



Ethnic Studies in Academic and Research Libraries

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CHAPTER 4

Improving Representation on Wikipedia

A Collaboration with Librarians and Faculty at Historically Black Colleges and Universities

Tiffany Atwater Lee and Justin de la Cruz

An archivist and a librarian at the Atlanta University Center Robert W. Woodruff Library collaborated with two faculty members on classroom projects at Clark Atlanta University and Spelman College to help students expand ethnic representation on Wikipedia through archival research. The projects centered on teaching students how to conduct research on African American figures in academic archives and how to publish their findings on Wikipedia. This chapter presents how the faculty collaboration functioned, how the assignment was developed, how instructional sessions were taught, and how the assignment was received by students. Additionally, the authors include information on the assessments and outcomes of the assignments in these classes, including examples of student work published on Wikipedia.

Overview and Background Information

Wikipedia is one of the top twenty most-visited websites according to Alexa.com.¹ It is read by internet users of every type and background, but the site content is generated by a fairly small and homogeneous population. Wikipedia itself acknowledges that it has racial and gender biases: most editors are male, and the encyclopedia suffers from a lack of people of color within its editor base.² And although studies on Wikipedia's content have focused on quality of articles rather than diversity of content,³ a large survey of Wikipedia's editors revealed that 13 percent of contributors were female, about half of all editors were between eighteen and thirty years old, and 48 percent had some level of higher education.⁴ Accordingly, it is safe to assume that the diversity of articles available on Wikipedia is skewed toward the worldview of this predominantly young, educated, male demographic. In order to address these issues while simultaneously teaching research and technology skills, we, an archivist and a librarian at the Atlanta University Center Robert W. Woodruff Library, collaborated with faculty members from Spelman College and Clark Atlanta University to develop a classroom assignment involving Wikipedia. Students were asked to (1) research in the library's Archives Research Center, African American figures who had no internet presence and (2) create new entries on Wikipedia to give representation to these historical figures.

To provide some institutional context for this assignment, we will first present a brief historical overview of the Atlanta University Center and the Robert W. Woodruff Library. Founded in the spirit of collaboration, the Atlanta University Center (AUC), located in Atlanta, Georgia, is the world's largest consortium of African American private institutions of higher education. Clark Atlanta University, Morehouse College, Morehouse School of Medicine, Spelman College, and the Interdenominational Theological Center "occupy adjacent properties, collectively enroll more than 10,000 students each year, and share common missions to educate tomorrow's leaders and preserve the history and culture of African Americans."⁵

All of the institutions in the AUC are Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), and the consortium was originally formed in 1929 as a nonprofit organization that operates on behalf of its member institutions.⁶ These colleges were founded after the Civil War, primarily to educate newly freed slaves through the Reconstruction era, and each member institution, while separate and distinct, has a distinguished legacy of excellence in teaching, scholarship, and service. The AUC Robert W. Woodruff Library is unique among academic libraries in that it is the sole library for all of the AUC institutions (except for Morehouse School of Medicine, which has its own medical library). Our library supports the teaching, learning, and research missions of the four institutions of higher education that currently comprise the Atlanta University Center, and, functioning as the "center of the center," it is the intellectual and information hub of the Atlanta University Center.

The library is home to the Archives Research Center (ARC), which is notable for its extensive and unique holdings of materials on the African American experience. The

archives' collections primarily document the African American experience through civil rights, race relations, education, literature, visual and performing arts, religion, politics, and social work. The ARC has one of the richest collections in the United States of primary and secondary resources on African American and African Diaspora history and culture. The extensive and unique collection covers a broad range of subjects documenting the impact of race and racism on the lives of Black people and people of the African Diaspora and their endeavors for freedom, self-determination, equality, and empowerment. Additionally, the ARC houses many collections documenting the past and present institutions of the AUC, including the records of administrations, students, faculty, and alumni. Our collections cover multiple disciplines and subjects, some of which include social work, history, political science, business, and science.

