Description of the Project

I am finishing a history of one of the most successful political movements of the twentieth century: the grassroots campaign against legalized abortion. In terms of public opinion, culture warriors lost almost every other battle in their late-twentieth-century war against secularism, feminism, and modernity. But until now, they have won the war on abortion. Why? My book answers that question by looking at the anti-abortion movement from 1945-2000 in four western states, Utah, Arizona, New Mexico, and Colorado. Rather than examine legal and judicial campaigns to end legal abortion, I focus on quotidian political activism and how the movement wove its core ideas into the fabric of many Americans’ everyday lives. For example, this book examines pro-life politics in religious communities, at crisis pregnancy centers, in self-help groups, and at schools and in homes. This type of activism changed people’s voting habits and their senses of self. By the 1980s and 1990s, anti-abortion activists had made the fetus central to how many a conservative, and many an American, thought of being a woman, a child, a Christian, and a member of a family. By the end of the century, activists had successfully integrated pro-life politics into the heart of American conservatism and, by extension, American politics.

Student Research

For this research project, the student would focus on the non-profit conservative media engine, Focus on the Family, based in Colorado Springs. Created in 1977, Focus on the Family singlehandedly changed Christian media, moving it away from a focus on religious conversion towards Christian “family management” and transforming a relatively marginal business into a media powerhouse that reached millions of Americans every year. One of Focus on the Family’s primary political concerns was legal abortion. The student will request Focus on the Family newsletters and radio programs (1980s to 2005) through the library. Then the student will read (or listen to) these primary documents for any mention of abortion, fetuses or the “unborn,” or feminism. Once the student has found and copied all relevant materials, he or she will look for common themes or arguments in the material, and identify if those arguments change over time.