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The Digital Humanities: Grants and Theory

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### Abstract

This paper aims to examine the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) Digital Humanities Start-up Grants program within the scope of special collections theory. An introductory overview of the digital humanities, a notional study of an ideal grant candidate, critical summaries of two NEH grant narratives and a comparison to analogous programs of the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) are provided. The findings illuminate the fundamental parallels and differences amongst NEH digital humanities grants and the broader grant agencies.

### Why the Digital Humanities?

In the academic journal *Digital Humanities Quarterly* Patrick Svensson (2010) explored the current landscape of digital humanities and its connection to the field of library and information science, digital humanities 2.0 and Web 2.0. He found that “Many digital humanities centers are housed in close proximity to university libraries, which is not surprising given the centrality of libraries to the humanities, and that many digital humanities initiatives have an interest in collections and interdisciplinary practice. Furthermore, such initiatives can sometimes function as resources in library based development and research work” (para 33.) Svensson noted:

Libraries are an important part of the infrastructure of the humanities, and in a sense, a kind of humanities laboratory placed outside the departments and schools. Libraries are also, by default, important players in relation to humanities-based information and information technology... One recent example is a survey on digital humanities centers in the U.S. prepared for the Council on Library and Information, where we find an institution-level working definition of the digital humanities: A digital humanities center is an entity where new media and technologies are used for humanities-based research, teaching, and intellectual engagement and experimentation. The goals of the center are to further humanities scholarship, create new forms of knowledge, and explore technology’s impact on humanities-based disciplines... Following the above definition, the report provides a list of activities, some or all of which a digital humanities center undertakes in the analysis presented in the survey [abbreviated]: Builds digital collections as scholarly or teaching resources; Creates tools for authoring, building digital collections, analyzing collections, data or research processes, managing the research process; Uses digital collections and analytical tools to generate new intellectual products; Offers digital humanities training; Conducts research in humanities and humanities computing (digital scholarship); Creates a zone of experimentation and innovation for humanists; Serves as an information portal for a particular humanities discipline; Serves as a repository for humanities-based digital collections” (para 33-39).

Lisa Spiro (2011), the Director of National Institute for Technology in Liberal Education and author of the blog *Digital Scholarship*, recently wrote the following suggestions for those in academic communities interested in developing a digital humanities based project that has taken on new meaning while plotting a foray into this innovative field: “Determine what goals or questions motivate you. As with any project, a research question, intellectual passion, or pedagogical goal should drive your work. Digital humanities is not technology for the sake of technology. It can encompass a wide range of work, such as building digital collections, constructing geo-temporal visualizations, analyzing large collections of data, creating 3D models, re-imagining scholarly communication, facilitating participatory scholarship, developing theoretical approaches to the artifacts of digital culture, practicing innovative digital pedagogy, and more” (para. 3).

With this in mind, Svensson observed that “The link between digital humanities and libraries is robust, but not static, and the expansion of the digital humanities and changing roles for libraries may lead to a new set of dynamics and a renewed sense of library as laboratory as well as a physical and digital repository. The idea of the library as a space for collaborative scholarship is strengthened through the introduction of more study spaces for (primarily) students, project spaces for digital humanities and technical infrastructure such as large, interactive screens. Perhaps libraries have always been the analogue to laboratories, in that they are sites for knowledge production, a repository or archive, and a place of exchange. In this sense, the contemporary moment re-sensitizes the traditional function of the library in order to extend its dynamic qualities, rather than those that may be strictly archival” (para 33-39).

Again, a digital humanities-based program in the field of Library and Information Science is paramount to our advancement in the world of digital humanities 2.0 and would usher in new and exciting resources for our information consumers as well as for our own organization.

#### One Good Grant: A Theoretical NEH Grant Project

This section explores an example of a theoretical NEH Digital Humanities Start-up Grant based upon established grant requirements, support and program description.<sup>1</sup>

Harvard University's Houghton Library has a digital catalog of medieval manuscripts. The scope of the collection is cosmopolitan: ranging from Dutch, to Latin, Hebrew and Syriac. The collection currently provides bibliographic information as well as an entry point to the Harvard Library catalog, including classification data. In addition the library is increasing efforts at digitization; a significant number of the records have digital facsimiles associated with them. Digital facsimiles consist of high resolution scans of the records in question, an interactive index of contents and an image viewer. Unfortunately, like all digital repositories of medieval manuscripts, the catalog currently does not support optical character recognition (OCR) and thus has decreased visibility and access options when compared to other fully plain text integrated media. This can be attributed to current difficulties in OCR software of interpreting medieval scripts, type, majuscule typography, rubrications, formatting standards and exotic leaf material. Manually transcribing the records would be a costly and time consuming process.

Houghton Library staff have allied with faculty of the Internet technology department and conducted an initial study to address this deficiency. The Internet technology department believes it can produce a revolutionary procedure, with the assistance of library archivists and university linguists, to optically interpret *any* intelligible character system. The new software's

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<sup>1</sup> NEH Digital Humanities Start-Up Grant program description, award information, eligibility, application and submission instructions, application review procedures, award administration information and points of contact can all be found on NEH.gov and were referenced to furnish this section.

output could be manipulated by pre-existing translation technologies and could be used to offer multi-lingual support for plain text conversion which would greatly enhance access to collections of this sort. The staff believes that this technology could be used to scan pre-existing image files, as well as be activated procedurally while documents are being first digitized and added to the database. The implications of the arrival of such a technology may revolutionize the way archives and special repositories currently process their manuscript collections.

