Research Reports: Summer 2009

During summer 2009, City College Fellows and Mellon Mays Undergraduate Fellows received funding to pursue a variety of projects, including: independent research under the guidance of a faculty mentor; participation in structured summer research programs; work in science laboratories; foreign language study; professional internships; and attendance of professional conferences.

Many institutes, universities, professional organizations, and private foundations sponsor summer programs for undergraduates. Natasha Walker discusses some things she learned attending the Gilder/Lehrman History Institute, held at New York University.

In lectures by veteran historians and prominent authors, I observed how they pay respect to one another but are unafraid to disagree. Some historians like Eric Foner unabashedly criticized the work of others in the field. Listening to them talk about new ideas in their fields as well as their own passions, I realized the importance of pursuing your own ideas with fervor and learning to back them up. Throughout your academic career, people will question your ideas and attempt to usurp your authority; you have to be able to weather that storm and work hard to effectively communicate what you believe to be true.

The experience was also invaluable because with slightly over fifty students in attendance, I got a close look at my national cohort. Overwhelmingly it was white and male, with only three African Americans, two being female. Participating in small group projects helped me understand what it means to collaborate with others whose background and opinions differ from your own. I attempted to leave any biases or fears behind and work on making my abilities and confidence shine through to my peers. It was hard to win respect from the males in the beginning, or to assume a position of authority; you have to be able to weather that storm and work hard to effectively communicate what you believe to be true. The experience was also invaluable because with slightly over fifty students in attendance, I got a close look at my national cohort. Overwhelmingly it was white and male, with only three African Americans, two being female. Participating in small group projects helped me understand what it means to collaborate with others whose background and opinions differ from your own. I attempted to leave any biases or fears behind and work on making my abilities and confidence shine through to my peers. It was hard to win respect from the males in the beginning, or to assume a position of authority; you have to be able to weather that storm and work hard to effectively communicate what you believe to be true.

Susan Besse

New Fellows

It is with great pleasure that we announce and welcome our new Fellows. From a most competitive pool of applications, 7 new Fellows have been selected to join the City College Fellowships Program in the spring 2010 semester.

The new City College Fellowship Fellows are:

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<th>Name</th>
<th>Major</th>
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<tr>
<td>Mr. Ishtiaq Alam</td>
<td>History</td>
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<td>Mr. Simon Divilov</td>
<td>Physics</td>
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<td>Mr. William Hickox</td>
<td>History</td>
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<td>Mr. Eduardo Lerro</td>
<td>English</td>
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<td>Ms. Cheryl Mazzeo</td>
<td>Biology</td>
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<td>Mr. Rashun Miles</td>
<td>Psychology</td>
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<td>Mr. Robert Ramos</td>
<td>English</td>
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APRIL 15, 2010
SUMMER RESEARCH PROPOSAL DUE

Proposals for funding for summer research are due in the office on Thursday, April 15th. For instructions, please read the CC Fellowships Program Guide: “Funding for Research, Training, Travel: Guidelines for Requesting and Using Research Monies.”
Latin American Studies Association Conference (LASA) in Rio de Janeiro at the beginning of his research trip to Brazil.

My first day at LASA was incredible. By dinnertime I had attended great panels, met a number of professors and grad students, and accepted an invitation to dinner at a nearby churrasco. It was a surreal experience, as the dinner table closely resembled my bookshelf back home. Around the table sat Peter Winn, James Green, John French, and a number of other scholars. More than anything I was surprised by how nice they were. I had a number of important conversations that night, including with James Green (professor at Brown University) who has turned out to be an incredibly kind and generous person. He told me about how he ended up in Brazil, described his time there as a militant, and spoke of his graduate school experience. He also listened intently to my description of my research project, offered excellent advice, and validated the importance of my desire to study the modern movimiento negro. While encouraging me to apply to the doctoral program at Brown, he expressed willingness to provide guidance no matter where I end up studying.

My experience at LASA provided far more that I could have ever expected. I met professors, graduate students, and intellectuals from all over the world. I developed contacts and built relationships that proved essential during my Ph.D. application process. The academics I met suggested new avenues of thought, archival resources, and people to contact; without this input I never would have completed my writing sample. Getting such a positive boost of encouragement from people who not only knew what I was talking about but also reaffirmed its importance was an unexpected blessing, one I’d need to weather the coming difficulties.

Some Fellows pursue intensive language study abroad. Lisa Figueroa Jahn (Anthropology) describes her summer experiences at the Proyecto Linguístico Francisco Marroquín (PLFM) school in the beautiful colonial city of Antigua, Guatemala.

Studying in Guatemala turned out to be an amazing experience. Aside from improving my Spanish, I learned so much from my five amazing maestra (female teachers) who provided inspiring examples of perseverance in addition to friendships that I hope will last a lifetime.