Assignment Origins

Our Wikipedia assignment originated from the goal of hosting a campus-wide Wikipedia edit-a-thon, “an event where editors edit and improve a specific topic or type of content.”⁷ We wanted to show our community the natural overlap that Wikipedia, libraries, and archives have in “an interest and understanding of quality research materials; an interest in effective citation and attribution of those research materials; and clear public communication.”⁸ A review of the literature shows the benefits of Wikipedia edit-a-thons and their positive impact on student engagement with archives,⁹ as well as how leveraging faculty collaborations can build engagement with archival collections related to women’s history.¹⁰ Accordingly, we believed hosting an edit-a-thon could increase campus engagement with our collections, so we settled on the topic of Black History Month. As with the goal of most edit-a-thons with a GLAM (galleries, library, archives, and museum) focus, we wanted to increase access to our collections while simultaneously increasing the diversity of both the content and the contributors to Wikipedia. By increasing the entries of prominent African Americans whose collections are housed in the AUC Robert W. Woodruff ARC, we hoped that we would also increase awareness about our collections.

But as we began the groundwork for hosting a Wikipedia edit-a-thon, we quickly realized that due to our unique structure it would be difficult to ensure that we had adequate participation. Our library is a nonprofit organization that operates independently of the four institutions of higher learning that it serves, so it is sometimes difficult to embed our services across our academic communities. Without faculty or classes committed to showing up and participating, the promotion and hosting of an edit-a-thon may have proven more troublesome than originally thought; in the past, due to the decentralized nature of our library in relation to the academic institutions we serve, library events that did not have a connection to specific student organizations, faculty, or classes had very few, or even zero, students in attendance. In order to work best, and through our experience with previous outreach initiatives, we found that buy-in from faculty is integral in ensuring successful participation from students. While trying to find ways to ensure participation from our institutions, we had the idea to create an assignment

that would highlight historical African American figures in our archival collections who were underrepresented (or not represented at all) on Wikipedia. Over the years, and through various conversations with faculty as well as a review of the literature, we found that more and more educators thought that “students lack writing, research and academic technology skills.”¹¹ Along with the professors, we as informational professionals wished to enhance these skills in conjunction with the assignment. The assignment’s primary objective was teaching information and archival literacy by having students produce information in a public forum using Wikipedia. We, like others in the field, recognized that if we focused on information and archival literacy, students would gain skills such as critical thinking and decision-making.¹² This approach would also help to lay the groundwork for many of the skills necessary for information gathering. A secondary objective was to encourage HBCU students to publish information about lesser known African American history on Wikipedia in order to increase the diversity of authors and content on the site.

After further developing our ideas, we decided that it would be best to pilot this assignment with a professor who had previously incorporated the archives into their class assignments. From previous experience, we knew that success meant working with faculty who already champion the library and that by continuing to engage with them we would reinforce those relationships for future collaborations. The idea was to adapt a professor’s existing assignment into one that would have a Wikipedia component. During our first time conducting the assignment, we collaborated with a Spelman College English professor, Dr. Deanna Koretsky, who was teaching an Introduction to Literary Studies class. Spelman College is a liberal arts women’s college founded in 1881 and is a global leader in the education of women of African descent. Dr. Koretsky’s class consisted of seventeen second- and third-year students. The second iteration of the assignment was a collaboration with Clark Atlanta University history professor Dr. Aubrey Underwood, who taught a twentieth century United States history class of seven students.

During our initial conversations with both professors, we decided that assessment was integral for analyzing both the validity and success of the assignment and for the possibility of showing its impact on students and their ideas about information and archives. We developed an assessment through an online form (via SurveyMonkey.com) to investigate students’ experiences with archives and Wikipedia both before the assignment took place and afterward. The assessment was also used as a guide to help us understand some of the challenges that students faced as they received instruction and worked through their projects.

