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Dreaming Big: Library-led Digital Scholarship for Undergraduates at a Small Institution

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Dreaming Big: Library-led Digital Scholarship for Undergraduates at a Small Institution

Abstract

In the summer of 2016, Gettysburg College's Musselman Library piloted a student-focused, library-led initiative designed to promote creative undergraduate research: the Digital Scholarship Summer Fellowship. The fellowship is a ten-week, paid summer program for rising sophomores and juniors that introduces the student fellows to digital scholarship, exposes them to a range of digital tools, and provides space for them to converse with appropriate partners about research practices and possibilities. Unlike other research fellowship opportunities, the Digital Scholarship Summer Fellowship is programmatic, based on a curriculum designed to provide students a broad introduction to digital scholarship. Digital tools, project management, documentation, and the philosophy behind digital scholarship are equally considered. While a student-created, public-facing project is an expected outcome of the fellowship, the process of getting to that point is the primary pedagogical emphasis. Students are encouraged to use materials from Gettysburg College's Special Collections & College Archives when conceiving their projects. Using our historic collections as the foundation of a digital project strengthens existing connections between the library and the academic curriculum and provides additional exposure to the library's collections. The fellowship was inspired by digital scholarship initiatives at peer institutions and grew from the library's position as a campus leader in supporting creative undergraduate research. By combining the best aspects from a variety of sources, we were able to create a new learning experience that allowed our students to start small and dream big.

Keywords

digital scholarship, digital humanities, Musselman Library, summer fellowship

Disciplines

Digital Humanities | Library and Information Science

Comments

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CHAPTER 7 *

Dreaming Big: Library-led Digital Scholarship for Undergraduates at a Small Institution

Janelle Wertzberger and R.C. Miessler

Introduction

In the summer of 2016, Gettysburg College's Musselman Library piloted a student-focused, library-led initiative designed to promote creative undergraduate research: the Digital Scholarship Summer Fellowship.¹ The fellowship is a ten-week, paid summer program for rising sophomores and juniors that introduces the student fellows to digital scholarship, exposes them to a range of digital tools, and provides space for them to converse with appropriate partners about research practices and possibilities. Unlike other research fellowship opportunities, the Digital Scholarship Summer Fellowship is programmatic, based on a curriculum designed to provide students a broad introduction to digital scholarship. Digital tools, project management, documentation, and the philosophy behind digital scholarship are equally considered. While a student-created, public-facing project is an expected outcome of the fellowship, the process of getting to that point is the primary pedagogical emphasis. Students are encouraged to use materials from Gettysburg College's Special Collections & College Archives when conceiving their projects.

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Using our historic collections as the foundation of a digital project strengthens existing connections between the library and the academic curriculum and provides additional exposure to the library's collections. The fellowship was inspired by digital scholarship initiatives at peer institutions and grew from the library's position as a campus leader in supporting creative undergraduate research. By combining the best aspects from a variety of sources, we were able to create a new learning experience that allowed our students to start small and dream big.

Background

In July 2015, two teams from Gettysburg College attended the first Institute for Liberal Arts and Digital Scholarship (ILiADS)² held at Hamilton College. A joint project of Hamilton's Digital Humanities Institute and the College of Wooster, ILiADS sought to bring together digital scholarship practitioners from liberal arts colleges and provide the time, space, and resources to engage in digital projects of their choosing. The teams from Gettysburg were cross-institutional, made up of representatives from the faculty, educational technology, and the library. While the opportunity to deep dive into a digital project for a week was invaluable, the teams were especially interested in the level of student involvement at ILiADS. Several teams from other institutions included student collaborators; those students continued to meet after each day's formal activities were concluded, working on their digital projects well into the night and building a community of practice that crossed institutional lines.³ The enthusiasm of the students was infectious, and we asked the question, "How do we bring this interest in digital scholarship back with us to Gettysburg?"

