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Researching a Region: Introducing the Rhodes Journal of Regional Studies

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Researching a Region:

Introducing the *Rhodes Journal of Regional Studies*

Memphis and the Mid-South region afford unique opportunities for scholarly research. From the foothills of the Appalachians to the foothills of the Ozarks, from the cotton fields of West Tennessee to the battlefields of Vicksburg, the region encompassing an approximately two hundred mile radius from Memphis has figured prominently in the social, cultural, political, and economic life of the nation. The area's racial and cultural diversity, its significant contributions to literature and music, its pivotal role in the history of civil rights, the prominence of its national political leaders, and its growing importance as a commercial and distribution hub make it an ideal laboratory for research in the humanities, fine arts, and social sciences. In 2003, Rhodes College initiated a new summer program, the Rhodes Institute for Regional Studies, that sought to capitalize on the cultural richness of the region while providing undergraduate students the chance to engage in academic research. Some of the best papers that emerged from the 2003 Rhodes Institute are published here, in the first volume of the *Rhodes Journal of Regional Studies*.

The Rhodes Institute is an innovative program that capitalizes on the liberal arts tradition of the College, the research expertise of its faculty, and its location in one of America's great cities. Students apply to the Institute by submitting proposals for specific research projects in one of several academic disciplines. The Institute faculty then selects a group of Rhodes Institute fellows, who receive meals, housing, research expenses, and stipends while they pursue their academic work. Over the course of the program, Institute fellows spend their first two weeks together engaged in an intensive regional studies seminar; five weeks working on their own projects, interspersed with weekly group meetings; and a final week presenting and discussing their research. By the end of the program, all fellows submit 8,000-10,000-word research papers. This unique experience includes four key components.

Interdisciplinary study

Grounded in the College's liberal arts tradition, the Rhodes Institute brings together faculty and fellows from economics, English, history, music, political science, and religious studies. Institute faculty members team teach the seminar, as they provide information and insight on the region from their own disciplinary perspectives through lectures, readings, and discussions. With a student-faculty ration of 3-1, fellows thus benefit from the expertise of all the faculty members involved in the program. Fellows reap similar rewards when they begin to focus on their research projects. Although each fellow works under the supervision of a faculty mentor within a specific discipline, all members of the Institute faculty take part in discussions of all of the projects during weekly meetings. During these sessions, fellows begin to see the relationships and make the connections among their various topics.

Independent Research

After gaining a broad, interdisciplinary perspective in the regional studies seminar, students embark on their own specialized research. Institute fellows leave the confines of the classroom and venture into the community to work in libraries and archives or in collaboration with businesses, government, or non-profit organizations. In contrast to the normal academic year, when students balance competing academic demands and have little time for focused research, the Rhodes Institute provides an opportunity to engage a project over a sustained period of time without distraction. Encouraged and advised along the way through individual meetings with faculty mentors as well as the larger group sessions, fellows produce papers that conform to the rigorous standards of the Institute faculty.

Regional immersion

Because the program focuses solely on the Mid-South, the Rhodes Institute serves as a cultural immersion experience. Much in the same way that college students often go abroad to imbibe the culture of a specific country, the Rhodes Institute

provides fellows the chance to get to know the Memphis region in ways that few Rhodes students ever do. Fellows engage not only in “academic immersion” during the regional studies seminar, they also take a variety of field trips to experience first-hand the things they have studied in the classroom. During its first two years, the Rhodes Institute has visited Sun Studio, Graceland, Shiloh National Military Park, the National Civil Rights Museum, Mud Island River Park, Elmwood Cemetery, Rowan Oak, Tunica River Park and Museum, and the Stax Museum of American Soul Music. Through visits to such sites, Institute fellows develop a sense of the unique attributes and contributions of the city and region.

Civic Engagement

The Rhodes Institute also fosters civic awareness and involvement in Memphis and the Mid-South. During the regional studies seminar and weekly group meetings, Rhodes Institute faculty and fellows discuss current events in the community. The program requires all fellows to read the city’s daily newspaper and to report on articles relating to issues raised in the seminar. To further such engagement, the Rhodes Institute is actively working to form partnerships with local institutions and organizations. All Institute fellows, for example, receive summer memberships in Mpace Memphis, a group of young professionals devoted to promoting and improving the city. And in the most general sense, Rhodes Institute fellows’ research helps them to make connections in the community—with librarians, policy makers, academicians, businesspersons, clergy, civic activists, and others—that will pay enormous dividends, particularly for students who decide to settle in the Mid-South.

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The three papers contained in this inaugural issue of the *Rhodes Journal of Regional Studies* exemplify these characteristics of the Rhodes Institute, in that the essays represent an interdisciplinary approach to researching the Mid-South. Daniel Anglin’s essay

combines the disciplines of music and history to describe a central figure in the history of Memphis church music, Christopher Philip Winkler. Profiling the life and work of this late nineteenth-century organist and composer, Anglin's highly original article relies on unpublished material obtained from Winkler's Nashville descendants, as well as newspaper articles, city directories, and local church histories. Anglin also analyzes the structure of Winkler's numerous works and shows the consistencies and patterns within his compositions. The result is a unique contribution to our understanding of local music history. Although Elvis and the like have dominated popular conceptions of the musical life of Memphians, it should come as no surprise that Memphis, often described as "a city of churches," possesses a rich tradition of church music as well.

Millie Worley's essay explores a more well known aspect of Memphis history, the race riot of 1866. One of the most significant events in Memphis history, the riot resulted in the deaths of forty-six African Americans and two whites. Most historians have portrayed the riot as a conflict between the city's poor Irish residents and the large, newly-freed black population that migrated to the city during and after the Civil War. According to many scholars, Irish city employees—mostly police officers—instigated the mob violence against African Americans. Worley's essay challenges this interpretation. After digging into Recorder's Court and city payroll records in local archives, Worley discovered that many of the Irish police officers blamed for leading the riot were not actually police officers at all. Republicans in Congress who came to Memphis to investigate, according to Worley, exaggerated the involvement of the police and city officials in general in order to justify a Republican takeover of the Democratic, Irish-controlled city government. Worley's essay aptly demonstrates how new research in primary sources can alter existing interpretations of historical events.

Finally, Chris Hathorn offers a thorough and thoughtful examination of the politics of gambling in Arkansas. Given the recent popularity and enormous profits associated with legalized gambling in other states, particularly in the South, Hathorn asks why attempts to establish a state lottery and casinos have repeatedly failed in the Natural State. The answer he provides to this question is comprehensive and multi-

faceted. Based upon interviews with policy makers and political scientists, as well as research in political science and economic theory, Hathorn concludes that organized opposition among religious conservatives, money from Mississippi casino interests who fear competition, and a series of legal obstacles that make it difficult for the state to amend its constitution have all contributed to the failure of efforts to expand legalized gambling in Arkansas. Hathorn's essay makes an important contribution to one of the nation's most significant public policy debates.

The publication of these articles and the journal's dissemination throughout the region represents one aspect of the Rhodes Institute's larger efforts to foster civic engagement. Scholars, teachers, and students in and of Memphis and the Mid-South will, it is hoped, gain new insights from the research published here and in future volumes.

The Rhodes Institute, finally, expresses deep gratitude to those who, because of their belief in our educational mission, have made this program and this publication possible. In particular, I wish to thank the Robert and Ruby Priddy Charitable Trust of Wichita Falls, Texas for its generous support of Rhodes CARES (Center for Academic Research and Education through Service), of which the Rhodes Institute is a part.

Timothy S. Huebner
Editor