

Jan Clinard, Ed.D.

## No Ordinary Time, No Ordinary Summer Program

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When I read the National Endowment for the Humanities Notice of Funding Opportunity for Humanities Initiatives at Community Colleges, it seemed that the stars were aligned for Helena College to pursue the grant. New “Guided Pathways” included Communications, Humanities, and Fine Arts; co-admissions agreements had been negotiated with liberal arts colleges; a film producer/humanities professor, Dr. Ari Laskin, had been hired to document student stories; the Montana Historical Society’s role was expanding; and MAPS Media Institute had begun offering programming in Helena. NEH agreed, and Helena College was among the 21 colleges and universities awarded funding in the 2020 competition.

The three-year NEH-funded program, *A Bridge to Humanities Pathways in College: Using Film Production to Explore Local Culture and History*, is a summer bridge program for high school and early college students to explore the culture and history of their communities, share their research by producing a documentary film, and hopefully enroll in college coursework in the humanities. As a humanities-focused grant, students are instructed in interdisciplinary humanities methodologies and principles to ground their research.

Each two-week summer program would focus on an important cultural theme that situates present issues of small-town, rural America within

the context of the past. In 2021, the theme was a comparative analysis of the social impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in relation to the 1918-19 Spanish Flu; in 2022, the plan is to explore the crucial yet often overlooked role of people of color in the formation of this region; and in 2023, students will examine the ecological and social impact of mining waste on a local community.

The program was designed to integrate research, writing, interviewing, and film production with activities led by Helena College humanities faculty, infusing humanities scholarship into the program while exposing students to courses offered at the college. Students can earn one college credit in a Communications Internship (COMX 298).

On the morning of August 9, thirteen students, mostly high school juniors and seniors, began their exploration of the humanities with a workshop on Creativity and Methods of Making, presented by art instructor, Seth Roby. Masked students played games that tested their problem solving, observational, teamwork and interpretive skills, while testing the boundaries of creativity. In the afternoon, Dr. Laskin began teaching students about the process of film production.

On day two, writing instructor Virginia Reeves led students through exercises on story, cultural and personal bias, and elements of an effective narrative. Dr. Laskin introduced students

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to the formal elements of film and the five basic types of documentaries, showing students examples of each. By the end of the second day, students had been assigned to their departments: Writer/Director; Producer; Camera; Sound; and Editing.

The third humanities instructor, Kim Feig, used exercises with close readings of late nineteenth century images and documents, employing intertextual analysis to explore how knowledge is produced. The humanities instructors, readings, and many of the sample films touched on topics of the Spanish Flu or COVID-19.

As students watched and analyzed additional samples of documentary films, they began to formulate a storyboard to plan their film. On their fourth day, students split into groups, walked to the Montana Historical Society, and began combing archives, including 1919-1920 year books, audio tapes, newspapers, and other records. One student wrote, "It was interesting to see what teenagers did during that time and how their high school experience compared to mine. A 1919 student wrote, 'I feel like I should write about being sick. I think it could be helpful for science and for future generations.' Searching through Spanish influenza era newspapers was fascinating and heartbreaking at the same time. The headlines and articles were eerily similar to those seen today during our COVID-19 pandemic." In the final film, students read from these articles as the camera scans pages of 1919 headlines.

According to one student, the trip to Butte on Friday of the first week, was "epic." At the Butte Silver Bow Historical Archives, students paged through old death records and newspaper articles as cameras and sound equipment recorded the research experience and captured historical documents. Students marveled at how the cause of death was first attributed to pneumonia, then flu, then Spanish Flu, and how deaths escalated in a few months. In fact, nearly 5,000 Montanans died.

As the second week began, the editing team, led by MAPS instructor Dru Carr, worked in the computer lab, selecting footage that would make it to the rough cut. In the classroom, students prepared for afternoon interviews with Greg Holzman, MD, state medical officer during the height of COVID-19 and Todd Harwell, administrator of Public Health and Safety. Another MAPS instructor, Cove Jasmin, taught students how to set up cameras and sound equipment for the interviews (while wearing masks).