We continued to discuss this question at the start of the fall 2015 semester. A Digital Scholarship Working Group formed in the library and was charged to find ways of engaging students in digital scholarship research activity. At the second Bucknell University Digital Scholarship Conference (BUDSC15) in November 2015, the idea of a library-led, student-focused digital scholarship program began to take shape. The conference featured several student-focused scholarship initiatives, two of which served as models and inspiration: Lafayette College's Digital Humanities Summer Scholars program⁴ and Haverford College's Digital Scholarship Fellowship.⁵ While many of the presentations at BUDSC15 included student projects, these were two examples of structured programs that demonstrated library-led, student-focused digital scholarship initiatives already in place. It was apparent from the creative, digitally-focused, undergraduate research on display at ILiADS and BUDSC15 that students were capable of developing compelling and robust digital scholarship projects when libraries provide the support structure.

While we used undergraduate digital humanities programs at other institutions to inspire our own program, we also looked to existing undergraduate research programs on our campus as models. In 2008, Gettysburg College obtained a grant from The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation to support a college-wide program of undergraduate research that is embedded within the curriculum. As part of the grant, ten to twelve students were awarded a Mellon Summer Scholarship to conduct faculty-mentored summer research each year in the humanities or social sciences. Our fellowship was modeled after the Mellon research opportunity in several ways. For instance, we planned for a ten-week experience, the same stipend amount (\$3,500) was awarded to students, a common living space for the cohort was provided, and students gave a public presentation of research at the completion of the project. In other ways, we made alternative decisions regarding fellowship administration. For example, we designed a low barrier to entry for applicants and a high degree of structure throughout the ten-week fellowship period. Our fellowship complemented an existing campus research opportunity while being distinct and attractive to a different population of applicants.

Another model program which informed our planning was the Peer Research Mentor program at our library. We began hiring student Peer Research Mentors to work alongside librarians at our Research Help Desk in 2014 and experienced success in training students to mentor their peers in how to conduct research.⁶ Gettysburg College has an established culture of using peer mentors in a variety of ways, and we were optimistic that the approach would support student learning in digital scholarship, as well.

We also had two “aha moments” that helped shape our Digital Scholarship Summer Fellowship. The first one emerged from a conversation about how to create a research experience that was accessible and inclusive to all students. We realized that most students who successfully earn other coveted undergraduate research opportunities on our campus do so because of pre-existing relationships with professors who encourage them to apply, offer to mentor their work, and so on. Many students are capable of doing this type of research, but the opportunity isn’t accessible to them without a developed network of faculty supporters to encourage and recommend them for that work. It also tends to be an option later in a student’s undergraduate career, after a student has declared a major and formed stronger relationships with faculty. We wanted our fellowship to feature a lower barrier to entry that didn’t rely on a professor’s availability to support a student’s research during the summer and was accessible to rising sophomores and juniors.

We also designed the application process to be as transparent and inclusive as possible.⁷ We knew that the concept of “digital scholarship” would be new to students and so we devoted considerable space to describing it in our call for applications. We linked to several digital projects and to a range

of digital tools. To apply, we asked students to submit a statement of interest addressing what they hope to learn and accomplish during the fellowship, describing ideas for potential projects and outlining their experience with technology and digital tools. Applicants listed a faculty reference but the application process did not require a reference letter. We also offered to speak with students about their ideas before the application due date. Many applicants took advantage of this opportunity and, consequently, application materials were stronger because of it. Finally, we conducted interviews to allow students to further explain their vision in-person. These choices were designed to encourage students to apply who might have been daunted by the application processes for other undergraduate research opportunities. One of our refrains was to “dream big”—we encouraged students to approach the fellowship with a big-picture idea that we would help them refine as needed.

