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Briefing Paper: Digital Humanities

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Sanford, Alexander
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Introduction

Digital Humanities are helping the humanities forge into the future and continue to provide relevance to the field; Libraries are not only a key asset in this venture, but can also use them as their own tool to stay relevant and gain support. As humanists turn towards Digital Humanities it further aligns them with the goals of librarians. With this alignment of goals, the library is often seen as a place where the humanist can gain expertise and assistance with areas often unfamiliar. (Kamposiori 2017, 12) Librarians can use these new roles and positions to further prove their relevance and role within academia.

While the Digital Humanities are still working to establish their own place within scholarship, their diverse nature will allow for a variety of diverse roles. Some of these projects even cross institutional divides. (Schaffner and Erway 2014) Due to these factors, each library will need to asses the needs of their community and establish an appropriate level of support. (Schaffner, and Erway 2014, 6) Additionally, the library will need to understand its relationship with the faculty to establish if the library should play a background service based role or if they can take the lead on establishing these projects. (Vandergrift, and Varner 2014; Posner 2013) These two approaches will also be tied directly to the level of commitment the library finds to be necessary. Even once these choices have been made, the library will still face many issues and questions as they engage with these projects. (Posner 2013, 43) Addressing and acknowledging these from the outset will shape the conversations around the project and lead to greater success.

Levels of Commitment

Not every library has the need, resources, or ability to commit to a full scale Digital Humanities Center. There is a broad spectrum of support a library can offer in lieu of a center. (Schaffner and Erway 2014, 6) Regardless of the level of commitment, it is important the library support and advocate for the digital humanities on some level. The Digital Humanities have only further expanded the grounds for collaboration between the two fields. According to Schaffner and Erway in their paper on Digital Humanities in libraries they establish a wide spectrum of options ranging from merely repackaging existing services to better accommodate the humanists needs to full commitment to the Digital Humanities Center. (2014, 15) This allows for great flexibility since not every library will have the resources or need, depending on the faculty's projects.

The second factor to account for in level of commitment is the faculty themselves. While the Library is generally seen as a valuable resource, many faculty will want to maintain their independence and control. (Schaffner and Erway 2014, 8) This is because many humanists employ a hands-on approach and want to be involved on every level of the project. (Schaffner and Erway 2014, 10) Therefore, it is best to approach the faculty with great care to make sure their wishes and goals are respected. This is not to say the library has no place in the project, but rather a librarian should build a relationship with the faculty member they are working with. This can be done by being actively involved within the department, listservs and by other means to stay involved, informed, and to disseminate information. (Vandergrift and Varner 2013, 73)

Service Oriented Approach

The majority of authorship assumes librarians maintain their traditional roles as a service and a resource for the humanist. In such approaches, the library provides the support in a variety of areas where the humanist may lack experience and knowledge. One important topic the library can provide assistance in is copyright and fair use. (Vandergrift and Varner 2013, 71) Libraries have dealt with these issues for much longer than humanists, and therefore have a strong knowledge base to draw from. When surveyed, about 63% of those working in Digital Humanities saw archiving and curating as the primary support role, but followed closely with preservation and digital tools at 55.6% and 51.9% respectively. (Kamposiori 2017, 13) This shows the majority of those in the field outright saw support from the library as advantageous to their projects. With many already seeing the potential for partnership and support, the library needs to recognize and capitalize on these opportunities to support Digital Humanities projects.

Library Guided Approach

While most see the traditional service based approach as the key, there are those who believe the library should take the lead and guide the projects while the humanist takes on the role of consultant. (Posner 2013, 45; Vandergrift and Varner 2013, 75) Miriam Posner states the library needs to see themselves as collaborators and as part of the process. (2013, 46) This combats two key issues: first, the librarian in a support role does not gain much from the project but more work, and second, they can fully utilize tools and skills the humanists may lack. In this approach, the librarian can almost treat the Digital Humanities project as a special collection, and with this approach, better apply their skills and expertise. (Posner 2013, 48) In order to properly collaborate it is key for the Librarian to take a much more active role not only within the library, but also within their academic community. This means attending meetings, joining and using listservs, attend organizational and committee meetings, and many other venues for communication. (Vandergrift and Varner 2013, 73) Taking the active role will allow the librarian to best apply their skills and expertise to support and maintain the project.

Issues

The first key issue to these projects might be the simplest, but most difficult to combat, a lack of time and staffing. Librarians are often already spread thin between their various roles, adding in extra digital humanities projects will only exacerbate the issue. (Posner 2013, 44) While the digital humanities projects can often be used for proof libraries are necessary, relevant, and play a key role in scholarship, it doesn't necessarily mean new staff can be added. This increases the burden on the librarians, who in many of these cases have little incentive to perfect the project as they are not the ones whose name is on it. (Posner 2013, 47) While this is not to say the librarian doesn't want to assist, but it may be difficult to provide the highest quality assistance.

Lack of staffing is also a symptom of a larger issue. Posner also points out many of the issues aren't the librarians themselves, but a lack of administrative support or technical infrastructure. (2013, 44) Digital Humanities require quiet specific technical needs, which the library may not necessarily support fully. Therefore, while the librarian themselves might truly

be ready to delve into these projects, they need administrative support so they can have the time and resources, but also will need either access too or creation of technical infrastructure to support the projects in both the short and long term. The technical infrastructure is especially key to the longevity of a project. Digital Humanities projects, unlike a traditional print collection in the library, will both be needs to support older technology or update the resources to be compatible with more modern platforms. (Schaffner and Erway 2014, 12) A Digital Humanities project isn't something that can sit idly, and takes immense long-term commitments of resources. In addition to updates, it will continue to expand and need the capacity to store this information.

It was noted by current scholars working on Digital Humanities is a lack of certain knowledge bases and technical skills by librarians. A large portion (77%) of those surveyed by Kamposiori stated this was the main flaw, followed by negotiating skills at 66%. (2017, 16) This problem is two-fold. First, coding and other technical skills have not been ones traditionally taught to Librarians, therefore it is something that would require additional training. Those who do have these skills will also hold other responsibilities, which again proves to be problematic from a staffing perspective. (Kamposiori 2017, 16) Therefore many librarians will need to be trained in these skills. Here is the second problem, gaining this training. While these skills might be useful, it is both difficult to know what exact skills will be necessary for the project in advance; additionally, getting administrative permission and support to receive this training can also prove problematic. (Posner 2013, 46)

Conclusion

Digital Humanities will only continue to grow in importance and impact as technology and projects expand and gain traction. Many scholars already see the library as a key asset in the creation, maintenance and expansion of these projects; most are already taking advantage of these resources and skills. (Kamposiori 2017, 12) Whether the library has the resources and ability to commit to a full Digital Humanities Center or will be somewhere along the spectrum, the library should play a key role in Digital Humanities. Regardless of the level of commitment the librarian should see themselves as a collaborator and as a Digital Humanist, not simply an asset. If the issues with administrative support, balance of time, and gaining appropriate skills can be addressed from the beginning, the project will be more likely to succeed. The library can use Digital Humanities as a platform to prove their relevance, and expand the role within academia, and to reimagine itself as part of the creative side rather than simply to answer a question. (Vandergrift and Varner 2013, 72) Librarians have skills and expertise that prove invaluable to Digital Humanities projects, and as such should be taken full advantage of.

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