

On Our Class Visit to the Swenson Center

In my SOAN 101: *Introduction to Sociology* course this fall, I brought my students to the Swenson Center to explore its rich archives, with a specific focus on World War I pamphlets. The activity aligned with our classroom discussions on governments, states, and religion as social institutions. The goal was to provide students with a hands-on experience analyzing primary source materials to deepen their understanding of how social institutions—such as religion—shape broader societal constructs like war, nationalism, and democracy.

At the Swenson Center, students worked collaboratively in small groups, each assigned a specific pamphlet. Using guiding questions provided in advance, they analyzed their materials and explored the intersections between religion and other social constructs. Back in the classroom, each group presented their findings, fostering a lively and insightful discussion. Additionally, students submitted individual reflection papers summarizing their experiences and the insights they gained from both the archival materials and the visit itself.

The visit was highly effective in enhancing students' critical thinking and analytical skills while connecting theoretical discussions to historical contexts. The testimonials below highlight the impact of this activity and may inspire fellow faculty to consider similar collaborations with the Swenson Center.

“I was very excited for the opportunity to engage with some of the archival materials available through the Swenson Research Center. While I had heard about the Research Center in passing since starting at Augustana, I never realized it was right there in Denkmann; let alone the history of the collection. Starting with a generous donation from Gustaf Nelson-Swan, the Research Center has very clearly grown into an incredible resource right here on campus. It was amazing to me to sit there and realize how much rich history we have access to. I am very thankful to have had the opportunity to do a little more hands-on research as I do hope to do more of that in my career. It can be really intimidating to get out into new spaces on campus, so having this introduction will hopefully inspire me and my peers to use the Research Center as well as other programs on campus.”

“During my experience at the Swenson Swedish Immigration Research Center, I thought learning beyond the classroom was a fun experience. During the trip, I traveled to a new part of campus I'd never seen before and got to experience a part of history. When I first held the pamphlet, I felt like I was holding an artifact of time, and was worried I'd somehow break it. The group interaction was great and was a huge help when applying concepts from class to what we were reading about. Overall, the experience was intriguing and different from what I've become accustomed to.”

“Personally, I found the field trip to be a great experience, one that helped me understand better what sociologists do. In class we mainly take notes and discuss sociological theories, but very rarely do we get to analyze sources as a sociologist would, so I loved that we got to do that. Especially working with older documents that did in fact smell very good, I felt that I got a better understanding of how to think like a sociologist.”

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