With only four days remaining, students would face a tight schedule to finish gathering content, record voice-over, complete their camera work, and put together a rough cut of the film. After debriefing the interviews, one group reviewed footage and sound in the editing room, and another listed the archival documents that they would need to tell their story. During the previous week's storyboarding activity, students had planned to begin the film with a roundtable in which students shared their own pandemic experiences. However, after further discussions about the difficulties of setting up sound equipment and cameras for that approach, they decided to use three individual student interviews to capture those experiences.

Since the high school across the street would provide visual interest to personal stories, preparations were made for filming at another site. On Wednesday, the editing team was working furiously to piece together shots and sound for the rough cut as another group went to Helena High School to shoot more scenes. On Thursday, one group began planning and recording a podcast to describe their research, what they learned, how they made the film, and their "aha!" moments. During the podcast taping, one student responded that she had learned "history is a lot of interpretation of events. It was great to be in a class where you had deep talks about history, not just memorizing dates and places. The humanities follow us everywhere. It isn't just about the past. And then there was the togetherness—coming up with ideas and then having to kill one! This has

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enhanced my knowledge of history and I realize what is important to me....Parts of history we forget, then it comes up and it's comforting to know that we're not the only ones to experience this."

The team of editors expanded into three groups, working on iMacs for different segments of the film, selecting and organizing scenes, adding voice-overs, and discussing possible music backgrounds. They debated the order of shots that would establish a style, pace and overall feel of the film; how to cut from a still to live-action, appropriate transitions, and using camera sound versus sound recorded with their specialized sound equipment. Huddled around their computer screens wearing headphones and masks, the students concentrated as they repeatedly viewed certain segments to select the ideal time to cut.

During the afternoon of their final Friday, students were delighted to watch the thirty-minute rough cut, the film slated for completion September 20. After working for two weeks, they burst into applause as the film ended. Students were eager to attend the premiere at the Myrna Loy in Helena, slated for Tuesday, October 12.

One of the primary goals of the grant was to inspire students to enroll in humanities programs. In the final evaluation, nine of thirteen students wrote comments about how the program strengthened their goals of studying film or their intention to take humanities courses. Students wrote comments that attested to this impact of the program, such as:

- I never really considered the humanities to be something I would be interested in, but after this program, I am considering studying it in college.
- I know now that I definitely want to take humanities courses.
- Being able to obtain raw experience and grounded advice from people who have dedicated their lives to these topics proved very helpful to me in my own journey and thought processes.
- Knowing that you can't rely on key words for research really helped expand my creative

thinking when finding certain things about a topic.

- This program has helped me see more clearly that I want an interdisciplinary education.
- The connections between people and the world are very important and learning more about that through the humanities has been very insightful.

Among the learning objectives that showed the most growth were: 1) knowledge about the Spanish Flu; 2) use of the creative process; 3) how to find, analyze, and select historical archives; 4) how to plan and write a film script; and 5) culture in the early 1900's.

With these positive results for the first year of the program, Helena College has begun planning its second *Humanities through Film* summer program. Key considerations are selecting dates with the fewest conflicts, getting advertising out to students earlier to expand participation, and adjusting schedules to increase efficiency.

Collaborations with the Montana Historical Society, Silver Bow Archives, and professionals who gave their time for interviews proved to be invaluable resources. Students wrote comments such as "I loved going to the archives and working with professionals" and "I was able to do research on an important topic."

For those of us guiding the program, watching students dig through old documents, beaming as they found compelling stories, were moments that made our hours of preparation worthwhile. We were in awe at how seriously they planned, interviewed, recorded, filmed, and edited. They worked in teams, found their voices and their strengths, and showed kindness to one another.

I was thrilled to witness several brilliant young artists and leaders emerge as they shared a vision, creatively pairing sound with images. Their film, *No Ordinary Time*, demonstrates how a group of random students, with focused instruction and relevant resources, can learn skills to communicate their message effectively through a medium that will reach a wide audience, even during a pandemic, even while wearing masks.