The second “aha” moment had to do with research materials for digital projects. While we wanted students to have the freedom to choose any type of project on any topic, we also knew some students would thrive with more guidance. Consequently, we identified some primary source collections in our Special Collections and College Archives that were already digitized and ready to be used and interpreted in digital scholarship projects. We directed students to those materials for inspiration and possible use, but did not restrict their ideas to projects involving these collections. The scope of the primary source documents in Musselman Library’s Special Collections encouraged narrative digital scholarship projects that tell stories of people and places through artifacts such as photographs, letters, and scrapbooks (as opposed to the more analytical digital scholarship approaches that draw conclusions from large amounts of data).

Partnerships

The library initiated the Digital Scholarship Summer Fellowship and continues to lead student-centered digital scholarship activities on our campus. Our campus climate is like that of many small liberal arts colleges, where employees tend to play many roles. Christina Bell emphasizes the collaborative ethos of the small college and concludes that the “library is a natural place to form the type of collaborative team that can bring the methods, practices, and tools of digital scholarship to a small college.”⁸ That is true at Gettysburg College, and we have many partners who are vital to supporting the range of activities included under the umbrella of “digital scholarship.” Seventeen individuals created and facilitated one or more workshops for our student fellows during the summer, and only seven of them are local librarians or archivists.⁹ The others included three educational technologists from our Infor-

mation Technology department, an education professor, a computer science professor, two administrators from our Civil War Institute, a recent graduate now working in the IT field, and representatives from digital humanities initiatives at two other liberal arts colleges.

We also had support from our Provost's Office. Specifically, we received funding for one of the three summer fellows (\$4,000). More important, the Associate Provost for Academic Technology Initiatives & Faculty Development was keenly interested in this initiative. One of his roles is to promote use of digital tools in faculty scholarship or in teaching. While our goal was to directly support student use of digital tools, the associate provost was watching closely to review student accomplishments. He was impressed by what the students had learned and created over the summer and subsequently allocated funds to allow the three fellows to continue working during the following academic year to assist with digital scholarship needs in the library and in the classroom. We put a call out to faculty who are interested in DS support for their classes and have begun collaborating with them on assignment design and discussing how the DSSFs can help students succeed on the digital assignments. This work has also engaged new faculty partners who are not regular users of our information literacy instruction services.

Reflection

The 2016 Digital Scholarship Summer Fellowship taught us that it is possible for undergraduates to become novice digital scholars during an intensive, ten-week research experience. With a scaffolded approach and a healthy dose of mentoring, students can plan and execute digital projects during a short time period. Prior to the summer, we were a little worried that students would not be able to finish during the fellowship. We had many conversations and negotiations about "right sizing" their projects in order to bring them to completion by the deadline—and all three students were successful. While this approach worked for the students, it was very time-intensive for the members of the Digital Scholarship Working Group. We are still musing on how to reduce the load on library employees without reducing the quality of the student experience.

We anticipate offering the Digital Scholarship Summer Fellowship again in 2017 and have begun to think about changes in the curriculum. The 2016 syllabus worked well for new fellows, but in 2017 we hope to involve the 2016 fellows as DS mentors. The 2016 fellows are already eager to lead some of the workshops. We also need to consider how they can continue to advance their own digital skills while mentoring a new set of students.

Assessment

When designing our ten-week fellowship, we included a variety of formative assessment activities. Members of the Digital Scholarship Working Group had a lot of face time with the student fellows during the summer. In addition to several workshops per week, we had a daily check-in meeting every morning and a weekly lunch meeting. These gatherings served as informal assessments and we continuously encouraged the students to reflect on how they were progressing toward their project goals. Fellows wrote several blog posts each week, and one of those posts was a response to a reflective prompt.¹⁰ We used writing prompts to help students assess their own understanding of digital scholarship as well as their progress toward completing a digital project.

Asking students to talk and write about their learning also helped us understand what they needed, even if the fellows didn't articulate it directly. For example, when we heard the fellows describing themselves as "not tech savvy" at the start of the summer, we initiated conversations about projecting confidence and competence. Their intent was to show how far they'd come during the summer (they started as "not tech savvy" and grew into digital scholars), but we knew not everyone would hear what they meant. It was a perfect opportunity to talk about how researchers are perceived, especially early career female researchers.

