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A Message from the Guest Editor

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A Message from the Guest Editor

This special issue of *Alpenglow: Binghamton University's Undergraduate Journal*, "Life at the Confluence of the Susquehanna and Chenango Rivers," is a collection of essays from first year students at Binghamton University who participated in a year long course sequence within the research immersion program, the Source Project. The collection includes several genres of writing that reflect the various modes of study we used to learn about the "place" of Binghamton, New York.

Students typically come to Binghamton from other suburban and urban areas of New York State, and sometimes from other parts of the United States; almost all of our students come with some anecdotal accounts from other people they know who also attended Binghamton University. Consequently, students often see Binghamton as primarily a college town or, in one student's words, "[a place] scattered with college bars, fast food restaurants, where the meals were \$5.00 and less, and outside of the three college streets was the dodgy downtown where my mom and her sorority sisters would travel in packs late at night." A goal of this course is to help students see Binghamton from various historical and contemporary perspectives and to examine how the people who have resided or worked in the area have affected the city's development. Such vantage points render legible the nuances of the Binghamton area and teach students how to translate the course's approach of study to any new place they find themselves residing in or curious about later in life.

I too came to Binghamton from a seemingly different suburban experience when I was an undergraduate, hailing from Long Island as so many of our undergraduates do. Originally, my interactions with the town were mostly related to night life. When I began taking environmental studies courses, however, professors showed me the natural wonders of the area: a great blue heron nesting site, the riverine, seasonally flooded forest along the Susquehanna River, and a diverse peatland over a glacial depression with a floating mat of cranberries and carnivorous plants. It was not until I met another student who grew up in the area (and later became my husband) that my eyes were truly opened to how families made their lives over generations in the Triple Cities of Binghamton, Johnson City and Endicott. These downtown districts were centers of manufacturing that radiated west along the Susquehanna River from its confluence with the Chenango River. They gave rise to an ethnically diverse, middle class workforce and many civic institutions that remain today.

The course sequence, entitled "Discovering Place: Binghamton as a Laboratory for Environmental Studies," introduced students to a variety of research methods to study the environmental, social, economic and political concerns of the area. We encouraged students to identify their own biases and assumptions, ask questions, and gather evidence to make informed statements and arguments about the area. We applied methods that forefront first-hand experiences to collect data, like observation and participant observation, and methods that enable

the collection of perspectives from people who reside or work in town, like interviewing and surveying. We analyzed historic and contemporary maps, newspaper articles, scholarly articles and reports, oral histories, U.S. Census records, and other quantitative databases. And we prioritized the “field research” aspect of the course by spending extensive course time in the “field.” We traveled to natural and built environments just a short drive from campus, where we talked to people who shared various kinds of knowledge about legal, political, biological, geological, historic, archaeological, economic and social attributes of the area. These research approaches are showcased in this Special Issue so that together, they describe the conditions that students discovered and documented.

This course benefited from the intellectual contributions of many colleagues, students, and class guests. I co-taught the course for the first time at Binghamton University in fall of 2019 with Dr. Robert Holahan, a political scientist who compliments the cultural approach that I take as an ethnobotanist. Yvonne Deligato, Binghamton University Archivist and Local History Curator, introduced the class to historic maps in the Library’s Special Collections. And before this iteration of the course, I co-developed and co-taught the course’s prototype about Bennington, Vermont, at Bennington College, with anthropologist Dr. Miroslava (Mirka) Prazak in the spring of 2015. The initiative was made possible with an award from the National Science Foundation to experiment with a new, interdisciplinary and community engaged approach to learn about life in the post-industrial Northeast of the United States. A primary goal of this approach to teaching and learning is to increase interaction between institutions of higher education and the towns that they are situated within (see Imbruce and Prazak, 2021, for more on this project). Mirka went on to teach the course in the fall 2018 term. She and her students completed a special issue of the *Walloomsack Review*, a journal published by the Bennington Museum, which was the inspiration for this special issue (see Prazak, 2019, for her students’ essays about Bennington, VT).

The Binghamton version of the course, a two course sequence that teaches first year students how to do research, is now in its third year with a retooled, more succinct course title “People, Politics, and the Environment.” Students explore the area in the fall, complete a research project of their own design in the spring, and present their findings to a public audience at a student poster session during Binghamton University Research Days in April. These projects are now online, thanks to the move to a virtual platform during the Covid-19 pandemic, and can be viewed by the public (see Research Days 2019 and 2020). This course sequence satisfies introductory course requirements to the environmental studies and sciences majors at Binghamton, providing continuity with the community engaged and place-based educational approaches of Dr. Richard Andrus that I benefited from as a student. It was he who introduced me to the work of Wes Jackson, who presented ideas in the book “Becoming Native to the Place” that undergird this course.

This special issue came about with the active participation and peer review of the students in the 2019-20 course. Each student was invited to contribute a piece from their year's research portfolio, and they worked together to peer review each other's manuscripts before submission to the journal. Priya Desai from our course volunteered to work with the journal's editorial team that also included undergraduate Adelaide Cagle, graduate assistant Ariella Patchen and managing editor Lisa Theo. Together they prepared the manuscripts for blind peer review and then for editorial board approval. When Lisa left Binghamton for another position in her home state of Wisconsin, we were fortunate to have Dr. Vanessa Jaeger join our team and forward the stewardship of the special issue. She worked with students to finalize copy-editing and select figures and images that add a visual dimension to the students' writing.

This special issue is broken into sections that start with the land acknowledgement that Joela Falk developed and shared at an international conference on Women, Peace and Security held by Binghamton University's Human Rights Institute from April 23-25, 2020. There are five observational pieces that describe old and new parts of the City of Binghamton's built environment. Three selections are included from students' participant observations of civic life—a public school board meeting, City Council meeting, and criminal court arraignment—and describe the momentary issues at hand within these critical social institutions. The next two pieces, an interview with a gas and oil drilling company executive that operates in the area, and a voter's guide that delineates major differences in political opinions, provide insight into two politically contentious topics: hydrofracking for natural gas and political representation for our swing district in the U.S. House of Representatives. The final three selections are research papers completed at the end of the course sequence in spring of 2020 on topics each author chose because of an interview or participant observation exercise that piqued their interest and led to a research question. All of the students' work was generated from their field investigations, and from their own interests, to provide a sense of place that emerged during their first year in residence at Binghamton University.

Dr. Valerie Imbruce



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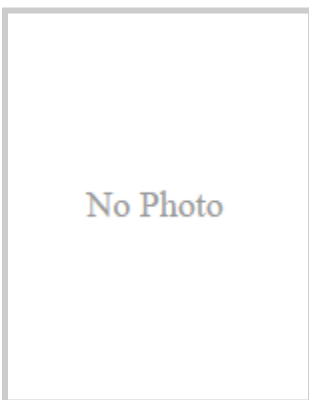
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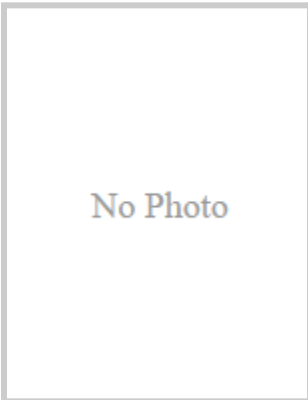
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