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Research Reflection
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CAPPP

Two years ago, I watched one of my friends present her capstone project for the honors college at the University of Washington. It was impressive; I knew she had worked hard on it. The concept did not interest me. I was under the impression that I would relax my senior year of college; my major would be complete and it would be smooth sailing from September to June. I am thankful that I ignored everything that the sophomore version of myself wanted. I am thankful that I just so happened to be in the right place at the right time when my TA suggested I apply to be a part of the Center for American Politics and Public Policy. Most of all I am thankful for the hours of guidance I received from my mentors allowing me to challenge myself and actually contribute to a body of scholarly work.

When my mentor asked me what I wanted to research I only had a vague idea of a general theme. I knew I wanted to learn about plea bargaining. I wanted to know why it was so prevalent, what the potential solutions may be. I started digging. What I did not anticipate was just how much literature existed on the topic. There were hundreds of articles from dozens of journals all at my fingertips, but searching for the right catalyst to begin my own research felt like searching for a needle in a haystack. I talked to my TA who then proceeded to wonderfully request a representative from the library help me and my fellow undergraduates on our quest to brave this new world. As ridiculous as it sounds, no one had ever showed me that Google Scholar exists and that I have access to volumes of information through the University of Washington itself. I learned how to find the bases of literature; the articles that have been cited thousands of times in countless different works. It was through this that I found my starting line; I found the work of Albert W. Alschuler.

He was one of the pioneer scholars when it came to writing about the prosecutor's role in a court room., something quite novel at the time. Specifically, he brought up the connection between prosecutorial power and the increase of plea bargaining in America. It was at this moment that I knew whose path I would follow. I read a few dozen articles on Heim Online and from JSTOR. Some were written by Alschuler, others were inspired by his work. They all

offered more and more theories, but missing from the literature surrounding prosecutors and plea bargains was empirical observations.

I started researching case law on my quest to learn more about the prosecutor's role in the court and their role in plea bargains. Through this I discovered a 1963 court case *Brady v. Maryland*. *Brady* ruled that prosecutors must disclose evidence timely to defense which peaked my interest in the power prosecutors hold over evidence. I wanted to see just exactly what the guideline for prosecutors and evidence was, so I investigated what I believed to be the root of any guideline: the American Bar Association. Upon skimming through their website I learned that they did indeed have a model rule that prosecutors were compelled to follow. The problem was that according to the ABA, less than half of states actually adopted this model rule. I dug around Google Scholar for a little while longer and I found that there was hardly any information regarding this rule. If no one else had looked at the effect of the model rule, I decided I was going to do just that.

Looking at plea bargaining rates is difficult due to the fact that most numbers are only recorded at the aggregate state level. A quick google will give anyone the estimated percentage of plea bargains at the state and federal level. I wanted more than that. I wanted to see what quantities lay at smaller geographical levels. Not only would that allow me to observe more cases, but it would also allow me to control more accurately for the smaller differences between areas. I wanted to look at county-level caseload data. Unfortunately, that is not easily accessible data. It should be transparent; it would be useful for continued research on plea bargaining. In reality, I had to read through 50 different judiciary reports from 2017 just to discover that only 17 states record data at the county level. I hand-recorded the caseload data for each of these counties over the course of about a month. I ended up creating my own spreadsheet with over 1000 different observations and as far as I am aware, this is the only comprehensive recording of county-level data for 2017 in a readable, .csv file. That alone, just the research that led to my data and the eventual collection of it, was an accomplishment in itself. Before I had even tested any of the information I collected, I had contributed a novel set of data that no other scholar had yet contributed to the field. I took exceptional pride in this.

After all, the point of research - the point of acknowledging what others in the field - is to build on what those before us have done. While my project is only one piece of a larger puzzle, someone in the future could use the research that I have done and the data that I have collected to

discover even more about the field in the future. The sophomore version of me would have never believed that I was capable of writing over 16 pages of research and findings; even less so that the findings came from my own original dataset. But sophomore me had also not yet discovered that it is when we challenge ourselves, not anticipate smooth sailing, that we actually learn what we are capable of.