

Chapter 12

From Digital Arts and Humanities to DASH

Justin Schell

University of Minnesota Libraries, USA

Deborah Boudewyns

University of Minnesota Libraries, USA

Jennie M. Burroughs

University of Minnesota Libraries, USA

Cecily Marcus

University of Minnesota Libraries, USA

Scott Spicer

University of Minnesota Libraries, USA

ABSTRACT

Academic libraries around the United States have been responding to an emerging style of research, the digital humanities, that promises to expand and revolutionize the humanities. Libraries are finding themselves to be generative sites of innovative partnerships and projects. Seeing a new opportunity to showcase cutting edge research and demonstrate value in an era of competitive demands for financial resources, there is significant incentive for libraries to quickly anticipate scholarly needs. Yet how do academic libraries best support a field of practice that is still developing? To address these issues, the University of Minnesota Libraries conducted a multi-year assessment of scholarly trends and practices, infrastructure needs, and roles of digital humanities centers and academic libraries, the University of Minnesota Libraries have designed and are in the process of implementing a service model as part of its Digital Arts Sciences + Humanities (DASH) program.

INTRODUCTION

The emergence of digital humanities scholarship offers libraries an opportunity to develop improved systems of support and to engage with long-standing questions of librarianship in new ways. This chapter focuses on how the University of Minnesota (UMN) Libraries have addressed the needs of digital humanities scholars and initiatives in the midst of an uncertain and rapidly changing field, by developing an informed, strategic response and service model that can function at scale. The title of the chapter, “From Digital Arts and Humanities to DASH”, represents the two main phases of the program development to date. The first section provides an overview of how, beginning in 2011, the UMN Libraries initially ap-

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proached supporting digital arts and humanities by surveying its practitioners and existing infrastructure, identifying research challenges and service gaps in the context of a large research university. This section presents findings from a series of interviews with faculty and staff and from a scan of local infrastructure and support mechanisms. The second section of the chapter discusses the Libraries' response to this investigative work: the 2013-present design and implementation of a comprehensive service model that addresses the needs of campus and regional scholarly communities engaging in "Digital Arts Sciences + Humanities", or "DASH". The section also describes the importance of embracing an iterative and experimental approach to services and some mechanisms for addressing critical sustainability issues in a pilot period.

Though the discussion focuses specifically on the UMN Libraries context, readers from many different institutions will see their own experience reflected in the environmental scans, the hiring of specific staff, and the pilot approach to providing support for emerging modes of research and pedagogy.

INVESTIGATING DIGITAL ARTS AND HUMANITIES

Scholarly Perspectives

Beginning in 2011, the University of Minnesota Libraries sponsored the formation of a digital arts and humanities working group in order to investigate and recommend a coherent strategy for library support of emerging digital arts and humanities scholarship on a large, distributed campus. The group included representatives from a range of related areas at the university: library departments (e.g., Arts and Humanities, Digital Library Services, Archives and Special Collections), the Office of Information Technology (OIT), and the College of Liberal Arts Office of Information Technology (CLA-OIT). The explicit inclusion of "art" in the working group's title reflected recognition that digital art and data arts are growing practices that may not always be represented adequately in discussions of the digital humanities. Within this local context, there was already evidence of burgeoning interest in digital arts and humanities across disciplines that included students and faculty in departments such as Art, Art History, Computer Science, Cultural Studies & Comparative Literature, English, Geography, History, Theatre Arts and Dance, and Writing Studies.

The two years of the group's work from spring 2011 to spring 2013 was both exploratory and analytical with a focus on: assembling representative case studies of digital humanities centers and institutes (including a survey of digital humanities support models, degree programs, certificates, tool kits, etc.); assessing local digital humanities initiatives and interest through interviews and online surveys with faculty and key staff; and identifying current tools and resources for digital humanities work locally and externally. The objectives of this foundational research were to gain a more complete understanding of the local community and its relationship to national conversations and issues; to identify the major obstacles and challenges that scholars and practitioners often face; and to make recommendations based on our expertise for how the University of Minnesota Libraries would continue to respond to the needs of digital scholars in a forward-looking manner.

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