Our project grows out of my teaching “First Wave American Feminisms” and “Second Wave American Feminisms.” Each of these courses investigates the social movements, political thought, and the changing trajectories of power for women. I want students to understand that history does not come to historians pre-packaged, that we craft narratives to make sense of evidence, and that we do this in conversation with other historians. Students have two major assignments for the class. One involves a critical review of a relevant historical monograph allowing students to see how historians talk to each other. The second, the “mini-edition,” is the heart of my pedagogy. I have always worked with primary documents which, I believe, help students see both the “pastness of the past” and the “presentness of the past,” but partnering with Oberlin College Archivist Ken Grossi has allowed my students to understand more fully how historians make sense of evidence.

Students are assigned to teams of two or three people who work together to create a “mini-edition” based on documents in the Oberlin College Archives. Archivist Ken Grossi and I pre-identify collections that we believe will have the potential to illuminate aspects of feminisms. Early in the semester, we set aside a class for students to visit the archives and browse the pre-selected collections. They tell me their preferences, and I then try to match teams with one of their first three choices.

From there, each student team member selects a document from the collection, transcribes and annotates it, and produces a headnote for it. Together, the members of the team cooperate to proof each others work, and to write an introduction to the project identifying how the contents contribute to understanding the history of American feminisms. Typically, students will make several visits to the Archives while they are doing this work. We are fortunate that Ken has arranged evening hours at the Archives once a week in order to accommodate student schedules. In our most recent iteration, during those evenings, I was able to send a student assistant who was available to consult on matters of transcription, annotation and writing.

I am convinced that students do better work when they know that their work is important to a broader professional world—in this case, historians and other people who may be interested in feminisms or in the particular women whose writings are featured. Students know from the first they will have the option of allowing their projects to be posted, and they know how much I value sharing this work with the
public. Each semester I have done this, only one team out of perhaps a dozen has opted out.

Before posting projects on our website americanfeminisms.org, the mini-editions receive editorial attention from me. In the past, I hired a recent graduate to help me. This summer, we are fortunate to have three “Student Editors,” Rebecca Debus, Natalia Shevin and Joanna Wiley—all OC 2017—who are doing editorial work, but also extending the content. This has added value to the projects, and allowed some remarkable students to enhance their skills and knowledge.