Reflections on the Research Process

Writing a research paper for my Economics Writing course WRIT112/ECON104 (Contemporary Economic Issues) was one of the most exciting and challenging academic experiences of my first semester at college. The opportunity to delve deeper into any of the topics covered in class allowed me to explore the issue that captured my attention from our first class--the inequality of college admissions and access policies. I had not thought about the applications of economics in the sphere of education policies before this class, and, having recently gone through the college application process myself, was thrilled to learn more. My only worries revolved around crafting a focused research question, and finding a variety of sources as a remote student.

I started my research process by returning to the assigned readings on the issues of inequality in higher education. One of them, a Vox article, cited a paper by Hoxby and Turner, titled “Expanding College Opportunities,” that I found through the Library SuperSearch engine. This peer-reviewed paper proposed an effective strategy to increase the representation of high-achieving low-income students at colleges that, however, still has not been implemented despite the paper’s publication date being 2013. This observation determined my interest to explore the reasons behind the persisting underrepresentation of high-achieving low-income students at elite colleges. Yet, the challenge lay in finding primary data and secondary sources to develop my arguments.
Professor Rothschild recommended to start by looking for primary data on The Equality of Opportunity Project website, and tracking the literature that cites, and is cited by, the Hoxby and Turner article. With the help of the library research guide for our class--that introduced me to the EconLit and the NBER databases--I found the literature cited by the Hoxby and Turner article. I was surprised by the number of economists who conducted the research on the issues of inequality in higher education. As I studied their work, I wrote down key arguments and bookmarked the useful graphs, and later grouped these findings by themes. This process enabled me to determine the key arguments I would address, develop an outline and create the first draft of my paper.

The discussion of my first draft with Professor Rothschild helped me to identify the arguments that required further development, and the possible extensions to my original thesis. To expand my lens, I looked for the data on the student body at the specific colleges, and examined the perspectives of other actors involved, such as the public school chancellor (in the New York Times magazine), the high-school counselor (in the college transitions blog), and the policy journalists (in the Atlantic magazine). Moreover, the implications from my findings empowered me to add recommendations for government policies to the thesis statement. One of these recommendations was based on the Bleemer’s paper, published in 2020, that evaluated the “top percent” policies of the University of California. Bleemer’s paper also cited some of the articles I was using, so it was particularly interesting to consider his policy proposals in my work.
Speaking of the technical side of the research process, I got more familiar with the APA citation style, the difference between the working and published papers, and the ways to incorporate visual representations of data. Some of the graphs I cited included more information than necessary for my research question. For example, the graphs from the Pew Research Center included the data on the low-income and nonwhite students, so I recreated the graphs to capture only the information directly related to my research.

This was my first experience of relying solely on the digital resources during the research process. At some point I faced the difficulty of accessing certain publications from my country, and attending the library research office hours helped me to not only resolve this problem, but also to find other relevant publications. By the end of the research process, I realized that one of the advantages of working with digital publications was that the literature that cites the article was immediately available to me. The paper copies usually shifted my whole focus to the bibliography, whereas the access to the “cited by” page on the library websites immediately took me to the recent literature on my topic.

I am thankful for this research experience because it opened my eyes to the vast possibilities within the field of economics, introduced me to the leading researchers in the sphere of access to higher education, and allowed me to learn more about a topic I deeply care about.