Research Strategy Essay

In WRIT 134, I was tasked with writing a research paper about an immigration-related issue. Because of my significant exposure to immigration topics through internships, I had many ideas about directions I could take, and since this was my first serious research paper, I was nervous about gathering all the necessary information. Through writing this paper, I overcame both of these obstacles and learned valuable lessons about research.

I spent weeks deciding my topic. In progressive policy circles, I had often heard the phrase “Abolish ICE,” so my initial idea was to examine this question – whether the US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) should be abolished. However, in the early stages of my research, I found a case study of the impact of a large ICE raid on a small town community that fascinated me because of how it zoomed in on a very specific situation. My interest shifted; I became interested in attempting to produce a similar case study about the impact of another ICE raid in a different community. In the process, I wanted to also highlight how ICE raids affect Southeast Asian communities. Given my data science background, I also wanted to incorporate quantitative measurements into a study. When I met with Laura O’Brien and Daria Hafner, I learned how to do this through Social Explorer, and more broadly, how to conduct a case study. However, I realized that it would be pretty difficult to do a case study of the particular ICE raid I was interested in because it was in a larger community. Thus, it was very unlikely that impacts of the raid would show up in data, so the results of a study would not provide new information. Finally, I switched my focus to efforts to grant driver’s licenses to undocumented immigrants. Initially, I was interested in why and how Virginia, a very “purple” state, had enacted such legislation, as I knew it had recently done so. But because the Virginia legislation passed on a party-line vote, Professor Battat suggested that I focus on another state instead. I decided to examine efforts to enact legislation to grant driver’s licenses to undocumented immigrants in Massachusetts, a very “blue” state, and why they had not yet been successful (at the time of my initial research). Going through a long
process just to choose a topic was a new experience for me, but it allowed me to find a topic that was specific, interesting, and about which I could produce new information.

Once I had finalized my topic, I used a variety of sources to try to understand the pro-driver’s license efforts. For my initial research, I explored searching databases like ProQuest to find both media and academic sources. The Boston Globe articles were an accessible way to identify what driver’s license legislation had entailed and who were its main supporters over the years, especially when I used the publication date selection feature. I even tried using the date selection feature to see if there had been change over time in Globe coverage of driver’s licenses for undocumented immigrants, although this information was unhelpful. On the academic side, I found articles that allowed me to better understand the purpose of driver’s license legislation, including a dissertation on similar pro-driver’s license efforts in other states and how they might apply to Massachusetts (2020). To gather more information about the pro-driver’s license efforts in Massachusetts specifically and legislators’ perspectives on these efforts, at Professor Battat’s suggestion, I reached out to two of the bill’s cosponsors. Through some email correspondence and a phone interview, I acquired first-hand accounts of the importance of different factors in advocacy. Additionally, I watched the Massachusetts State Senate floor as they voted on the legislation to see if legislators’ comments might reveal more about perceived factors that contributed to the ultimate success of the bill. To examine demographic changes, I used the American Community Survey data and other data sources. Lastly, because the driver’s license legislation was actively making its way through the Massachusetts legislature as I wrote my paper (and was passed just a few days before the paper’s due date), I even cited a tweet from a legislator to communicate the great joy in the Senate chamber when the legislation was passed.

From writing this research paper, I learned the importance of thoughtfulness in choosing a topic and to seek out information wherever it can be found. I look forward to applying these lessons and further strengthening my research skills in future projects.