

## No Half Measures: Overcoming Common Challenges to Doing Digital Humanities in the Library<sup>1</sup>

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**ABSTRACT.** *While much work on libraries and digital humanities has focused on how to train and encourage individual librarians, we have not paid enough attention to the administrative and institutional factors required to help these professionals succeed. This article outlines some common sources of frustration for library professionals engaged in digital humanities work and offers sketches of some library-based digital humanities programs that are working to address these challenges.*

Once you start noticing, the pattern becomes clear: Library after library is rolling out support for digital humanities. That support might consist of a “center,” a “suite of services,” a librarian with a revised job title, or, murkiest of all, an “initiative.” (A place, a thing, a person? Who knows?) Spend some time talking to the people who staff these new offerings, and another pattern emerges: Many of them are frustrated. Many of them fear that will disappoint patrons. Many of them wonder whether the tasks they have been charged with are actually doable.

We do not acknowledge often enough that if a library is to engage in digital humanities activity, its leaders need to give serious thought to the administrative and technical infrastructure that supports this work. I want to argue here that many of the barriers to completing digital humanities projects in the library arise not from librarians themselves, but from a set of institutional and administrative factors that will be familiar to most people who have worked in libraries.

This is not to say that DH is *not* done in the library. It is, and often well. Many of the contributors to this issue represent flourishing library-based digital humanities programs. And it is crucial to remember that what we now call digital humanities grew out of a set of practices, and a community of practitioners, which themselves arose in libraries and archives. The Text Encoding Initiative (TEI), for example, a vital humanities computing effort, grew out of the work of electronic scholarly editing programs, many of which were based in libraries (Hockey, 2004; Renear, 2004). So did any number of pioneering humanities computing projects, including important work on digital archives, interface design, and textual analysis.

But digital humanities has reached new levels of popularity, piquing the interests of a great many institutions that have little previous experience with it. And, as my colleagues and I found when we conducted a survey through the Association of Research Libraries, with the exception of a few well-known programs, most library-based DH is being done in a very piecemeal fashion. Forty-eight percent of survey respondents described their libraries' digital humanities support as "ad hoc" (Bryson, Varner, Pierre, & Posner, 2011, p. 16). Relatively few libraries have dedicated digital humanities centers or programs, and many existing initiatives are still in the developmental stages. Staffing for libraries' digital humanities programs is often confined to a digital scholarship librarian (who may fill many other roles) and a few information technology professionals, many of whom work on contract on grant-funded projects, or have responsibilities well beyond digital humanities programs. The result is that the success of library DH efforts often depends on the energy, creativity, and goodwill of a few overextended library professionals and the services they can cobble together.

When we talk about bringing new digital programs into the library, we often focus on what individual librarians can do, encouraging them to adopt a spirit of entrepreneurialism or seek out opportunities to learn new skills (e.g., Brian Mathews, 2012; Tzoc & Millard, 2011). But I contend that much of the discussion about building a DH-friendly library environment leans too hard on individual librarians, without taking into account the set of institutional supports, incentives, and rewards that will allow DH to flourish in a sustained way (and keep these library professionals from burning out).

In fact, there are very good reasons why individual librarians may choose to eschew digital humanities work, and they have to do with the lag between libraries' enthusiasm for DH and institutions' ability to support it in meaningful ways. If we hope to develop robust digital humanities programs in the library, we need to address these institutional shortcomings. Here, I outline some of the challenges for libraries as they attempt to offer digital humanities programs, offering some suggestions for how they might be addressed.

#### WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO DO DIGITAL HUMANITIES IN THE LIBRARY?

But before I move to these points, there remains the nagging question of what we talk about when we talk about doing DH in the library. In an earlier draft of this article, I assumed a model of DH support common to many fledgling DH programs, in which a scholar (usually a faculty member) conceives an idea for a DH project and approaches the library for help in accomplishing it. (See Posner, 2012)

But as Trevor Muñoz cogently pointed out, this approach — let’s call it the service-and-support model — is not the only, or necessarily the best, one out there. “Digital humanities in libraries isn’t a service and libraries will be more successful at generating engagement with digital humanities if they focus on helping librarians lead their own DH initiatives and projects,” writes Muñoz, drawing on his own work as both a librarian and the associate director of the Maryland Institute for Technology in the Humanities (Muñoz, 2012). He argues that librarians’ work needs to be seen as intellectual labor, and that their efforts within library incubators (or “skunkworks,” as Bethany Nowviskie describes them in a separate article in this collection) could offer invaluable opportunities for “technology transfer” to the university community at large.

