to share tips on best utilizing these resources.

Benefits of Primary Documents Research

Students can benefit greatly by conducting primary documents research. It gives them a unique opportunity to analyze and synthesize information on their own accord. It challenges them to make educated guesses and informed judgments on decisions, policies, and processes. Presidential libraries offer excellent opportunities for students to view some of the most interesting original documents pertaining to the American bureaucracy. At the core of the library holdings is its manuscript collection, with a large number of memorandums written for the president by White House staff and aides. These memorandums have been called the “footprints of an administration” (Kumar 200) and can tell a researcher a lot of background information about an administration. At Presidential Libraries, students can see first hand these original memos, along with policy briefs, correspondence, and a plethora of other documents written by presidents, their staff, foreign dignitaries, members of Congress, and the general public. The libraries’ files allow researchers to see how “the events of an administration were perceived, what information was available, what the various recommendations for action were, and who was recommending which plan” (Kumar 202). By studying these documents, students are able to discover and understand the process an administration used to handle particular situations, how internal administrative disputes led to various policy outcomes, how decisions in one major part of the government have been reached, and the various leadership styles of various presidents (Kumar). These are all areas of important research to scholars and students of public administration.

Primary documents research also helps students understand the significance of topic selection, how to categorize and organize information, and how to interpret documents. Conducting this research at a presidential library has several advantages. First, it helps students in selecting a topic. They are limited to issues that were dealt with during the term of the specific president's administration (which are generally vast, but specific). They are also generally forced to narrow their topic because of the breadth of information on very general topics. For example, I had a student who originally selected "The Iran Hostage Crisis" as a paper topic, but quickly narrowed it when he discovered the hundreds of boxes that contained original documents on this event. By the end, the individual wrote a conference paper on one very specific incident that occurred during the crisis with more than enough information to adequately cover the topic. This is an experience that would have been unlikely if he had been using secondary source documents at our University's library.

A second great advantage of doing research at a Presidential library is the assistance the staff will provide you with your research. My experiences have been with the Jimmy Carter library in Atlanta, GA and the excellent staff there. Prior to a visit they will collect all of the relevant documents for the topics you provide them. Students are able to search through files and boxes of a variety of resources from memorandums, briefs, photos, personal letters, and videos. They have to learn to determine how to use these documents in their research and the significance of the various players involved in the documents. For example, is a handwritten memo from a chief of staff expressing the president's opinion more or less important than a typed policy statement from a cabinet secretary who offers a contradictory presidential opinion? And how do these two

documents fit together in determining the outcome of a policy? Conducting primary source research at a presidential library allows students to experience various research questions that create rich learning opportunities.

A third advantage of conducting research at a presidential library is the excitement students experience when they get into their topic. Even when a student does not ideologically agree with the president, they still can not help but become amazed when they are reading a handwritten note by him on a memo from a staff member. The majority of the students I have brought to the Carter library have been conservative republicans, and yet everyone thus far has left with a greater respect and admiration for both the man and the office. They get a small taste of what it takes to lead the federal government and the vast amount of information and decisions each president is inundated with. As future public administrators, this lesson provides students with a broader perspective and a bigger picture of the federal government and the role of the president in the bureaucracy.

Although it may seem much easier to justify bringing political science students to a presidential library, there are just as many reasons to introduce MPA students to these research organizations. Some of the major issues in the field of public administration, such as the politics/administration dichotomy, bureaucracy versus democracy, policy networks and organizational behavior can all be seen in action through presidential staff documents. Students of public administration can observe these issues in action by viewing presidential documents, helping them understand the relevance of the theories discussed in MPA coursework.

As with any type of research venue, there are some limitations that I would be remiss if I did not point out. What has been recorded in writing is only part of the story of a presidential administration – much information is shared orally, and that may not be recorded. There are some staffers and some presidents who have left few records behind, so unless the library has oral histories pertaining to a specific event, the researcher must keep in mind that whatever was discussed and not written down, is not there. Research also suggests that often memorandums can be self-serving (Kumar). Staffers may take the opportunity to overstate their role, build their own prestige, score some points with the President, or blow off some steam in their memorandums. It is important to keep this in mind when using personal memorandums in developing evidence for theories or hypothesis testing.