This assignment was a semester-long project that culminated in the creation of a Wikipedia page as well as an informal in-class presentation. Students were assigned a collection of personal papers or manuscripts from the AUC Woodruff Archives focusing on figures who did not have an online presence. In order to ensure that the figures being researched did not have an online presence, archival staff searched extensively for Wikipedia entries, local or state websites, internet encyclopedia entries, or other resources online. To decide on which figures to provide to students, archivists

searched all collections within our holdings and created an inventory consisting of three options: collections or individuals that had no Wikipedia page; collections or individuals that had Wikipedia pages that needed enhancement (e.g., additional biographical information, photographs, links to resources like finding aids); and lastly, collections or individuals who had well-developed Wikipedia pages. The collections that had no Wikipedia pages and also no internet presence were the collections we chose to focus on. Students were asked to create new entries or edit existing Wikipedia articles pertaining to people and organizations reflected in the archival holdings of the ARC.

Classroom Collaboration

To ensure that all students felt comfortable working through their projects regardless of their experience with archives and Wikipedia, we offered to embed with the classes through a series of information and archival literacy sessions. Rather than providing a one-shot instruction session, which limits our interactions with students, we integrated our instruction and reference services into classes as a way to offer more direct research assistance to students over time. These sessions took place over the course of the entire semester and culminated with students' publications of their Wikipedia pages. We planned four instructional sessions, with recommended milestones for the students:

1. **Archival literacy:** Learn how to conduct research in the archives by making an appointment, consulting with an archivist, requesting specific materials, analyzing and interpreting resources, and taking notes. Students received their research topics during this class session. Milestone: Visit the archives before the next session.
2. **Introduction to Wikipedia:** Learn about the history and impact of Wikipedia, including editorial and content biases, cultural impact, how to create a user account, how to use Wikipedia's sandbox feature to create sample entries, and how to edit existing Wikipedia entries. Milestone: Create an account and place some sample text in your user sandbox before the next session.
3. **Virtual Q&A:** Tiffany and Justin held virtual office hours to answer any questions students might have while beginning their projects. Milestone: Collect some information on your research projects from the archives and other sources before the next session.
4. **Wikipedia editing:** Learn how to edit Wikipedia entries with the site's specialized Wikitext code, including formatting and structuring content, placing hyperlinks, and adding citations and references.

The first session was focused on general archival and primary source literacy, which included basic information on what archives are and how primary sources are utilized for research. We covered how to use archival finding aids and how to search for individual historical figures across multiple types of resources, including those found in the library generally and within the archives specifically. We also stressed the importance of

accessibility to information as it related particularly to the history of marginalized groups. While it was important for students to understand how to use archives as a resource for creating and sharing scholarship, we also wanted to emphasize the activism that can also be inspired by these same acts. For example, community-based archivists often “identify as activists, advocates, or community organizers, and this identification shapes their understandings of community archives work and the missions of community archives.”¹³ Following this first session, we requested that students begin researching in order to gather materials for their Wikipedia pages.

The remaining two instructional sessions focused on Wikipedia. We taught the students about the history and culture of Wikipedia and mentioned that the site favored secondary materials and had a rule against publishing original research.¹⁴ This meant that primary materials obtained from an archive would have to be used carefully, since Wikipedia typically considered the use of primary materials in entries as constituting original research, which stems from the site’s bias toward published, secondary materials as sources for entries. To address this concern, we asked that the students focus only on creating biographical sketches for the figures they were researching by listing basic, verifiable information on when they lived, where they were born, and what institutions and organizations they were involved in. Wikipedia entries created from scratch are typically sent to review by a Wikipedia editor before being published, so we encouraged students to first construct their entries in their personal Wikipedia sandboxes and to include all possible references and evidence before submitting. The Wikipedia sandbox is a feature that allows users to create content that is on Wikipedia’s platform but is not considered to be a part of Wikipedia’s encyclopedia entries, so our students had the benefit of their own personal space for constructing their entries before submitting to Wikipedia’s main content. Our virtual Q&A session had very few participants, and during our final classroom instruction session we provided an optional template for Wikipedia entries, showed students how to format all of their information according to Wikipedia’s standards, and reviewed students’ work. Most students did not have prior experience with editing Wikipedia pages, but all finished the assignment.

To assist Dr. Koretsky with grading the assignment, we developed a rubric based around the core Wikipedia concepts that we wanted to pass on to the students: readability, hyperlinking, and information organization.