The on-the-ground reality at some institutions may be that the skunkworks or incubator model, in which digital humanities activity takes place entirely at the discretion of library-based DH experts, is not a politically feasible option. But that does not mean that the service-and-support approach makes sense either.

Muñoz points to an error not only in my own thinking about libraries’ support problems, but also in the way that the libraries-and-digital humanities question has been framed in the library community at large. Many of the problems we have faced “supporting” digital humanities work may stem from the fact that digital humanities projects in general do not need *supporters* — they need *collaborators*. Libraries need to provide infrastructure (access to digitization tools and servers, for example) to support digital humanities work, but they need thoughtful, skilled, knowledgeable humanists to actually work on it.

Indeed, my experience has been that the service-and-support approach, in which a scholar brings an idea to the library to build, often results in a less-than-optimal outcome. Few scholars are really trained to understand the larger environment of digital humanities tools, projects, and methods, and it can be very challenging for a librarian charged with “supporting” a project to dissuade a faculty member from barreling ahead with a half-baked idea.

Of course I do not mean that good DH project ideas cannot come from scholars. Many do! But in conceiving library-based DH programs, we need to jettison some of our thinking about providing library “services.” It is important to see that some of the most valuable DH work has been imagined and designed by library professionals themselves, and that we need to support librarians who want to make these ideas happen. And when librarians do collaborate on projects, it is important to find ways to impress upon scholars that DH expertise is a specialized,

crucial — and frankly, rare — skill, not a service to be offered in silent support of a scholar’s master plan.

Thus, I offer this list of challenges in the hope that library leaders might use them to correct shortcomings not only in support programs, but also to rethink the possible relationships librarians might have to digital humanities work.

## CHALLENGES TO DOING DIGITAL HUMANITIES IN THE LIBRARY

### **Insufficient training opportunities**

For librarians, this problem is acute. Clearly, expertise in digital humanities requires new skillsets. But funding for training opportunities is often scarce, and it can be very hard to justify to supervisors why one needs to take a class in, say, Python, when one’s job responsibilities do not currently include Python. In addition, it is not always clear where to go for training. Computer science classes often lack an obvious connection with humanities questions, and very hard for a novice to know which language or skill one needs to start with. The recent abundance of online technical training opportunities, like Coursera and Codecademy, may seem to offer an attractive solution, but in many cases these classes lack relevance to the library professional who cannot yet imagine what skills will be called for.

Moreover, some of the most valuable skills a digital humanities specialist can offer are not strictly technical, but a combination of “soft” and “hard” skills: the ability to manage a project efficiently, for example, or knowledge of how to perform an environmental scan to ensure a proposed DH project does not reinvent the wheel. These kinds of skills are best learned through participation in actual DH projects — a Catch-22 situation for many librarians.

### **Lack of support for librarian-conceived initiatives**

In a library, responsibilities and opportunities are (logically enough) apportioned in ways that are designed to be consistent with institutional priorities. Libraries tend to be concerned with metrics, with assigning roles efficiently, and with meeting patrons’ demonstrated needs. Projects often get assigned from the top down, and it is not unusual for a project sponsor to be asked to prepare a business case to show that an initiative will meet a need and benefit the library. Many DH projects do not meet any particular demonstrated need — they are done to

find an interesting answer to an interesting question. This can be very difficult to explain to one's supervisors in the library.

### **Too many tasks, too little time**

With all the hand wringing about whether the library has a future, it can be easy to overlook the fact that many librarians actually feel overburdened. Most subject librarians cover multiple disciplines, and with purchasing, instruction, outreach, professional development, and administrative responsibilities — well, it all adds up. Time for a DH project has to come from somewhere else, and many librarians do not feel they can keep doing their existing jobs well if they add something else to the mix.

