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Journal Showcases Dying Art of the Research Paper

By **SAM DILLON**

SUDBURY, Mass. — William H. Fitzhugh, the cantankerous publisher of a journal that showcases high school research papers, sits at his computer in a cluttered office above a secondhand shop here, deploring the nation's declining academic standards.

"Most kids don't know how to write, don't know any history, and that's a disgrace," Mr. Fitzhugh said. "Writing is the most dumbed-down subject in our schools."

His mood brightens, however, when talk turns to the occasionally brilliant work of the students whose heavily footnoted history papers appear in his quarterly, *The Concord Review*. Over 23 years, the review has printed 924 essays by teenagers from 44 states and 39 nations.

The review's exacting standards have won influential admirers. William R. Fitzsimmons, [Harvard's](#) dean of admissions, said he keeps a few issues in his Cambridge office to inspire applicants. Harvard considers it "something that's impressive," like winning a national math competition, if an applicant's essay has appeared in the review, he said.

That reputation has always been bigger than revenues. Last year, income from 1,400 subscriptions plus charitable donations totaled \$131,000 — about \$5,400 short of total expenses, even though Mr. Fitzhugh paid himself only \$18,000. This year, with donors less generous in the recession, Mr. Fitzhugh had to stop printing hard copies of the review, publishing its most recent issues only online, at tcr.org.

The term paper was once an important feature of American secondary education, requiring students to dig deeply and write at length. Mr. Fitzhugh said that most public school teachers have stopped assigning such papers — a shift that he attributed mostly to the fact that teachers have so many students and so little time.

Still, hundreds of earnest students send Mr. Fitzhugh papers every year, hoping to win his stamp of approval.

In the [most recent issue](#), a senior from Montclair, N.J., writes of [Theodore Roosevelt's](#) tenure as a New York police commissioner; a New Orleans student profiles a 19th-century transcendentalist philosopher; and a senior from Seoul documents the oppression of Korean residents on a North Pacific island.

Pamela Ban was a junior at Thomas Worthington High School in Ohio when Mr. Fitzhugh picked her [paper on Chinese economic reform](#) for the summer 2008 issue. Researching it as an independent study project with her teacher, Mark McCort, Ms. Ban said, was a transformative learning experience. But it puzzled her classmates.

“They were in disbelief, like, ‘Why would you want to do more work like that?’ ” said Ms. Ban, who now studies applied math and economics at Harvard.

Mr. Fitzhugh, a Harvard graduate himself, taught history for a decade at Concord-Carlisle High School in Massachusetts. When he started teaching in 1977, he was advised by colleagues to assign only short papers, five to seven pages — if at all.

But well into his teaching career, he received a high school sophomore's thoroughly researched, 28-page paper on America's strategic nuclear balance with the Soviet Union.

“That taught me I hadn't been asking kids to work as hard as they could,” Mr. Fitzhugh recalled.

In 1987, he put up most of his modest savings to start publishing the review.

One of its earliest cheerleaders was [Albert Shanker](#), the president of the [American Federation of Teachers](#), who before his death in 1997 wrote at least two newspaper columns and personal letters to the [National Endowment for the Humanities](#), the [MacArthur Foundation](#), and Secretary of Education [Richard W. Riley](#), extolling the review and urging them to provide it with financial support.

“We know that most of the youngsters in our schools don't write very much or very well,” Mr. Shanker wrote to the endowment's president, [Lynne Cheney](#), in 1991. “There are probably teachers who don't believe their students are capable of putting together a decent paragraph. The Concord Review shows them how much our students are capable of.”

Another admirer was [Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr.](#), the historian.

“The Concord Review has done an extraordinary thing in providing an organ, a medium, for first-class papers done in high schools,” Mr. Schlesinger says in a 2004 videotape that Mr. Fitzhugh has posted on the review's Web site.

Despite all the praise, Mr. Fitzhugh has never been able to put the review on solid financial footing.

One reason is that he has been unable to persuade more than just a few of the nation's 24,000 public secondary schools to subscribe, at \$40 a year.

Some educators may see the review as a showcase only for an elite. All but four of the 22 essays published in the two most recent issues, for example, were by private school students.

But it was not always so. In the review's first decade, more than a third of the essays were from public school students. Mr. Fitzhugh said he would love to publish more from public school students, but does not get many exemplary submissions.

"It's not my fault," he said. "They're not doing the work."

He recently asked the head of a history department at a New Jersey high school if he assigned research papers.

"Not anymore," Mr. Fitzhugh quoted the teacher as saying. "I have my kids do PowerPoint presentations." Mr. Fitzhugh said he scoffs when some educators argue that research papers have lost relevance because Google has put so much knowledge just keystrokes away.

Researching a history paper, he said, is not just about accumulating facts, but about developing a sense of historical context, synthesizing findings into new ideas, and wrestling with how to communicate them clearly — a challenge for many students, now that many schools do not require students to write more than five-paragraph essays.

"I can't count all the lawyers who say their firms have organized remedial classes for all the associates who can't write," Mr. Fitzhugh said.

Mr. Fitzhugh's curmudgeonly personality may have driven away supporters. One who abruptly stopped giving was John Abele, the billionaire co-founder of Boston Scientific, who was donating nearly \$200,000 a year in the early 2000s. Mr. Fitzhugh said he believed Mr. Abele had tried to replace him with younger leadership at the review.

A spokesman for Mr. Abele declined to comment.

In another episode, Mr. Fitzhugh persuaded the Albert Shanker Institute, a research group associated with the teachers' union that Mr. Shanker led, to finance a [nationwide survey](#) of public school history teachers in 2002.

About 95 percent of them said assigning long research papers was important, but 8 out of 10

said they never did because they had too little time to read and grade them.

During the survey, Mr. Fitzhugh said he quarreled with a deputy director at the institute, Burnie Bond. The institute paid the survey costs but cut off further collaboration and did little to publicize the results, which received scant coverage.

In October — eight years later — an organization of conservative academics whose president is a friend of Mr. Fitzhugh's reported the results anew on its Web site, arguing that the institute had "suppressed" them because they were "too awkward" for the teachers' union. Mr. Fitzhugh acknowledged that that was a misleading characterization of the events.

Ms. Bond said last week that Mr. Fitzhugh had been "so irascible he couldn't be worked with."

"Still, we think he's doing a good job with The Concord Review and in advocating for more writing in the schools," she said.

Now 74, Mr. Fitzhugh said he has so far been unable to find the right person to succeed him, and the review's future as an online journal remains uncertain.

But when he feels discouraged, he said, a new essay will often arrive, like, say, the 11,000-word paper that came in the other day from a student in Hong Kong examining the history of scientific inquiry in China.

Suddenly he is thrilled anew that the review has called forth impressive work from a young scholar on the other side of the earth.

"It's a great essay, and I can't wait to publish it," he said.