- **Readability** dealt with the overall presentation of materials on Wikipedia—Was the entry written grammatically? Was the information formatted correctly, according to Wikipedia’s standards? Did the students understand how to properly edit information on Wikipedia?
- **Hyperlinking** asked the students to link to both external sources (websites other than Wikipedia, including the archives’ finding aids) and internal references to Wikipedia (e.g., if a figure attended Atlanta University, the students would find that institution on Wikipedia and link to it from their entry).
- **Information organization** was graded for how sections were formed within their entries and how thorough and appropriate students’ references were.

Table 4.1

Wikipedia assignment grading rubric

| | | |
|---------------------------------|---|----------|
| Readability | Wikipedia content is grammatically correct, well-written, and easily understandable by a general readership. | 0–3 pts. |
| | Information is properly formatted for Wikipedia and visually organized appropriately on the screen, e.g., paragraph breaks, info boxes, figures, and pictures are used appropriately in context. | 0–3 pts. |
| Linking Content | At least three internal hyperlinks (to other Wikipedia entries) are included appropriately. | 0–3 pts. |
| | At least three external hyperlinks (to websites other than Wikipedia) are included appropriately. (The link to the archives finding aid can count as one of these.) | 0–3 pts. |
| | Find three other pages relevant to your topic and put links on those pages back to your page. For example, if you wrote about “apple,” then find the page on “types of fruit” and link back to your “apple” page there. You will need to keep a list of which pages you visited and added links to. | 0–3 pts. |
| Information Organization | Content is appropriately organized into at least three distinct sections that describe the content (examples: Introduction, Biography, References, or other topics from the person’s life, including organizations they were involved in). | 0–3 pts. |
| | The inclusion of a Reference section where three resources are listed and linked to, including a link to the appropriate archives finding aid and any other materials you reference in your entry. | 0–3 pts. |
| | All entry content has a related reference, where applicable, and all references listed in the Reference section are actually mentioned or used in the main entry. | 0–3 pts. |

In terms of assessment, students were asked to take pre- and post-assignment surveys. The initial survey aided us in the creation of our overall instruction as well as creation of a time line for the assignment. For instance, in the initial survey over 73 percent of the class responded that they had never contributed to Wikipedia prior to the assignment. This allowed us to devote more time to the technical side of the assignment by ensuring special sessions were devoted strictly to signing up for Wikipedia accounts, explaining how to edit Wikipedia visually and through code, and other related topics. The outcomes from the post-assignment survey will be discussed below.

Examples of Student Work

Our students worked in pairs to develop their Wikipedia entries, and out of close to a dozen entries, three have been deleted by Wikipedia editors and three have grown significantly since their inception. All entries for this assignment were published on Wikipedia by November 30, 2016. Here are the most successful entries:

- The **Josephine Dibble Murphy** entry highlights Murphy’s work and activism while providing some insight into her character provided by quotes from her

contemporaries. The entry has been edited and expanded fourteen times by nine Wikipedia users not affiliated with our students.¹⁵

- The **Samuel Woodrow Williams** entry details Williams's involvement in the Atlanta Student Movement, provides a discussion about his sermons, and includes a list of books and articles for those interested in reading more about Williams. The entry has received twenty-seven updates from a variety of Wikipedia users, with the most recent being January 2021.¹⁶
- The **Pearlie Craft Dove** entry provides a wealth of information on Dove's early life, philanthropy, and community service, and has received fourteen updates since its inception, including a warning box asking for additional information for the entry in the form of inline citations. The warning also asks users to create links on other pages in Wikipedia pointing to this entry.¹⁷

Since Wikipedia is such a highly trafficked site, its content usually appears near the top of search engine results (especially for individual's names) and in knowledge panels included on many websites, including search result pages. Accordingly, our students' efforts to expand representation on Wikipedia have proved successful for the entries that have remained on Wikipedia.