### **Lack of authority to marshal the appropriate resources**

This may be one of the most difficult challenges librarians face. When my job was to foster DH projects in the library, I sometimes fought the urge to hide when I saw a faculty member coming at me with a project idea — even if it was a great idea, even if I really wanted to do it. I started tabulating the resources it would take to get the project done: time from a developer, time from a designer, time from a metadata specialist, time from a system administrator, project management expertise, server space, a commitment to host the project in the long term ... I just did not have the authority to make all these pieces fall into place, and neither do most individual librarians. In fact, very few individuals within a library have the ability to bring all these parts together. If a librarian has assembled these resources, he or she has probably (unbeknownst to the patron) gone from desk to desk, pleading for time from each of the people involved. You can imagine why most librarians are not eager to do this over and over again.

### **Inflexible infrastructure**

Libraries, of course, are big, complex organizations, with responsibilities to patrons across the campus. It is easy to see why they place a premium on information technology infrastructure that is secure, scalable, and does not require a lot of fiddly maintenance. Alas, many DH projects require customized support, or at the very least, server-level access for collaborators. If a DH scholar needs to file a support ticket every time she, say, wants to install a Drupal module, a project is virtually guaranteed to languish. But requesting this kind of access or support from already overstretched system administrators is not an exercise for the faint of heart.

### **Lack of incentive**

It may not be all it should be, but for scholars, there is some professional payoff to accomplishing a DH project: some name recognition, something to take on the conference circuit. It is sometimes less clear what the payoff is for the librarian. Too often, the “completion” of a DH project means more headaches down the road (about upgrades and server space and support) for the librarian, while it is a faculty member’s name that’s associated with the project. If the librarian’s institution is not providing support and recognition for librarians involved with DH, it is hard to see what would motivate someone to subject herself to such hard work.

### **The complexity of collaborating with faculty**

If a DH project involves collaboration between faculty and librarians, it is important to be attuned to the peculiar dynamics of this kind of relationship. Frequently, faculty approach librarians as service providers (and too often, librarians approach faculty that way, too). The flaw in this relationship becomes clear a few weeks into the collaboration, when the librarian really needs that dataset, decision, or brainstorming time in order to make progress on the project, but does not feel entitled to make demands from an unresponsive professor. There is no one to appeal to and no one who can help, and so the request languishes. The project will suffer if the relationship is not truly equitable.

### **Overcautiousness**

If a faculty member who wants to write a book, she needs no one’s permission. The book may fail, but it may wildly succeed, and that is a risk she can take on herself. If, on the other hand, you are a librarian who wants to work on a DH project, you will probably need to check with your supervisor, maybe the legal department, whoever is in charge of the technical team, maybe the people in branding. And frankly, for most of these decision-makers, the safest answer is “no.” When so many stakeholders are involved, the incentives for risk-taking become so diffuse as to be almost imperceptible. Oddly, the same math does not seem to apply when one calculates the potential penalties for risk-taking. At many libraries, it is easy to imagine getting in trouble for overstepping one’s bounds; it is harder to imagine getting rewarded for it.

### **Diffusion of effort**

One unfortunate side effect of DH's new popularity is that enthusiasts, particularly at large campuses, do not always communicate with one another. So it is becoming common to see sibling digital humanities initiatives cropping up on the same campus. This may not be entirely a bad thing — there may be very good reasons to target digital scholarship efforts to, say, a particular discipline. But these multiple efforts can also create unnecessary competition for an institution's resources, as well as a confusing situation for people on campus looking for a digital humanities "front door."

### **Lack of a real institutional commitment**

When libraries do DH well, they are in it for the long term. That means permanent staff, hard funding, real space to work, and an understanding that some projects will succeed and some will fail. But what we often see now is libraries hedging their bets: willing to wager a postdoc or two, but not more. Alas, this strategy often leads to more frustration than exciting DH projects. DH takes time, and an investment in relationships across the campus. When that commitment is not there, librarians know it, and so do faculty and students.

### WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

This laundry list of challenges may seem disheartening, but it is (believe it or not) not my intention to discourage DH aspirants. It is true that there are very real hurdles to getting a functional DH center up and running in the library. But thinking through these challenges can provide an occasion to grapple with some of the most fundamental questions libraries are faced with today.

