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Organization, Outreach, and Optimism: Getting a Project Up to Full Speed

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The Harriet Jacobs Papers is both a project with a long history and one that is a relatively new full-time endeavor. Jacobs was born a slave in Edenton, North Carolina, in 1813. She escaped north after hiding in a crawl space in her grandmother’s house for several years. While living in Rochester, New York, she became involved in the abolition movement, and in 1861 she published the slave narrative *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. Many of her contemporaries knew she had written the narrative herself, but when the book was rediscovered in the twentieth century, many scholars assumed a former slave could not have written such a lucid text. It was not until the 1980s that letters newly donated to the University of Rochester between Jacobs and her editor Lydia Maria Child allowed Jean Fagan Yellin to establish that Jacobs was indeed the author. The project will produce a two-volume edition of documents by and about Jacobs, as well as her daughter Louisa Jacobs and brother John S. Jacobs, who were also active reformers.

The Harriet Jacobs Papers began as an offshoot of Jean Fagan Yellin’s research for a biography of Jacobs and her edited edition of *Incidents*. For several years, work on the papers project was sporadic, as Dr. Yellin and a series of undergraduate and graduate students surveyed archives for material, accessioned and transcribed documents, and began research on the annotations. The pace changed dramatically in the summer of 2002 when the project received funds from the National Endowment for the Humanities and the Gladys Kriebel Delmas Foundation and secured a contract to publish the book with the University of North Carolina Press. Suddenly there was money for the project to move forward—and a deadline to meet.

I began as the full-time associate editor in September 2002, encountering a project that had wonderful resources, historical significance, and some not
insignificant challenges. Because so many people had worked on the papers, over such an extended period of time, it was unclear at points what work had been done, how the work had been organized, and the rationale behind some of the decisions that had been made. Because of funding limitations, undergraduates with relatively little experience would conduct much of the research. Moreover, like many projects, we work in an environment in which few people know what documentary editing is and why it is important. Despite these obstacles, the project has made significant progress in the time since it became a full-time operation. I can break down the strategies we have devised into three categories: Organization, Outreach, and Optimism. While our project’s situation may be relatively unusual, I believe these strategies can be applied to many projects as they change staff or try to meet a deadline or pick up the speed at which they work.

**Organization**

The ongoing nature of the project was both a blessing and a challenge when I arrived. On the positive side Dr. Yellin and her various assistants had done a great deal of work throughout the years and gathered significant research materials. In the course of working on her Jacobs’s biography, Yellin had put together invaluable subject files, full of both secondary and primary sources. Previous staff had accessioned and transcribed the documents, and conducted research on many of the important figures in the papers. Critically, Yellin had developed a transcription manual with Professor W. Speed Hill of Lehman College, who had extensive experience in textual editing. Because the project had had so many cooks, however, the work had not been organized systematically and many different approaches and standards had been applied.

My first priority was to identify the status of the research and organize the research materials, so I knew exactly where the project stood. Previously, Dr. Yellin had developed a procedure in which researchers wrote up their findings in a document called a research report. The reports followed a template, which included space for the researcher’s name, the document for which the research was being done, citations for sources consulted, a summary of relevant information identified, and, when appropriate, a list of remaining questions and possible sources. Despite this set format, the reports that previous employees had turned in varied widely in quality. Dr. Yellin, I, and our senior research assistant developed written guidelines for what we required in a research report, including acceptable sources, citation requirements, and the type and amount of information we wanted. I then sorted through the exist-
ing research reports, marking them either as completed or needing follow-up; many reports that earlier staff had felt complete needed to be reassigned, in order to bring them into line with our new standards. As I made decisions, I updated the existing database accordingly. In addition, to ensure I could make full use of the database, I took a class in Access. Armed with knowledge of the computer system we were using and the extent of the research completed, we were ready to move forward.