There is also a vast difference in the amount and organization of materials in presidential libraries. Only libraries created after 1981 are held accountable to the Presidential Records Act that established systematic record keeping and declared the president's papers as public property (Kumar 214). One additional thing to consider is the restrictions that can be put on papers. Papers that are considered personal are only available if the donor agrees to make them so. There are personal papers that are held at libraries and require the owner's permission to be granted to the individual researcher before they can be viewed. There are also papers that are confidential in the interest of national security. This however, can be a valuable learning experience for students when they find the document they wanted to review has been declared confidential and is not accessible. All of these limitations are also great opportunities to teach students about basic problems and issues of validity in doing research.

The Carter Experience

As a graduate student I had the unique opportunity to research at the Jimmy Carter library with Professor Betty Gladd. Dr. Gladd is a Carter biographer and a regular at the library. The experience was by far one of my best as a graduate student and something I carried with me into my teaching, influencing me to bring my students to the Carter library to learn about research. In September of 2003 I incorporated such a trip into my undergraduate course on the presidency and had the opportunity first hand to watch students evolve into true researchers. Eastern Kentucky University, the institution for which I teach, generously funded the travel, lodging, and books for the trip to the tune of \$3,000. Another faculty member and I brought 12 students to Atlanta for a day of research and then to Plains, GA to experience President Carter's home town and meet the president and his wife. All of the students found it to be a once in a lifetime opportunity.

I began by contacting the director of the library who connected me with one of the library's archivists. Prior to the trip, each student submitted a research topic and proposal. Students were required to review the manuscript collection at the Carter library available on its website (<http://www.jimmycarterlibrary.gov/library/listsobj.phtml>) to assist them in developing their topics. I forwarded the list of proposed topics to the archivist who provided me with feedback on whether they were too narrow or too specific. Each student was also given *An Hour Before Daylight* by Jimmy Carter to read prior to the trip. This was to help them develop an understanding of where President Carter came from and how his upbringing may have influenced his decision making and leadership style.

The Carter library is open Monday through Friday 8:30 am to 4:30 pm. When we met as a group at 8:00 that morning students were confident that they would be finished with their research by lunch time and ready to go. I assured them that if this was the case we could do so. By the time we met for lunch the group unanimously agreed that they needed to stay until closing, and still would not have enough time to finish their research. Their enthusiasm was exciting for me and my colleague who had not seen students so engaged in their research since we began teaching.

Upon our arrival at the library, our archivist had carts of documents he had pulled and organized for each student based on their topic. He spent 30 minutes with the group explaining the policies and procedures for using and citing presidential library documents. It was an excellent introduction to a new style of research for which the students had a number of questions. The library rules were explained and then each student received a library card and was assisted in finding their materials.

At the end of the day the students begged for another day of research (can you imagine?) They had all become so interested in their topics and had discovered so much exciting information that they did not have enough time to delve into it. For some reason, they found it much more interesting to explore their topic through the original documents than they ever had using secondary resources. They actually began to understand how to analyze documents and synthesize pieces of information to form a more complete picture. All of the students agreed that it had been the best academic experience they had had in college. They were disappointed that the next day was Saturday and the library was closed. A few students even found the money and time to return to Atlanta later in the semester to do more research at the library.

The second part of the trip took place in Plains, GA. The trip was planned around the annual Peanut Festival held in President Carter's hometown. On Friday evening before the festival, the townspeople produce a new play each about and starring the people and the town of Plains. It is a small event that takes place in the auditorium of President Carter's elementary school. The class attended this event, as did President Carter and his wife. Since the venue was so small and the President knew most of the others in the room, the students had the opportunity to speak with him and his wife, and even snap a few photos. The students also had the unique opportunity to informally interview people who had known the president his whole life. They had been prepared by reading articles on collecting information through interviews, and actually enjoyed the chance to hear personal stories about the president and his background. And as a small town in the South, there was no shortage of people willing to share good stories and memories, even with a stranger.

The students were able to briefly speak with President and Mrs. Carter again the next day at the Peanut Festival book signings they do each year. Every student got their book autographed and had the chance to say something to the President and his wife. They were all impressed with his kindness and humility and realized that even people from humble beginnings can make a big difference in this country. The entire experience had a real impact on the students who participated and they all strongly encouraged us to continue to bring future students to the Carter library. They expressed the sentiment that they had learned more in 4 days about research, then they had in their entire college careers.

Sources Cited

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