Michael Furlough, associate dean for research and scholarly communication at Pennsylvania State University, asked a question that, in my mind, gets at the heart of the matter: "Is research the Library's core business?" As Furlough points out:

the most valued IT services in the institution are the mission-critical enterprise systems: email, financial, student enrollment, course management systems. In the Library, it's the catalog, OpenURL resolver, or other discovery layers. We don't hesitate to allocate permanent people and dollars to ensure that those core business activities run 99.9% of the time. But research ... sure, it's a core activity of the faculty, but is it a core business function of the University? (Furlough, 2012)

Furlough asks a genuine question. Digital humanities scholarship, by definition, is eccentric, unpredictable, highly customized, and prone to failure. It will not match up neatly with a library's existing workflows, and it may well negatively affect existing measures of productivity. So a canny administrator may well ask: Is the library prepared to take on a beast like this? Does it *want* to?

If DH does make sense for a particular library, some very promising models, both established and emerging, may serve as examples for how a library might balance the productive chaos of DH work with its obligations to support the needs of stakeholders across campus.

Recently, several institutions have demonstrated some creative thinking about how to provide librarians with meaningful training opportunities. At the University of Maryland Libraries' new Digital Humanities Incubator (an initiative co-sponsored by the Maryland Institute for Technology in the Humanities), librarians participate in a semester-long series of workshops on research development, working with data, developing projects, and writing funding proposals. Columbia University has instituted a librarian re-skilling project, in which 12 librarians collaborate to accomplish a digital humanities project. Inspired by a recent report on librarians' skill gaps from Research Libraries UK, Columbia is focusing on leadership and interpersonal skills as well as technical skills (Auckland, 2012).

In both cases, librarians are offered the opportunity to participate in targeted, collaborative, project-based training in a relatively low-stakes, supportive environment. These initiatives may well point the way toward more meaningful training strategies for librarians eager to learn new skills.

The University of Nebraska's Center for Digital Research in the Humanities, a well-established and highly respected DH center, is a joint program of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln's Libraries and UNL's College of Arts & Sciences. It maintains strong ties to the library, in personnel and in research activity, but it also exercises a great deal of independence when necessary — running its own sandbox server, for example, and employing its own designer and programmer.

The Scholars' Lab, at the University of Virginia, is based inside Alderman Library, and identifies strongly with the mission and ethic of librarianship. But, as Bethany Nowviskie explains in her article in this issue, the Scholars' Lab's Research and Development team has also purposely embraced an iterative, informal development cycle that focuses as much on process as on end



results. This “skunkworks” model gives the Scholars’ Lab the freedom to experiment in a space set apart from the productivity demands of the larger library system. And, crucially, the R&D team feeds back into the library at large, in what Trevor Muñoz has described as “technology transfer.”

At Harvard, the Library Lab, founded in 2010, is charged with incubating innovative projects that contribute to library services. While not devoted to digital humanities initiatives, the Library Lab has adopted a model that seems promising for DH projects. Faculty, students, and staff can all suggest projects, which, if supported, receive funding and support for three months or longer, depending on how successfully the project appears to be developing. The Library Lab has given rise to projects such as the Highbrow Textual Annotation Browser and Spectacle, a library collections slideshow generator.

These success stories — and numerous others I have not mentioned — indicate that DH is possible in a library setting. But they also demonstrate that DH is not, and cannot be, business as usual for a library. To succeed at digital humanities, a library must do a great deal more than add “digital scholarship” to an individual librarian’s long string of subject specialties. It must provide room, support, and funding for library professionals to experiment (and maybe fail). It must make hard decisions about what the library is *not* going to do, now that it has taken on this new role. It must find ways to offer incentives, training, and professional credit to library professionals who take risks. It must give serious thought to the technology needs it is willing and able to support.

Above all, a library must be willing to take a hard look at what it considers its core functions. It may well be the case that DH is a distraction from a given library’s basic mission — in which case, better to know that now than to set off a domino effect of frustration in semesters to come. If, on the other hand, a library decides that digital humanities is an activity it truly values and wants to support, it must find ways to value, support, and sustain the people it asks to participate in this work.

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