The next step was to organize the subject files. Some of the material was already in the office; Dr. Yellin soon supplemented it with five drawers of the material she had collected over the years and used in her home office. She had organized this material through a personal filing system that, like many of our personal files, worked for her but did not translate for a wider audience. She and I spent many hours going through the files, determining what was there and how to categorize it; we then arranged the folders by subject, filed alphabetically. This step was also important because, as we spoke, it became clear that much of the history of the project and the information we needed was still in her head and not documented anywhere. We decided she should write brief research "manuals" on the subjects she knew the most about, such as the Jacobs family and the abolitionists who worked most closely with them, so we could access at least some of the information "in her head" even when she was not in the office.

Our third step in the initial organization was to create protocols for our researchers. We wanted to make these as explicit as possible, to avoid the problems created earlier. As mentioned before, the senior staff wrote guidelines for research reports. We also created weekly status reports to track researchers' progress; revised the draft research report form to make our requirements clearer; and drafted extensive research protocols to assist student workers. The last item was especially important, since, because of budget constraints, undergraduates would conduct much of our research. We wanted them to have written documentation about the databases and secondary sources to consult as they navigated libraries and archives. The senior staff supplemented this documentation with training sessions and site visits to the repositories the researchers would use the most often, to introduce them to the materials and collections with which they would need to become familiar.

These organizational steps took over a month, time which had not been built into the work plan. But they were necessary and saved us time later on,
and this work was critical psychologically. Once we had control over the research, our task seemed much less overwhelming.

**Outreach**

The organization took place in our office on the fifteenth floor of 41 Park Row, but it soon became clear that we needed to connect to people and institutions outside of room 1505. We made contact with colleagues within the documentary editing community, within our institution, and within other academic departments. These contacts have provided invaluable help, and I cannot overemphasize the value of reaching out to colleagues, both to answer specific questions and to publicize a project.

I had attended the Institute for the Editing of Historical Documents (Camp Edit) and received a Certificate in Archival Management and Historical Editing from NYU, as well as working at the Margaret Sanger Papers while in graduate school, but, of course, I still had questions as we set up this particular project. Luckily, the documentary editing community is one of the most supportive in all of academia, and its members are almost always willing to answer questions large and small. For instance, Esther Katz and Cathy Hajo, for whom I had worked at the Sanger Papers, generously invited me to their office as soon as I told them I would be working at the Jacobs Papers, and they gave me invaluable advice. They shared everything from their systems for organizing and assigning research to the templates for the forms they used. I was lucky this project was within walking distance of my apartment, but SEDIT-L, the Association for Documentary Editing’s email discussion list, is another excellent way to solicit advice. And any new project should make sure that its members attend Camp Edit and the annual ADE conference.

One of our major challenges was (and is) to explain to people at Pace University, which houses the project, what exactly it is that we do at the Harriet Jacobs Papers and why it is important. Although frustrating, it is worth the time and effort to make those explanations. Dr. Yellin had retired as a Distinguished Professor of English after teaching at Pace for over thirty years, so she was well known at the school. Still, many of her colleagues seemed baffled as to the nature and importance of a documentary editing project. We have come to have strong allies in the Department of English, where the project “lives,” and in the departments of History and Women’s Studies, but it took some active networking to make them sit up and notice us. We received the best response from these departments when we stressed what we could offer them, or at least their students. Faculty members were
at their most responsive, for instance, when we asked for names of strong students for the research positions. We have, furthermore, set up an internship program through which Pace students can obtain credit in English and history. Because the faculty now understand we offer students a unique opportunity, which will make them more competitive as they apply for jobs and graduate schools, they are more supportive. The Women's Studies Department, for instance, allows us to use their conference room, which provides critical space for proofreading and other projects, such as collating grant applications. It is a small thing, but it makes a big difference when we have five people crowded in a tiny office.

While the project at times confuses the humanities departments, we utterly mystify the rest of the school. Pace is a small institution, but it has an entrenched bureaucracy that does not know what to do with square pegs like us. The staff of computer services, for instance, kept insisting we only needed one computer, as we had just one full-time staff member; it took a few weeks of daily calls, but they finally came to understand that we are different from other offices on campus and have several interns and student workers at any one time. We now have three machines, and a good friend in the department who prioritizes our service calls. During the last year I have compiled a list of people who have been helpful in similar situations and now call them first, instead of working my way up the chain of command.

