Encounters with the Archives: Undergraduate Research in Rare Books & Special Collections

Principal Investigators: Olivia Moy

Proposal Summary: Access to manuscripts and special collections is generally reserved for graduate students and faculty, while undergraduates are traditionally limited to working with literary texts through paperback prints or anthologies. I propose developing a course that exposes undergraduate students to archival research first-hand, incorporating manuscript research into the 300-level English curriculum and training students to engage directly with rare books, both digitally and in person. Not only is it exhilarating to handle the manuscripts of great canonical figures, but encounters with the material text bring authors and their writings to life, confronting students with questions of historical context, print culture, and publication history. My current book project involves locating, deciphering, and analyzing letters of five major British writers from the 19th century, comparing different editions and letters to learn more about the print history of a text or biographical details of the authors. Undergraduates could easily be directed to engage in such archival work; in fact, the simple act of transcribing would provide groundbreaking work for rarer letters, many of which are housed in nearby university libraries but remain relatively untouched by scholars. I will also arrange for students to receive interdisciplinary training in archival skills, drawing on resources through Lehman’s library staff and John Jay College’s forensics faculty. The end research goal would be two-fold: to create content for a comprehensive online teaching guide, to be used in future semesters of teaching ENG 303 through the archives, and to provide valuable research assistance for my book manuscript. The impetus behind this project is that manuscript research need not be limited to advanced graduate students nor to students of elite research institutions.

For more information, please contact:
Olivia Moy
olivia.moy@lehman.cuny.edu