

List of Business and Economic History Research Projects and Abstracts,  
2016-present

Dale E. Benson Summer Student-Faculty Research Program

Pacific Lutheran University

Faculty Coordinator, Michael Halvorson (History / Innovation Studies)

For additional information about these research projects and to contact the authors or faculty mentors, email [halvormi@plu.edu](mailto:halvormi@plu.edu).

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Summer 2020

**Benjamin Merrill (School of Business, advisor Ralph Flick)**

Effective and Ethical Automation in Human Resources

Abstract

Information technology, and in particular Artificial Intelligence (AI), is impacting lives and disrupting business in many significant ways. AI technologies such as Apple Corporation's Siri and Amazon.com's Alexa have radically altered our use of consumer technology, while enterprise use of AI is impacting industry via driverless cars, security, and surveillance. AI is automating jobs, replacing human workers, and supplementing employment systems.

One business function that provides substantial opportunity for cost reduction with AI is Human Resource Management (HRM). Here AI can be used to automate tasks such as screening job candidates, delivering training and development programs, and employee self-service.

This paper argues that the automation of HRM can offer substantial benefits to employers in the form of efficiency, cost savings, and effectiveness. However, we warn that employers must recognize and account for the ethical and moral consequences of such technology. While it is true that AI can offer cost savings and the rapid automation of certain tasks, ethical implications should be a chief concern of those who use this technology.

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Summer 2019

**Zackery Gostisha (History, advisor Rebekah Mergenthal)**

“We had pretty well drained them of skins”: The Commercial Language of Colonization in the Early European Exploration of the Pacific Northwest

Abstract

Many scholars have linked theories of Global Capitalism to colonization and modernity for decades, and recent historiographies of science, European expansion, and empire have debated the ties between Early Modern cultural and intellectual movements that cohered into what became largely referred to as Capitalist economics. While many scholars have studied colonizers as agents of Capitalist or proto-Capitalist economics, these analyses have been largely confined to the Atlantic world. In contrast, this paper analyzes the writings of several late eighteenth century European and Creole American colonizers of the Pacific Northwest Region, especially Juan Perez, James Cook, and Robert Gray, to explicate the content and function of the economic discourse in these colonial texts. This paper argues that a discourse of “commercial colonization” permeated such texts, which shaped how colonizers understood the spaces and peoples with whom they interacted. The discourse of commercial colonization emphasized reciprocity in all encounters yet consigned Indigenous peoples to inherently inferior status in relation to colonizers and was used to justify colonial violence. When the idealized practice of European commerce was challenged, colonizers relegated those who challenged their theories to subordination instead of revising their guiding ideals. These sources portray relationships in transactional terms, motivated by profit above all else. Thus, this paper argues that the tensions in these colonial texts are examples of an emerging Capitalist worldview that links the larger European colonial project to modern theories of race, commodification, and exploration, allowing us to better understand the relationships between each.

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Summer 2018

**Abigail E. Welch (History, advisor Rebekah Mergenthal)**

Ezra Meeker, “the living symbol” of “the Golden West”:  
Business Opportunity and Identity in Nineteenth Century America

Abstract

This research project explores the relationship between various business activities of Ezra Meeker, an early white settler of the Pacific Northwest, to illuminate how his identity was shaped by nineteenth-century American business culture. Since Meeker faced both financial and personal failures in his hop and his Klondike business enterprises, he felt pressured to produce a legacy of success. Meeker looked to his pioneer past as the time when he was the most successful. Thus, he used his public and published memorialization of the Oregon Trail to restore his legacy. Making extensive use of archival and printed sources, this project argues that it is only in comprehending the successes and failures of Meeker's business pursuits that his nationally important work of preserving the past can be truly understood. In this way, Meeker research also sheds light on crucial aspects of American identity, including westward expansion and myths of the West, which people like Ezra Meeker have preserved and perpetuated. This identity is vital to appreciate since American's perceptions of their country have been built on this understanding of our nation's past.

**Sarah Cornell Maier (Business, advisor Mark Mulder)**

An Exploration into Experiences with Terminal Illness: Understanding Barriers in Communication and Support from Public Policy and Marketing

Abstract

This research is exploring the communication barriers that may arise in the experience of terminal illness, and seeks to broaden the literature to present perspectives of both family/friends of a person with a terminal illness as well as the perspective of medical professionals.

The paper explores the following questions:

- What challenges are present surrounding communication for a terminal illness in the areas of conversations with family, caregivers and friends (related to diagnosis, medical information, and routine conversation)?
- What are some of the experiences of those with a terminal illness related to challenges they might encounter, as well as personas they may exhibit?
- What are recommendations from those with experience supporting a person with terminal illness (i.e., family, friends and healthcare/medical staff), and ultimately what might the 'ideal' journey be through terminal illness as one navigates this new experience?

