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Government Documents Assignments: Have We Really Been There, Done That?

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Which assignments would you offer, if you were teaching? Why?

The Classic Government Documents Class

- * Not always taught as a separate course
- * Usually Federally focused
- * Both specialist and generalist appeal
- * Has practical and theoretical aspects
- * Introduces students to "the documents story"
- * Supplemented by high-quality handouts
- * Inspires students

Selected Textbooks Over the Years

- * Boyd & Rips, United States Government Publications (1949)
- * Schmeckebier & Eastin, Government Publications and Their Use (1961)
- * Morehead & Fetzer, Introduction to United States Government Information Sources (1978-1994)
- * Sears & Moody, Using Government Information Sources (1985, 1994)
- * Robinson, Tapping the Government Grapevine (1988, 1998)

Memories of Assignments

Assignments: The Required Tasks

- * Practice questions/source review
- * Legislative histories
- * Government agency reports
- * Annotated bibliographies or "pathfinders"
- * Indexing, abstracting of articles, Web sites
- * Field observations
- * Research
- * Case studies or simulations

Assignments: The Means

- * Homework
- * Research papers
- * Class presentations
- * Field observations: trips to libraries, government offices, or legislative bodies
- * Reading and discussion of professional literature
- * Individual vs. group work
- * I understand that a picture of the members of Space Shuttle Mission STS-43 is available as a government publication. Could you give me the SuDocs number so I could order it?
- * The Freedman's Savings and Trust Company was established by the Federal Government in the 1860's. Which bibliography gives information explaining the official status of this banking institution, along with a list of its publications?
- * Which three cities in Alabama have the highest percentage of families with yearly incomes of \$50,000 or more?

Quality Assignments Should:

- * Reflect graduate level work
- * Combine challenge with a sense of mastery
- * Increase knowledge of government
- * Raise more questions than they resolve
- * Require questioning and critical thinking
- * Change from year to year
- * Be discussed in class
- * Be relevant and memorable

Areas We Should Be Emphasizing More:

- * The reference interview
- * Demographic, economic, and Census sources
- * Depository management/collection development
- * Promoting a depository collection
- * Getting involved professionally
- * Collaboration (good guest speakers!)
- * Comparative assignments across jurisdictions
- * Bibliographic control & cataloging (PURLs)
- * Theory:
 - o information policy
 - o privacy/FOIA
 - o history of government information
 - o privatization
 - o democratic concepts
 - o future trends
 - o Positive attitude

How many cherries must be in fruit cocktail?
 (For the answer, see 21 CFR 145.135.)

Anonymous Quotes from GOVDOC-L Respondents

* The real value to my GovDocs course was that [the instructor] continued to teach the course whenever I called him with a question during my first job... [I remember] how well he told the "documents story" and really made it interesting even though it was an 8:00 a.m. class. I guess the time meant that you really wanted to be there.

* I remember very well [the professor] talking about how our state didn't have a Regional depository and what a shame it was, etc. I really didn't get it then. But when I wound up in documents, I understood. [My library] became the Regional in 1989 due to my pushing and a willing director. So... an instructor never knows what remark will influence someone-or even how long it will take.

* One of the lasting contributions my gov docs teacher made to my professional life was the high-quality, well-organized handouts she provided to us at the beginning of each assignment... I used these handouts heavily in my days as a young librarian. I used them as check-sheets to understand my current collection, place orders, make wish lists for future large orders, and to get familiar with my collection... Fourteen years later and I still have them handy in a side drawer of my desk.