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Process Paper: Submission to Friends of the Library Excellence in Research Award

I drew inspiration for researching the history of Oberlin — both as a college and a town — from the book *Elusive Utopia*, by former Oberlin Profs. Carol Lasser and Gary Kornblith. In winter 2018, a mentor gave me the book as a gift, and it piqued my interest for two primary reasons. First, it revealed that Oberlin has consistently and meticulously documented its own history — an understanding confirmed by my time spent in the College archives this past spring. Second, the book highlighted the significant degree to which individuals have impacted and shaped Oberlin's historical trajectory, a profound statement about life in this small town.

Inspired by *Elusive Utopia*, I launched a private reading about Oberlin's history with Professor of Comparative American Studies Wendy Kozol this past spring. I wanted to work from an American studies perspective, influenced largely by Lasser and Kornblith's focus on race in early Oberlin. I conducted an initial review of published works and compiled a list that would ultimately prove to be overly-ambitious — especially after I learned of other books to add — but still provided an effective baseline for learning about Oberlin's history. I also planned to spend a significant amount of time in the College's archives.

My goal for the private reading was to produce a series of op-ed style essays about Oberlin's history that I would later publish in *The Oberlin Review* as a regular series throughout fall 2019. In the process of writing those op-eds, I encountered a number of successes, setbacks, and realizations. The first — and potentially most important — was that I was not going to make any profound original statements, especially given the constraints on my time and resources. Others — notably Lasser, Kornblith, former Prof. Geoffrey Blodgett, among others — had already written a great number of words about the broader strokes of Oberlin's history.

Consequently, I began to envision my work as an exploration of specific individuals, places, and stories that might escape inclusion in higher-level examinations, but that nonetheless reveal much about Oberlin's past, present, and future. To find those moments, I looked to existing work by scholars and historians, in order to build familiarity both with important threads that weave throughout Oberlin's history and, perhaps more importantly, how people write about them. With this general background, I began to explore both the College's official archives in Mudd library, as well as the *Review's* online archives. In the course of that research, I attempted to make my searches as specific as possible while still rooting them in the secondary literature.

In terms of working with the archives themselves, I began by pulling all records associated with a chosen name, place, or event. I would read them all (or as many as time would allow), build a list of interesting facts, sketch out a general timeline, and then stitch together a 800-1,000 word piece that attempted to capture the most salient elements of this process. I found a few successes

with this approach — in particular my research on Talcott Hall and the brief presidency of Robert Fuller — but also ran into some dead ends.

For example, my attempt to write about Oberlin's history of environmental activism dating back to the first Earth Day in 1970 did not pan out. I attribute the difficulty I encountered to three factors: 1) there is an overwhelmingly vast body of archival materials on the topic, 2) most of these materials concern more recent events, such as the construction of the AJLC, and 3) the 'environmental movement' as we currently conceive of it used different language to define itself at its inception. In this way and others, my archival work — both when it succeeded as well as when it didn't — gave me insight into how to formulate intentional, directed questions that gave me the best chance of finding the information I am looking for.

There were many other elements to my research process that I did not have time to discuss here; however, this document provides a relatively complete overview. I am grateful for the opportunity to be considered for this award, and look forward to hearing from the committee soon.