To more formally assess the program, we asked the fellows to complete written evaluations at the fellowship midpoint and again at the end of the summer. Both were presented to students as formative assessments designed to help us understand what was working or not working so that we could correct course as needed. These evaluations helped us understand the value of undergraduate networking. Our DSSFs benefited greatly from meeting with students in a similar fellowship at another liberal arts college and would have liked even more contact with them (we took a field trip to their campus and would have enjoyed a reciprocal visit). They indicated that another field trip would have been worthwhile and even suggested visiting the New York Public Library, as they had found their digital collections helpful and inspiring. Closer to home, our students requested that future DSSFs be assigned campus housing with other undergraduate researchers working in the humanities and social sciences. In order to provide additional time for the DSSFs to focus on their projects, workshops considered non-essential to the completion of these particular projects, such as advanced text encoding and data visualization, were eliminated (but could possibly be included in future iterations of the fellowship). The blogging requirements were also reduced. Finally, we asked the audience members who attended the fellows' final presentations to provide written feedback for the students.

Recommendations/Best Practices

For other libraries wanting to begin a DS fellowship for students, we advise thinking carefully about resources such as money and time. Money is important but not as important as you might think. We paid each summer fellow a \$3,500 stipend plus \$500 for campus summer housing. We had a small budget that covered occasional meals, a field trip, and office supplies. To the surprise of our library dean, we didn't request to buy a single piece of technology; we only invested in people and experiences. All the software students used was already licensed by Information Technology or freely available. Time is more important than money. Do not underestimate the time it takes to plan and implement a new initiative with so many moving parts. Also, if you're planning a summer experience, factor in staff vacations. Having the right mentors available can make or break a student experience.

This student fellowship changed how some members of the Digital Scholarship Working Group approach their work. For our Systems Librarian, it meant bringing his content expertise to a new audience (students) and approaching time management in new ways. In addition to sharing his knowledge with students, he had to think about communicating to other audiences beyond technologists and librarians, like faculty and representatives from the Provost's Office. For our assistant dean and director of scholarly communications, who has a background in public services and information literacy instruction, the fellowship required bringing a new content area (digital humanities/digital scholarship) to a familiar audience (students). Both librarians had complementary skills and communication styles. Our program could not have been implemented nearly as well by one person or the other.

Our DS student initiative has made it possible for our library to offer a new service beginning in the fall 2016 semester. We received funding from the Provost's Office to hire our three seasoned student fellows to support digital project work assigned by faculty. If professors want to create a new assignment (or enhance an existing one) with a digital component, the fellows are prepared to work with them to recommend the best digital platform, support the use of digital tools, and assist with training and mentoring students in the development of their projects. After announcing this service to campus, we heard from interested faculty in History, Spanish, and Environmental Studies.

The most important things we learned from the experience of developing, implementing, assessing, and reflecting on our initiative are:

- The experience of *daily* interaction with each other, with us, and with many campus partners was integral to the success of our inaugural group of Digital Scholarship Summer Fellows and to their happiness. Our fellows formed strong bonds and supported each

other through their struggles and their accomplishments. The interpersonal dynamic would not have been the same with fewer than three people. Developing a community of practice locally, as well as drawing upon the larger digital scholarship communities of practice, reinforces the collaborative nature of digital scholarship. Opening many of the workshops to the campus community allowed the fellows to engage with students, faculty, and administrators who were likewise interested in digital scholarship. A field trip to visit Lafayette College's Digital Humanities Summer Scholars also encouraged the fellows to collaborate cross-institutionally.

