Librarian’s/Archivist’s Guide

What are the History Engine and the associated student project?
The History Engine is an educational resource center and cumulative database that provides
opportunities for teachers, students, and researchers to access and add to a wide-ranging portrait
of life in the United States in the nineteenth century. The student project contributes to the
database, allowing students to gain firsthand experience as academic historians as they research
and interpret historical events, encapsulate this knowledge in a brief online entry, and post their
analysis for public use. Thus the database is composed of “episodes”—snippets of daily life in
American history from the largest national event to the smallest local occurrence—based on
research from primary documents and context from secondary sources. Episodes mainly relate a
story from a moment in time, drawn from a wide variety of primary documents in both small and
large collections from around the country, many of which have yet to appear in scholarly
manuscripts. The History Engine helps preserve these primary documents and makes them
accessible to people all over the world. The HE also provides maps and search capabilities to aid
in future research.

Why might you want to help?
Many students get through college without putting their universities’ and local libraries to use.
Through this project you can encourage and teach students how to use such tools as microform,
Interlibrary Loan, and reference materials. You can also familiarize students with using rare
documents. Essentially, this is an excellent opportunity for you to publicize the resources of your
library to the student body and get connected to the classroom. In addition, the end result of the
students’ work is a resource database that you and your patrons can use in future searches for
historical primary and secondary materials.

Why does this project need you?
While professors are most likely familiar with the types of available resources at your facility,
they do not know the extent of the materials you have on hand, nor can they be present to help
students explore the library. Therefore an instructor would greatly benefit from the following
contributions on the part of library staff:

1. Getting Started. To help instructors to determine the time and space parameters of their
classroom project, you can tell them what primary documents are available. They will let you
know the tentative region and time frame they hope to cover (and possibly a specific theme, i.e.
agriculture) and will then ask you how many primary documents the library contains for these
times and places. They may alter their parameters to accommodate the collection. An example of
a project they might design is a historical investigation of the antebellum U.S., from 1810 to
1860. They might ask you which states you have extensive materials for and which you have
fewer or possibly no materials for. From this information they might determine which states to
cover and how many students to assign to each state.

2. Breaking down regions. It may be helpful for you to inform the instructor what documents are
available in specific counties within the states; students will eventually be uploading their
episodes onto the database by county. The HE does provide a historical map of counties, but it
can be difficult for the instructor to determine how to break up states into manageable units for
students without knowledge of the resources available by county in their libraries.
3. *Helping to organize documents.* You and the instructor can determine together how much of the gathering of materials you will do for the students. While it is important that students experience researching, you may want to set aside a certain number of crucial collections for use during the project. You may also decide to produce lists of available materials to speed the process along or to make certain students are using reliable documents.

4. *Checking the integrity of student research.* You, along with the instructor, serve as a vital check on the quality of student research. The database is a reliable source for scholars all over the world because of the critical monitoring process of student work. As you help students to locate materials and use your resources, you may also want to discuss the reliability of certain resources. You might also suggest materials you know and trust.

5. *Presenting the library to the class.* An excellent way to save yourself from being inundated with student questions is to simply arrange to present the library facilities to the class. You may want to assemble a group of librarians from your rare document collection, microform, ILL, etc. Present to the class how to use library facilities they may be uncomfortable or unfamiliar with. Explain equipment, procedures, and policies. Designate which librarians students should approach for help along the way.

*Because you are a vital part of the process, feel free to be as involved as you like. Ask for a timeline of the project from the instructor so your staff knows when to expect students. Take a look at the finished database to see the fruits of your labor.*