Just after I had arrived, Beatriz, the owner of the bed and breakfast where I stayed, lost her husband. His death, while heartbreaking, allowed me some insight into how Guatemalan culture views death, and how modernization is transforming practices among the middle classes. ... Outside of instructional time, I learned about Guatemalan food by helping my first maestra, Marta Lidia Jimenez, prepare and sell chile rellenos, enchiladas, pollo con pan, repollo and mole de platanos at the school for some additional money. ... In conversations with three other maestra - Marta Lidia, Rosa Maria, and Elida -, I learned about women’s struggles to control their fertility while I also practiced my use of Spanish medical terminology. Only after having five children and securing her husband’s permission was Rosa Maria able to get the sterilization she had wanted years previously. Elida complained that the local clinic provides no information about possible side effects from using birth control pills or Depo Provera and asked me to share with her what I know. ... My maestros (all older women) also complained that “at their age” it is difficult to find work that pays decent wages and provides any security. They described how the factories, or maquiladora, that surround Antigua prefer to hire women aged 22-28, provide no benefits, often abuse employees physically or mentally, and also pay low wages.

The National Science Foundation sponsors summer “Research Experience for Undergraduates” (REU) programs at many universities around the country and in all the disciplines of the Social Sciences and Sciences. Yamilette Hernandez (Psychology) and Evangeleen Pattison (Sociology) discuss what they learned in different REU programs.

Yamilette Hernandez: Participating in the REU on Applied Psychology at Clemson University was one of the most rewarding and enriching experiences of my professional development. It not only provided me with the research experience necessary for success in graduate school, but it also taught me about myself, my abilities, strengths and weaknesses. Learning to use the scientific method to provide answers to questions about human behavior and then seeing my ideas come to fruition was thrilling. Finally, I stopped doubting my potential.

Together, we nine interns attended classes and guest presentations, toured labs, and designed and carried out a class research project. The project tested pool playing skills on the basis of whether an individual played on a team or alone. Just when we thought we had planned everything to perfection, some minor problem would pop up. For example, it took us more than one try to successfully carry out random assignment.

Our class project was especially useful in preparing for my individual research project. I collaborated with a mentor and another intern to test a hypothesis about human behavior with respect to a virtual environment, which we titled “Avatar Creation and Self Concept in a Virtual World.” We designed an experiment to test empirically how much difference exists between an individual’s real world appearance and the appearance of an avatar he/she creates. Our data came from two self-concept questionnaires that we designed and administered to participants; one pertained to their real world appearance and the other to their avatar’s appearance. The results showed that people tend to create avatars that are significantly different from their real world appearance (which confirmed our hypothesis), but self-concept scores were not significantly different from each other. We suspected, since self-concept develops over time and experience, that the experiment did not allow enough time to reveal a self-concept for the individual’s avatar.

Through all this, I learned how to collaborate and communicate with other researchers; I grew to appreciate the importance of time management, patience, and flexibility; and I gained familiarity with IRB protocols as well as the use of the statistical program SPSS.

Evangeleen Pattison: I experienced tremendous personal and academic growth from participating in the REU in minority demography sponsored by the Population Research Center (PRC) and Department of Sociology at the University of Texas at Austin. During the first half of the summer, I took a demography course and learned to perform advanced statistical analysis using a program called STATA. This training was necessary for the second half of the REU, which consisted of complete immersion in the research process.

I began my individual research project with a literature review on the relationship between parental education and
completion of the PhD, only to find that the data set I intended to use was too small and that I did not have time to meet the licensing requirements for using it. This opened my eyes to obstacles and difficulties of quantitative research, especially if one wants to focus on minority communities, as I do! Eventually I found a data set that allowed for the level of analysis of the US education system that I was interested in. Using Wave I of the Midlife in the United States (MIDUS I) data set, which I accessed through the Interuniversity Consortium for Political and Social Research (ICPSR), I was able to examine stratification in post-secondary education. My hypotheses were: (1) the relationship between parental education and degree completion becomes stronger as the degree becomes more advanced; and (2) the relationship between parental education and degree completion is stronger among the younger age cohort than the older age cohort. The findings confirmed my hypotheses. I am grateful for the helpful and stimulating mentorship I received from demographer Dr. Robert Hummer. He personally taught me multinomial logistic regression and led me through the process of interpreting the sophisticated, multi-variable results.

At the close of the summer, REU participants presented their

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**SPRING 2010 SCHEDULE**

All events are from 12:30 - 2 PM and lunch is served, unless otherwise noted. Please refer to the room number by the date of the event for the location of the event.

* Required event for all Fellows; see “Guide” for other requirements.

**MON Mar 15 DUE:** MMUF applications

**TU Apr 20 (NAC 6/316) (12:30-1:50): Recruitment meeting for City College Fellowships**

**MON May 3 DUE:** Applications for City College Fellowships

**MMUF EVENTS**

**SAT Feb 27:** Yale MMUF Conference: “Diversity at the Crossroads: Representation in Interdisciplinary Work”

**FRI Apr 9:** Eighth Annual NY Regional MMUF Conference, Hunter College, CUNY

**FRI May 14:** MMUF Annual Dinner

**GRE PREP COURSE**

Students wishing to attend a GRE Prep Course, which the Fellowships Program strongly recommends, may choose from a Kaplan course or the Prep Prime course led by Prof. Pilette. For information and schedules for the classes offered: Kaptest.com (Kaplan) and Prep@primeprep.com to request a schedule from Prof. Pilette. The Program will pay for the course or reimburse you for a course taken. You must write Renee and request permission to attend a course, supplying dates and costs, before taking a course in order to be eligible for the GRE Prep course tuition payment. Remember it takes two to three weeks for a check to be processed, if you need your course paid versus a reimbursement.