- Digital scholarship requires physical space. We suspected that the fellows would desire dedicated workspace and we reserved a large study room for them to use over the summer. They used it heavily (and creatively) but they also used many other spaces in and outside the library, too. We regularly spotted them working in a library computer lab, a library meeting room, study spaces on various floors of the library, Special Collections & College Archives, and the library patio. It would have been a mistake to invest heavily in one physical space; in the future, we will advocate for allocating flexible space to digital fellows.
- Like any new initiative, the development, implementation, and continuation of the program required a significant investment of time and human resources. Even if using other programs as guides, workshops and readings have to be tailored to the outcomes of the local program and adapted to fit with the skillsets of available partners.

Conclusion

The Digital Scholarship Summer Fellowship proved to be a success, with three creative, scholarly student projects developed in ten weeks, a well-received presentation of the student work, and a desire to continue the program beyond the summer.¹¹ The students dreamed big with their projects and brought them to fruition. The librarians at Gettysburg College likewise dreamed big about the possibilities of what creative undergraduate learning can be. Together, we developed a foundation for further digital scholarship activity led by Musselman Library to support innovative, public-facing student research.

Appendix 7A: Final Presentation Audience Feedback Form

Welcome to the Digital Scholarship Summer Fellow presentations!

Our 2016 student fellows have created public-facing scholarly projects. It is especially important for them to receive feedback from listeners in order to improve (or validate) their communication skills. Please share some comments that will help our student presenters understand how well they are conveying their research results to a general audience.

All audience feedback is anonymous and will be typed and compiled before sharing with the student presenters.

Thank you for your support of digital scholarship and student research!

Presenter name: _____

I learned:	I wish I had learned:
I was impressed:	Comments for Presenter to Ponder:

Thanks to Prof. Divonna Stebick for allowing us to use and modify her feedback form.

Notes

1. Gettysburg College has embraced the phrase Digital Scholarship rather than Digital Humanities in order to be inclusive of the breadth of the college's scholarly activity. Digital Scholarship, in the context of this fellowship, then, means using digital tools and methods to interpret, analyze, and present original research.
2. <http://iliads.org>.
3. Several students from the first ILiADS formed the Undergraduate Network for Research in the Humanities (UNRH, <http://unrh.org>) and have organized two conferences as of January 2017.
4. <http://sites.lafayette.edu/dhss>.
5. <http://ds.haverford.edu/dsfellows/>.
6. Janelle Wertzberger et al., "Peer Research Mentors at Gettysburg College," in *Peer-Assisted Learning in Academic Libraries*, ed. Erin Rinto, John Watts, and Rosan Mitola (Santa Barbara: Libraries Unlimited, 2017). Forthcoming.

7. The 2016 summer application is available at <http://dssf.musselmanlibrary.org/2016/application/>.
8. Christina Bell, "In Practice and Pedagogy Digital Humanities in a Small College Environment," in *Digital Humanities in the Library: Challenges and Opportunities for Subject Specialists*, ed. Arianne Hartsell-Gundy, Laura Braunstein, and Liorah Golomb (Chicago: The Association of College & Research Libraries, 2015), 104.
9. Musselman Library, "Schedule/Syllabus," Digital Scholarship Summer Fellows 2016, 2016, <http://dssf.musselmanlibrary.org/2016/syllabus/>.
10. Ibid. As an example, here is a blog post prompt from week six of the fellowship: "As digital humanities practitioners at a small liberal arts college, it's important to be aware of criticism of digital humanities work, as well as negative perceptions of liberal arts schools. Read 'Neoliberal Tools (and Archives): A Political History of Digital Humanities.' Given what you have learned so far about digital humanities and digital scholarship, what is your reaction to this article? Do you agree with the authors, disagree, or somewhere in between? Make sure you are acquainted with the concept of neoliberalism. The article 'The Neoliberal Arts: How College Sold Its Soul to the Market' by William Deresiewicz may provide some additional context. Once you've read the article and formulated some thoughts, check out some responses. Feel free to incorporate their arguments into yours, or refute them."
11. Musselman Library, "Projects," Digital Scholarship Summer Fellows 2016 (2016), <http://dssf.musselmanlibrary.org/2016/projects/>.

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