Outcomes

Much of the feedback we received from students spoke to the unique nature of the assignment and the challenges they encountered along the way. One student wrote, "I learned how to do research and stick with something even through frustrations and gaps in the history." Another expounded on these frustrations:

The Wikipedia aspect has by far been the hardest assignment of my college career. I am not tech savvy at all and the whole process has just been all around confusing for me. The archival research on the other hand was very intriguing to me and I felt as if I was truly absorbing the information, not regurgitating it for a quick grade.

While these comments were generally positive, what made this assignment innovative was the collaboration of information professionals who were tasked to instruct undergraduate students on their power to both collect information through research and then add to a global encyclopedia through modern technology. While some students gravitated more toward the archival research aspect, others seemed to have more interest in the technical portions involving Wikipedia: "My favorite part was uploading everything to Wikipedia," one student wrote. Another said, "I liked learning to edit the pages and coding."

The hands-on, intensive archival research, encyclopedia entry writing, and use of Wikipedia's technology helped to empower students to take an active role engaging in the entire research process, from idea to investigation to publication. All of this took place while they were also contributing to historical records through Wikipedia's global platform. Thus, we were able to open our students' minds to the possibility of research while simultaneously diversifying one of the largest and most popular general reference works on the internet.

Taken separately, archival research assignments and Wikipedia assignments have been popular for years. None of the parts of the assignment independently was innovative on its own, but bringing interdisciplinary skills together were what made this assignment intriguing to both the professor and students alike.

As we suspected, our assessment also found areas where the assignment fell short. Some students missed out on some of the goals for the archival historical research portion of the assignment, with one writing that, “In the future, I’d request more prominent topics so that students could be completely confident in their work.” This response speaks to the feeling that there should be an appropriately large amount of information on any particular topic that students are asked to research. Through our instruction sessions, we attempted to fully bring into view the significance of what their assignment had done, which was to start generating some information on Wikipedia for underrepresented topics. In this way, their Wikipedia entries could be a starting point for others researching the topic, and their entries would grow as others added their own information.

Our faculty shared the excitement some of our students had about the outcome of the assignment, with one stating:

Tiffany and Justin made this project not only manageable, but multiply beneficial. Translating content contained in physical archives to a public digital forum challenged students to reflect on the production process that is the precondition for what we usually think of as academic study. Students made stylistic decisions about how to frame and present their research on the web for public engagement, and they also gained valuable professional skills: Ms. Atwater Lee eased students into the complex processes of archival research, and Mr. de la Cruz provided training in HTML coding and web publication protocols. In crafting original narratives of Black culture using primary materials, students actively challenged how narratives of the past are written and who gets to write them. Moreover, in disseminating their knowledge beyond the classroom, students were empowered, early in their collegiate educations, to be active participants in global knowledge production.

For those interested in constructing and implementing a similar assignment, we had some take-aways on how to improve our approach in the future. We started by teaching archival literacy, then asked students to conduct research before learning about the Wikipedia portion of the assignment. But we thought it would be best for students to create a Wikipedia account early on and to start using their sandbox as soon as possible. That way, as they start conducting research, they can slowly add information to their sandbox before learning how to format, and when the instruction session on Wikipedia takes place, students will already have content to work on formatting. Additionally, it helps to break the assignment down into parts and have due dates for portions of the assignment throughout the semester. This will help both instructors and students with pacing the teaching and learning involved. And, finally, we did not track our students’ use of the archives after this assignment, so future research could explore whether assignments like these have an impact on students’ use of archives throughout their college experience.

Overall, our mission was to instruct students on how to put knowledge and information in the hands of the world. In doing so, we wanted to highlight individuals from our

archival collections who are worthy of encyclopedia entries, no matter how hidden they are in the archival record. This idea of using technology for the students' benefit is one that students hear throughout their academic careers, but students may often interpret this advice as using technology to educate themselves on their own. Rarely are students encouraged to use technology to help educate others. This process not only instructed students on how information is created, but served to increase awareness for hidden and underrepresented communities on Wikipedia and increased the diversity of editors on Wikipedia. This collaboration among faculty, librarians, and archivists provided a unique educational experience with multiple benefits for students and online communities.

Acknowledgments

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Notes

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