

Chapter 4

Filling the Gap: Digital Scholarship, Graduate Students, and the Role of the Subject Specialist

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ABSTRACT

Graduate students in the humanities increasingly view training in the use of digital tools and methodologies as critical to their success. Graduate students' interest in becoming familiar with digital tools often accompanies their awareness of a competitive academic job market, coupled with a recognition that teaching and research positions increasingly call for experience and skills in the Digital Humanities (DH). Likewise, recent debates over DH's role in the future of humanities scholarship have heightened the sense that DH skills can translate to crucial job skills. While many graduate students receive encouragement from faculty to pursue digital scholarship, individual academic departments often have limited resources to prioritize the development of these skills at the expense of existing curricular components. This chapter looks at initiatives at the University of Michigan Library that demonstrate the ways in which subject librarians, in collaboration with data and technology specialist librarians, can fill this gap by creating opportunities for graduate students to develop DH skills.

INTRODUCTION

Graduate students in the humanities increasingly view training in the use of digital tools and methodologies as critical to their success. Graduate students are acutely aware of the highly competitive nature of the academic job market, and they also recognize that teaching and research positions increasingly call for experience and skills in the Digital Humanities (DH). Likewise, recent debates over the role of DH in the future of humanities scholarship have heightened the sense that experience with DH is becoming a crucial prerequisite for academic employment. Smith (2010) and others have argued that graduate

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education needs to reform in order to adjust to a changing scholarly and professional landscape. One crucial component of that reform involves rethinking the dissertation and allowing students to create collaborative, interactive digital projects that reflect the ways in which “digital media and computational technologies are radically transforming how knowledge is produced, communicated, and evaluated” (Smith, 2010, para. 5). Similarly, a recent Modern Language Association (MLA) report advocated that graduate programs incorporate a deeper engagement with technology (Alonso et al., 2014, pp. 13-4).

With consideration for the existing academic and professional pressures that graduate students experience, librarians see a growing desire among graduate students to become involved in DH projects that is outpacing the opportunities for them to do so. While many graduate students have a sense that there are benefits of pursuing digital scholarship, individual academic departments often have limited abilities, interest, and resources to prioritize the development of these skills and opportunities at the expense of existing curricular components. In addition, many advisors still counsel their students not to devote energy to digital projects at the expense of focusing on their dissertations. Experimentation with digital methods and new formats continues to be perceived by some as appropriate only after traditional milestones in the academic career path have been achieved. Graduate students who may be curious about DH as a field, as well as anxious that being left out could hamper their chances on the job market, are often keeping their eyes open for ways to become involved in digital scholarship. This chapter argues for the ways in which subject librarians, in collaboration with data and technology specialist colleagues in the library, can fill this gap by creating opportunities for graduate students to develop DH skills.

As Schaffner and Erway (2014) have recently argued in an OCLC report on whether or not research libraries should direct resources toward developing DH centers, the “needs and desires of digital humanists can be addressed in a nuanced way, and tailored to demand....Only rarely will a director need to sink resources into a DH center” (2014, p. 8). In this model, subject librarians are crucial to supporting DH work, especially in the absence of a DH center. Likewise, Alexander, Case, Downing, Gomis, and Maslowski (2014) have suggested that “libraries can play a key role in supporting and promoting digital humanities scholarship, especially on decentralized campuses” (para. 1). This chapter focuses on experiences at the Ann Arbor campus of the University of Michigan (U-M), a public research institution with 43,000 students and 99 graduate programs. With over 17 libraries across campus, and over 10 million volumes in its holdings, the U-M Library supports research in a broad range of disciplines. In the absence of a DH center, and on a campus where there are relatively few opportunities within academic departments for graduate students to work on funded DH projects, subject librarians and technology specialists in the U-M Library have found ways to collaborate with each other, students, and faculty to offer both educational and project opportunities. This chapter will highlight some specific experiences creating opportunities for graduate students to explore DH and argue that the library can and should play an increasing role in supporting graduate training in digital scholarship, especially at universities without DH centers. Key to this support is the creation of low-stakes opportunities in the library for graduate students to gain experience in digital scholarship.

BACKGROUND

As evidenced by a growing body of literature, research libraries are dedicating significant time and energy to supporting and collaborating with scholars in DH, although less emphasis has been placed on developing programs aimed at training graduate students. Though there is widespread agreement that

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