

INTRODUCTION
History Research Paper Study, November 2002
for The Concord Review, Inc.
Will Fitzhugh, Editor and Publisher

Early in 2001, *The Concord Review* approached the Albert Shanker Institute for funds for a study of the state of the history research paper in United States high schools.

With the Shanker grant, a study of 400 U.S. public high school teachers was conducted for *The Concord Review* by the Center for Survey Research and Analysis at the University of Connecticut.

I had a concern that, with all the emphasis on state tests to measure progress on state standards, the research paper, which cannot be measured on a standardized test, would be forgotten. College professors had been complaining for years that incoming students had no idea how to write papers, and some employers were setting up writing courses for their new college graduate employees.

While I had read and heard many anecdotes about the dominance of creative writing and the personal essay, I believed it would be useful to conduct a study to see how many teachers were assigning history research papers, and what some of the problems with such assignments might be.

The Concord Review study found that while 95% of those teachers surveyed believe that writing a research term paper is important or very important, some 62% of the teachers never assign a paper of moderate length (3,000-5,000 words), and 81% never assign a paper of over 5,000 words.

Candidates for the International Baccalaureate Diploma must complete a 4,000-5,000 word Extended Essay, and *The Concord Review* has published 572 history research papers (average 5,000 words with endnotes and bibliography) by high school students from 42 states (and 33 other countries) in the last 15 years.

Many of these essays were from private school students, but many were also from the students of overworked public high school teachers, including a number who were preparing their students for AP and IB and ACT exams.

The principal obstacles cited by those surveyed for this study were the amount of time required for reading and grading long research papers, and the fact that this time almost always had to be taken from personal time—in the evenings, on weekends, early in the morning, and so on. There seems to be no provision given in the school day or the school year for teachers to give the attention to serious research papers that they inevitably require. High school teachers have no Reading Days at the end of term, but perhaps they should, if we want students to learn how to write a decent term paper once before they graduate. In addition, 31% of the high school teachers said that assigning and correcting term papers would take too much time away from other tasks, for instance preparing for AP or state assessments, or simply covering course material.

Many people do not consider the fact that if a teacher in a public high school has five classes of thirty students each and he/she assigns a 20-page paper to each one, then when the papers come in, he/she will have 3,000 pages to proofread, correct, and comment on. Any simple calculation will reveal that this would be prohibitively time-consuming for anyone who has to continue teaching five classes, give tests, and so on.

What is lost, then, if 81% of high school teachers never assign a 5,000-word history research paper? It may very well mean that a majority of our high school students never read a complete nonfiction book on any subject before they graduate. They may also miss the experience of knowing a fair amount about some important topic—more, for instance, than anyone else in their class. They may also miss a fundamental step in their preparation for demanding college work.

The Concord Review study indicates that this may now be the case for the majority of our high

school students. We must consider supporting teachers, 95% of whom think research papers are important, by giving them the time during the regular school day and the regular school year to allow them to offer this essential academic exercise to all of our candidates for the high school diploma.