This study utilized 15 semi-structured interviews of people with direct experience of supporting a person with a terminal illness. Participants offered experiences surrounding terminal illness and important insights about those with a terminal illness. Participants offered insights from

the perspective of family members/friends and healthcare professionals. Transcripts were thematically coded by two different coders and emergent themes followed.

Participants in this qualitative study offered four main areas of tension in the experience of terminal illness and corresponding relational factors. These four areas include: the fragile state of a person after they are diagnosed with a terminal illness; a common lack of experience talking about death, dying, and terminal illness; personas that a person with a terminal illness or their friends and family members may put up; and primarily focusing on the person with a terminal illness in their final times, rather than one's own issues.

Participants also offered three distinct personas that are often found in the experience with a person with the terminal illness, including: (1) The Fighter, (2) The Caregiver, and (3) The Denier/Avoider. In short, the interviewees proposed the idea of open, honest, and vulnerable conversation as the antithesis to their described tensions. They also spoke in terms of empathy, presenting a framework for conversations that revolved around selflessness and care for the person with a terminal illness in their final times.

While this may at first sound like common sense to some, the present research finds that it is in *no way a common experience*. Across all respondents, this was a tension filled process, and there is a long journey ahead before society sees this as a more positive experience. Overall, the respondents spoke in terms of empathy, presenting a framework for conversations that revolved around selflessness and care for the person with a terminal illness in their final times. Understanding and then helping to mitigate barriers to effective and loving communication may improve this experience for patients, families and caregivers, even if no changes are made in the logistics of treatment.

Partnerships between nonprofit organizations, government agencies, and care providers can help create and pilot communication protocols for how to navigate this journey by identifying and moving beyond stigmas and communication barriers. Whether this is through healthcare based conversations or those with families, this research shows an imperative for policy makers, researchers and healthcare providers. Promoting the idea of a good death in the palliative and hospice care industry can help to improve the quality of life of those impacted by terminal illness.

**Damian Alessandro (Innovation Studies, advisor Michael Halvorson)**

The Dream Machine

Or

Conviviality, Personal Computers, and the Apple Macintosh

Abstract

The 'PC Revolution' was started on the wave of a counterculture movement that swept through the United States in the 1960s. Inspired by humanist ideals, visionaries such as Doug Engelbert and Ted Nelson engaged in a mission to take computing out of the hands of big businesses and government functionaries and place it in the hands of regular people. This endeavor continued into the 1970s as personal computers (PCs) took shape and found commercial expression. Lee Felsenstein, inspired by Ivan Illich's work, *Tools for Conviviality*, set out to create a convivial computer that could be used by anyone, an idea that would be acted on in the Bay Area Homebrew Computer Club meetings that he helped orchestrate. This key development was a foundational moment for the nascent PC industry.

This Benson Family summer research project presents a definition of conviviality based on the work of Illich, Felsenstein, and other theorists. I argue that the Apple Macintosh, created by Apple Computer, Inc., was the most successful attempt at creating a convivial-type device between the years 1974 and 1984. The Macintosh should be understood as a culmination of several distinct innovations developed by numerous actors over many years. Collectively, however, the team was inspired to build a revolutionary "dream machine" that became an organic whole, as earlier theorists had envisioned and requested. By bringing numerous innovations together into one package, Apple Computer and its Macintosh Division created a convivial device unlike any of that era.

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Summer 2017

**Alex Lund (History, advisor Rebekah Mergenthal)**

'To salvage something of the Scobey line!': Grain Elevators and Community in Northeastern Montana, 1917-2017

Abstract

The relationship between the Railroad and the communities it created has long been studied as an integral part of westward expansion and for its role in the global trade of agricultural goods. Likewise, when it comes to Rail abandonment, the economic factors of this relationship have been well studied to explain decline in Rail service. However, very little of this research addresses the social and economic impacts abandonment has on the communities that are left behind. Furthermore, the role of grain elevators and what happens to them after Rail abandonment is often overlooked, particularly those communities that maintain elevators without Rail service.

This paper utilizes Scobey, Montana, as a case study to explore the social and economic relationships between an agricultural community and its grain elevator before and after Rail

abandonment. Primarily through the use of local newspaper, the *Daniels County Leader*, and interviews with Scobey community members, this study addresses the business relationship between grain elevators and the communities they serve, and the choices this farming community has been forced to make to remain viable. This paper gives voice to an under represented group in American agricultural history, the Rail abandoned community.

By researching the economic and social impacts of Rail abandonment upon Scobey and the subsequent strategies independent farmers are forced to employ, economically feasible solutions can be developed that are respectful of local populations and addresses needs of the community and various agricultural businesses present.