**The Eight Annual City College Fellowships Research Conference**

The Eighth Annual City College Fellowships Research Conference is Friday, April 30, 2010, from 9 AM – 5 PM in NAC 6/316. All students, faculty, family members, and friends are welcome and encouraged to attend. Fellows who wish to present their work at the Research Conference must submit a title by Monday, April 5, 2010.
research at an informal conference held for all of the researchers at the University of Texas at Austin. I was grateful for the experience I had had speaking at the City College Fellowships Program 7th Annual Research Conference last spring. It was evident that I was the only student who had experience presenting research in public. The REU experience allowed me to see that I have what it takes to be successful in graduate school, and I feel enthusiastic to begin my journey as a doctoral student.

Excerpts from Fellows’ Journals

Fellows in the Humanities and Social Scientists often work with their faculty mentors to develop a research paper that fulfills, but goes far beyond, the requirements for a course. Ala Fink found this to be a productive project during fall semester 2009.

For Professor Bonaparte’s class in Victorian literature, I analyzed Thomas Hardy’s novel, Tess of the D’Urbervilles, drawing also on D.H. Lawrence’s, Study of Thomas Hardy. Using tools introduced in class, I sought to find out what made people happy in the nineteenth century Victorian context of erosion of moral and religious foundations following the descent of the Catholic Church and the rise of empiricism. Through a circuitous route via studying German romantics, I ended up focusing on Hardy’s view that man was unhappy because of his alienation from “human nature.”

I learned the importance of placing literary works in historical context, as connections between literature and philosophy became clear to me. I also learned that I should have begun writing my paper as soon as the main thesis started to form, instead of waiting until I finished all my reading. It would have been a much easier process had I done so; this would have allowed me to clearly see where my problems lay, and what points I didn’t completely understand or lacked evidence to prove.

Through frequent email communications with Professor Bonapart, I was able to formulate clear questions and articulate difficulties I ran up against along the way. Although writing this paper was just a first step, my experiences gave me a taste of the thrill of focusing deeply on one topic through conducting more extensive research than I had done before. I appreciate Professor Bonapart’s guidance and her belief in me.

Fadila Habchi assisted her mentor, Professor Joshua Wilner, to organize a professional conference during fall semester 2009. She recounts the benefits of this experience.

My relationship with my mentor developed in the context of assisting him to organize an international conference on Romanticism and the City that took place at CCNY and at the CUNY Graduate Center from Nov. 5-8. We met frequently before the conference to prepare materials and to discuss my various responsibilities. In the process, I learned what it takes to organize such an event. I appreciated Professor Wilner’s professionalism and patience. He always found time to meet with me.

I started out thinking I would simultaneously engage in other fellowship projects, but Professor Wilner brought me down to earth and made me understand that my participation in the conference was enough. During the conference, I spent four days working alongside my mentor and other students and met many professors from across the country and from abroad. I also met CCNY professors who I plan to study with in future semesters. Graduate students who I worked with during the conference shared their personal experiences applying to graduate school and their current experiences in the CUNY Graduate Center doctoral program. I found their advice to be useful and their example motivating. Attending various panels of particular interest to me exposed me to current literary scholarship as well as to protocols scholars follow when sharing their views and theories with one another.

Fellows attend many workshops that provide information about research and academic careers and that prepare them to write strong applications to doctoral programs. Below, several fellows remark on the value of the fall workshop on writing the difficult and important “statement of purpose.” They also expressed appreciation to Professor Joshua Wilner for his valuable advice.

Jared Rodriguez: The draft I submitted for the workshop was not a “statement of purpose” at all. It was a personal history: a distinction I learned when my document was used as an example of “what not to do.” This was an embarrassing experience but one that provided a useful lesson. The workshop format led us to discover the rationales behind how and why these statements are structured in the way they are. Discussing why a particular literary structure aids one’s argument and how to refashion our drafts made the undertaking a little easier, if not less painful. I was motivated by the camaraderie the workshop generated as we engaged with each other’s work.

Natasha Walker: The most beneficial workshop this semester was on writing the statement of purpose. Reading other fellows’ drafts, I realized that simplicity and brevity make for a more effective piece of writing. The most compelling statements were those with original or unique thoughts expressed succinctly using simple language. Ideas pared down to their essence won the reader over more than complex strings of ornate vocabulary. The best essays didn’t feel as though they were trying to impress though because of this, they did.

Evangeleen Pattison: I benefited from reading the statements of other Fellows, especially Yamilette’s. She owned her experience and described her academic growth and desire for knowledge in a most engaging manner. It took me a long time to own my story and produce a statement that I felt good about. It was not until my fourth application was due, UC Berkeley, that a light went off and I produced a personal statement that I am extremely pleased with.