Moving Ahead with Support for Digital Humanities

Many institutions, from research universities to mid-sized state colleges to liberal arts colleges to community colleges, are struggling with how to support digital humanities (DH) as part of the research and teaching & learning programs of the institution. Whereas a small number of faculty have pioneered development of DH projects and tools for over two decades, they have often done so through their own commitment of time and resources or through the limited grant support available from public and private funders. In fact, two key reasons motivate colleges and universities to undertake comprehensive planning for support of DH: (1) much lower availability of external funding for DH researchers, compared with funding for researchers in the sciences; and (2) humanists’ greater need for support around all areas of technology, compared with the need of those in the sciences. As more faculty in the humanities show interest in incorporating DH projects into their class assignments and consider how they might use DH tools in their own research, they seek access to expertise, tools, hardware, and data storage, beginning locally where possible. Often they find that it is difficult to identify how to get support from their institution or even whom they can contact for some initial information about which technologies might be valuable for their work. DH incorporates a wide array of methodologies, including text mining, data visualization, 3D modeling of historic buildings or archaeological sites, complex maps, interactive timelines, and content that combines text and other media in complex ways. These tools are used in service of exploring research questions in ways that are not feasible without the use of new technologies.

There is no simple, one-size-fits-all solution to supporting DH at an institutional level. In 2017, an EDUCAUSE Center for Analysis and Research (ECAR) working group, developed with the Coalition for Networked Information (CNI), produced the paper Building Capacity for Digital Humanities: A Framework for Institutional Planning. As co-chairs of this project, we guided the team of information technologists and librarians who formed the working group to develop this paper, which included sections on funding and institutional investment, governance, infrastructure, roles and capabilities, communication and outreach, and DH acceptance and support. As we developed the paper, we discussed the interrelationship between the kind of support needed for DH and the support required for the social sciences and sciences, and we realized that there are many similarities among the infrastructure and the tools used across disciplines. For example, an increasing number of disciplines in all areas are using mapping tools and statistical analysis tools. However, since we realized that the humanities researchers were often the most underserved in technology-related areas in the institution, we decided to focus the paper on DH.

Infrastructure for DH incorporates technology elements such as network availability and capacity, access to expensive hardware and specialized software, and in many cases, a physical facility in which to work. The human component of infrastructure is as important as is access to technology. Availability of expertise to guide scholars’ choice of appropriate tools, creation of metadata, project management, curation of content, and mechanisms for publishing or disseminating the project content are all important components of support for DH.

At many institutions, humanities-based IT groups and specialized groups within the library have traditionally taken the lead in defining and addressing the infrastructure needs around DH. However, DH project needs have been growing more complex as humanists—like scholars in many other fields—tackle research questions with larger-scale data than was previously possible. From issues of long-term data storage, organization, and access; to scalability and sustainability of digital publishing platforms; to computationally-intensive text analysis, optical character recognition (text digitization), and 3D modeling work that can leverage high-performance computing (HPC) clusters and cloud computing resources, there are increasing opportunities for IT and library professionals, throughout their respective organizations, to engage as key partners in DH support. Consequently, IT and library professionals may find their efforts to engage with the campus DH community are received with more enthusiasm than five or ten years ago.

The ECAR/CNI paper was written to serve as a starting point for IT professionals and librarians who want to engage with their local DH communities. Some of the sections—such as infrastructure and roles/capabilities—directly pertain to information
technology and can serve as the basis for internal IT or library discussions about what technology and expertise a central IT organization, or the library as a whole, can realistically offer the campus DH community. It is important to approach these conversations with a user-centered design mentality and to resist the urge to conclude that because the IT organization already offers a particular service (e.g., database or web hosting, or an HPC cluster), no further work is needed to make that service truly accessible and useful for the DH community. Similarly, there may be tools and processes that the library systems group has used only internally but that could benefit the DH community if made available in some form. Meaningful engagement with DH may require service owners to rethink the conditions under which a service can be offered or the kinds of support that they are willing to provide to users who are less familiar with the technology. This can spur discussions of what funding and institutional investment—also addressed in the ECAR/CNI paper—looks like from a central IT or library perspective. Examples may include exploring opportunities for treating some services as common good under certain conditions, reducing cost barriers to adoption, or making internal services accessible in limited ways. A growing number of research IT and library organizations have hired humanists in research facilitator roles to help with the translation work between humanists’ needs and available resources. Although it may be tempting to seek out grant or other one-time funding for such a position, this incurs the same set of liabilities as funding any long-term need with short-term money and is best avoided when possible. While the paper’s framework for assessing DH acceptance and support within an institution is most consequential for the scholars themselves, one measure of institutional support for DH is the degree to which doing DH support work is a clearly identified part of people’s roles, rather than something done “on the margins” of another job. These factors are worth considering as an IT organization or library develops its preliminary plan for how to engage with the DH community. Understanding both the broad DH landscape and the local institutional context is important in developing a plan for support. Once an organization has attained enough internal consensus around what it can offer the DH community, the next step is to engage with other groups already involved with DH support—whether through a defined program or center or simply through work with individual faculty members. Ideally, a campus team composed of individuals from sectors representing faculty, students, information technology, and the library, as well as other appropriate units, would work together to determine where the institution fits in the landscape of current trends and activities in DH. By scanning popular DH websites and blogs as well as participating in local, regional, national, and even international DH groups, the campus can develop a perspective of its own strengths and interests. The National Endowment for the Humanities publishes information about all the projects it has funded; taking the time to set up a meeting with recent DH grant recipients at an institution can often provide a crucial faculty-level perspective on unmet needs. Similarly, looking through departmental and campus-level event listings for DH-inflected talks can be a valuable way to identify who is already doing DH work; attending those talks, and engaging with other attendees, is worth the time investment. These conversations are an opportunity to get feedback on an organization’s preliminary plan for DH engagement, which may need to be revised iteratively in light of the needs and priorities of the DH community specific to the campus. Sharing the ECAR/CNI paper with the leadership of partner organizations is the next step, in order to establish buy-in for a holistic, collaborative effort to support DH at the campus level. While it may not be possible to get all potential partners to participate to the same extent, even a subset of organizations—representing different kinds of expertise—can move forward with better coordinating support between them. Achieving coordinated, visible, and sustained support for DH on campus will provide a true service to the community.

Note

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