Undergraduate Research: Hands-on History

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"Our students learn that if they unlock one door, there are a million doors behind that door," said Bonnie Lynn-Sherow, associate professor of history and executive director of the center.

Launched with a gift in 2006 from Mark Chapman, a 1965 K-State history and political science alumnus, the Chapman Center's initial focus was on preserving the memory of Chapman's hometown, Broughton, Kansas. It now is a busy multidisciplinary center that supports undergraduate students' research endeavors, especially in the social sciences and humanities — disciplines that Lynn-Sherow said have fewer opportunities for hands-on experiences.

"Undergraduates have clearly expressed their desire for skills-based experiences," Lynn-Sherow said. "This opportunity is extremely exciting for a lot of students, and we've had hundreds of students from all majors and departments involved in the center."

Center faculty also select four student interns each semester based on their class work, most often a published history of a small town. The interns receive scholarships, travel funds and their own workspaces. They also are mentored one-on-one by faculty on original research projects, as well as contribute to larger projects, such as the recent "Going Home: Hidden Histories of the Flint Hills" exhibit at Manhattan's Flint Hills Discovery Center.

Brandon Williams, sophomore in history, is a current Chapman scholarship intern.

"Through the Chapman Center I found what it was I was supposed to be doing, what I am passionate about," Williams said. "I would not have had the opportunity to do research had it not been for the center."

Williams' project for the spring 2017 semester is a photo essay of Orion, Kansas, a town that no longer exists. He is working with an elderly former Orion resident and will scan her six generations of family photographs taken in and around the town.

Williams was selected to present his fall 2016 project, "Cameras in the Streets: The Use and Evolution of Photography in Turn-of-the-Century Kansas," at the 2017 Kansas Undergraduate Research Day at the Capitol in Topeka. Lynn-Sherow and Williams are the fourth Chapman Center student selected to present research at the event since 2010.

M.J. Morgan, longtime research director at the center and professor of history, is responsible for the day-to-day work of the center. The goal of the interns' research projects — and the courses Lynn-Sherow and Morgan teach — is to incorporate service learning into the curriculum and help students network both on and off campus.

"A lot of small historical societies do not have the technology to scan their collections, organize their collections or conserve their photographs. These are things that we train our students to do so we can do it for these communities," Lynn-Sherow said. "It becomes a great collaboration because the students can then see the content of these collections for their research projects, which in many cases is not available anywhere else."

The hours of work interviewing and digging in files for months at a time serve a useful purpose for Williams.

"My research is something that I take upon myself to finish and is for more than just me," he said. "I know my research might be beneficial to other people."

According to Lynn-Sherow, students at the center gain a deeper appreciation for history and the humanities.

"They never see the world again in the same way," Lynn-Sherow said. "Dr. Morgan puts it, 'Where other people see a derelict collection of buildings, a student from the center will look at that place and see Main Street. They can tell you where the blacksmith shop was, or where the grocery store was, or where you are going to find the cemetery.'"

Many of center's alumni are now working in or running historical societies and cultural institutions, have started consultancy firms or produce and edit historical films. Based on their work at the center, several have received scholarships for graduate school to study public history.

"The discoveries by undergraduate students at Kansas State University's Chapman Center for Rural Studies keep coming."

By Taylor Manges