**Michael Diambri (History, advisor Beth Kraig)**

It's Not Just Business, It's Not Just Booze:  
Gay Bars and the Shaping of Seattle's Queer Community in the 1970s

Abstract

This research project examines the cultural history of Seattle's gay and lesbian bars in the 1970s through the lens of business and leisure as factors shaping the development of the LGBT community. It also focuses on the role that gay bars and clubs had in shaping queer economic standing within the city, as well as the relationship bar patrons and owners had to sociopolitical activism. Three Seattle-area bars are highlighted as case studies—The Monastery, Shelly's Leg, and The Silver Slipper. Collectively, they reveal the diversity and economic development of Seattle's queer culture in the 1970s. The research suggests that activism and politics are fundamental pathways into understanding the experience of American LGBT communities. However, focusing solely on activism and politics often removes notions of personhood, sociality, and leisure from queer history, and these factors are important aspects of 20<sup>th</sup> century life. The story is enriched by considering the fundamental role that business and economics played in the construction of queer ideologies. Stories of business owners and their queer clientele give impressive views into the rich, burgeoning culture of queerness cultivated in Seattle and beyond in the 1970s.

**Teresa Hackler (Economics, advisor Karen Travis)**

Portland's Forgotten History:  
An Analysis of Racism's Impact on Black Health Outcomes from 1940-1960

Abstract

Portland is often championed as a socially progressive "utopia" by mainstream media and widely circulated history textbooks alike. However, this research seeks to question the

authenticity behind this stereotype of Multnomah County. This paper explores correlation between historical racism and present-day overrepresentation in negative health indicators for the black population of Multnomah County, Oregon. It attempts to fill gaps present in previous literature which fail to examine historical health outcomes of black residents.

This research analyzes death records gathered from the years 1940, 1950, and 1960; it uses statistics and economic theories to calculate whether black and white residents were dying of the same causes in equal numbers. Data personally gathered is examined in combination with the historical context of this same period. This work is part of a growing body of research that attempts to preserve the black history of Portland and seeks to explain from where current health and economic discrepancies stem.

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Summer 2016

**Matthew Macfarlane (History, advisor Michael Halvorson)**

Innovation and Development in the Software Industry, 1977-1994:

A New Chapter in American Business

Abstract

This project illustrates the importance of technical innovation in the creation of PC software from 1977 to 1994, a time of sustained growth and change in the global software industry. In this era “before the Internet”, visionary start-ups such as MicroPro, Lotus 1-2-3, VisiCorp, and Microsoft created software for the first home personal computers. What becomes clear after an analysis of these companies and their primary products is that although they were competitors they were also working together to create an industry that was profitable, durable, and designed for financial success over the long term. Common caricatures of tinkerers in garages and big personalities locked in fierce competition are only partially accurate images of software pioneers. Instead, it was the drive to make better products for consumers that fueled the success of early software companies, especially those located in the supportive business communities of Massachusetts, Silicon Valley, and the Pacific Northwest.

This project illustrates the importance of software companies being multi-dimensional in their long-term approach to product development, and it highlights the consumer-first model that many pioneers employed as they built early business software such as spreadsheets and word processors. This research was supported by a Benson Family Summer Research Fellowship.

**Marc Vetter (Sociology and Global Studies, Advisor Peter Grosvenor)**

## The Self-Determination Era: A Historical Overview of Federal Policy on American Indian Health Care from 1950-1976

### Abstract

For Native American activists, the 1970s are widely regarded as the 'golden era' of American Indian legislation. This decade saw the objective of Federal Indian policy shift from cultural assimilation towards self-determination for individual Native communities. This new episode in Federal-Indian relations decentralized the provision of Native American healthcare, allowing tribes to organize their own community health systems through contracts rather than relying on federal health structures. Nearly forty years later, self-determination has effectively reduced many healthcare access barriers for Native American communities. However, insufficient federal funding continues to be the most significant hurdle in achieving health parity between America's first peoples and the general U.S. population.

This project explores changing governmental attitudes towards Native American health care from the 1950s until the passage of the Indian Health Care Improvement Act (IHCIA) and the Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act (ISDEAA) in 1976. Furthermore, it documents the importance of several key political relationships which helped move federal policy away from assimilation and towards self-determination. Finally, this project includes a variety of interviews with physicians and administrators at the Puyallup Tribal Health Authority, an ambulatory care clinic opened and managed by the Puyallup Tribe of Indians under the ISDEAA. Using the perspectives gathered from these interviews, the project seeks to demonstrate how self-determination contracts, when fully funded by the federal government, can allow tribes to provide culturally competent and locally relevant care to members.