Our ace in the hole has been securing a member of the administration as our advisory editor. Joseph M. Thomas, an assistant dean at Pace at the time he joined the project, was uniquely qualified. Dr. Thomas not only understood the ins and outs of the school’s administration, but he also had conducted scholarly work on slave narratives and served as a consultant to the Modern Language Association’s Committee on Scholarly Editing. His knowledge of the administration was especially important at a school like Pace, which was not used to handling a grant-funded project. He has since left for another school, but continues to work for the project and to serve as a liaison between the Papers and Pace and between Pace and granting agencies. Not every project could or should add a dean to their permanent staff list, but befriending someone within the administration, who can get the answers you need and navigate the system, can save an immense amount of time (as well as preserving your sanity).

When I was applying for the position at the Jacobs Papers, I searched for the project on-line and was surprised to find that it did not have a website. Once I joined the project, I knew it was critical to establish a presence on the
web, as that is the first, and sometimes only, place many people now turn for information. We learned a few hard lessons in the process of designing and launching the site. The administration had informed us the school’s webmaster could design the site for us. This webmaster turned out to be an overextended graduate student juggling several jobs and school; she consistently missed meetings and kept spelling Jacobs wrong, leaving off the final “s.” We decided to hire someone, but to save money we hired another graduate student, one who came recommended by the Computer Sciences Department. He had the basic computer skills, but did not comprehend the purpose of the project and the image we wanted to project, and thus made design decisions that we found objectionable. On one page, for instance, he included large pictures of the white reformers and small illustrations of the African-American activists, a problem for a project devoted to highlighting the work of the black abolitionist community. We saw the light at the end of the tunnel only when one of our student researchers took an HTML class, for her own purposes, and suggested that she finish the site for us. Understanding our vision of the project, she was able to finish quickly the work. The lesson to take from this is either to allot the money to hire a professional who can complete the job quickly, or have a staff member who understands your needs learn the basics of web design. Despite our rough start, the website has been a success since its launch. We announced it on SEDIT-L and various H-Net listservs and have had over 3,700 hits since April.

A strong, involved advisory board is a critical part of an outreach strategy. Our board is comprised of scholars known for their expertise in nineteenth-century African-American and women’s history and documentary editing. We have turned to them for a wide variety of reasons, from assistance with specific research questions to help with fundraising. In the past year, for instance, one board member found a researcher for us in Boston, saving us the expense of a trip, and delivered a paper on Jacobs at a national conference, when our project director was unable to attend. Ann Gordon Editor of the Stanton-Anthony Papers, another board member, opened her files to me as I researched Louisa Jacobs’s participation on a suffrage tour organized by Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony. Not all board members can or want to be so involved, but it is important to make sure that some people on your board have a strong level of commitment.

I have already discussed our internship program for Pace students. We also established an internship program for students from other schools,
which has inadvertently been our most successful outreach program. And here I need to thank the staff of the Sanger Papers once again, who suggested I advertise for summer interns. The response to our advertisement, posted to SEDIT-L and several H-Net listservs, amazed us. We had over forty applications for five internships that not only did not pay, but required participants to pay for their own housing in New York City. The research the interns did was wonderful and saved us hundreds of dollars in salary, but their value went beyond that. Their enthusiasm for the project reminded us it was important work at a time we were struggling for funding and trying to make our home institution recognize our value. And the very act of advertising the internship was effective publicity, spreading the word about the project and generating interest it.

Optimism

Finally, I want to speak briefly about the importance of a positive attitude while dealing with the stresses of a new or changing project. Dr. Yellin and I both spent our first weeks exclaiming, “If only it had been done this way from the beginning!” and “When will we feel like we’re at square one?” We soon learned this approach took a lot of energy and time that could be better spent propelling the project to completion. Previous researchers may not have gone about the work in the manner I would have done it, but I have come to appreciate that they did the work at all. Each task done in the past is one I do not have to do in the future.