Accordingly the Houghton Library is applying for a level II grant in order to fund the development of this innovative technology. Final product and dissemination plan is as follows:

- Expanding the pre-existing Houghton Library Digital Manuscripts Collection website to have at least one thirds coverage of full plain text support, which will be publicly accessible free of charge.
- Establishing a digital distribution site of the OCR software developed
- A project blog
- Extensive documentation on the OCR software
- Establishment of an in-house long term OCR team, a sub-department of the Houghton Library

#### Crowdsourcing Culinary History at The New York Public Library

The National Endowment for the Humanities Digital Humanities Start-up Grants has a resource library where one can find successful grant applications to gather what the NEH is specifically looking for in terms of program scale and funding. One grant studied was the New York Public Library's project titled "Crowdsourcing Culinary History at The New York Public Library". The NYPL proposed a way to maximize and add value to their special collection of over 40,000 New York restaurant menus dating back to 1840 by creating a crowdsourcing tool

that would allow “scholars and interested members of the general public to contribute to transcription materials related to culinary history, using the menu collection of the New York Public Library as a testbed” (New York Public Library, 2011a).

The grant narrative was successful because it included multiple sections that described the history of the project, including that which was needed in terms of funding to complete the project, and how the project would improve access to the collection as well as developing innovative ways for the public to use and contribute to the collection. The grant narrative included sections titled “Enhancing the Humanities Through Innovation” where the authors described the collection in terms of its importance to “historians, novelists, food writers, and general food enthusiasts” (New York Public Library, 2011b, para. 1). This section also included a synopsis on how the NYPL has made investments to this collection including digitizing the collection, improving user access, and integrating it into ongoing digital projects, such as combining it with their program “NYC Historical GIS”. The narrative emphasized, “Taken together, “NYC Historical GIS” and “What’s on the Menu?” suggests a radical evolution of the very idea of a public library: a library that is not only used, but built by its public” (New York Public Library, 2011b, para. 7).

The NEH application also included sections titled “Environmental Scan”, “History and Duration of Project”, “Work Plan”, and “Final Product and Dissemination”. The “Environmental Scan” looks at previously funded projects that have been successful at advancing the digital humanities, while noting that the NYPL project would advance this field in many ways by: “tackling a new form of ephemeral document (the menu), with its own format/content complexities and research implications...by integrated into a larger research library infrastructure (e.g. enhanced metadata will repopulate NYPL Digital Gallery, geospatial data will

eventually integrate with NYPL's "NYC Historical GIS" project)...the subject matter is particularly popular: food is a unique attractor uniting a broad base of enthusiasts ranging from specialist to passionate amateur. Consequently, "What's on the Menu?" has an uncommon potential to popularize the model of library-public collaboration" (New York Public Library, 2011b, para. 10).

Briefly, "History and Duration of the Project" described the collection's development and advised how the Start-Up Grant would "subsidize a six-month pilot period focused on building up public participation from overlapping food communities, and in honing and improving the user interface" (New York Public Library, 2011b, para. 20). Next, the "Work Plan" detailed how the funding would be used and included a section where staff is listed and their contributions are described. Finally, the section "Final Product and Dissemination" described the outcome in the form of a beta website consisting of:

- A browsable gallery of menus to be selected by users for transcription
- A user registration/login system
- A transcription interface: menu image, transcription area, viewer of resulting html text file
- Exportable data lists
- A searchable gallery of finished documents
- A progress meter, contributor leader board, prizes, and other game-like features.
- Several visualizations of the evolving data
- A project blog (New York Public Library, 2011b, para. 34).

The application's success is found in the fact that the NYPL has researched its collection, user base, and the technology that it would require to see the project through. The application was ultimately funded through a Level II award of \$50, 000. Level II, described by the NEH as

“larger grants that can be used for more fully-formed projects that are ready to begin implementation or demonstrate proofs of concept...including a more articulated plan of work leading to concrete and tangible outcomes, such as working prototypes, test beds, or demonstration projects. (United States Federal Government, National Endowment for the Humanities, 2010, para. 8).

#### Jefferson’s Travels/HistoryBrowser

In 2008, the University of Virginia (UVA) was awarded a Level II Digital Humanities Start-Up grant in the amount of \$48,827 to develop its *Jefferson’s Travels/HistoryBrowser* project (UVA Today, 2008). The goal of this project was to create an innovative, interactive, web-based tool that would allow a wide variety of users a dynamic platform for exploring primary source documents relating to the travels of Thomas Jefferson. The *Jefferson’s Travels/HistoryBrowser* grant proposal is another excellent example of the type of project the NEH is looking to fund with its Start-Up grants program. Like the NYPL’s *Crowdsourcing* project, the *HistoryBrowser* takes a unique approach to utilizing web technology in the digital humanities. Level II grants require the applicants to present a robust plan, which will result in a substantial outcome. These grants are intended to fund new approaches to digital scholarship, and increase accessibility at all academic levels.

The *HistoryBrowser* grant proposal includes a number of essential features required in a successful application. Though unique in design, the *HistoryBrowser* builds on the work of previous, successful digital history projects that utilized the visual aspects of web technology to engage the user (National Endowment for the Humanities, 2008, p. 15). Designed as a prototype, the *Jefferson’s Travels* module of the *HistoryBrowser* takes these concepts further, providing users with the ability to interact with and manipulate primary source materials thereby creating a

user directed learning experience (National Endowment for the Humanities, 2008, p. 8). In addition, the *HistoryBrowser* tool, based on simple scripts, does not require specialized computer programming experience thereby allowing for ease of expansion. Built on the success of this initial *Jefferson's Travels* project the current version of the *HistoryBrowser*, renamed *Visual Eyes* ([www.viseyes.org](http://www.viseyes.org)), has expanded to include a number of additional projects (Ferster & French, 2010, p.2).

In addition to presenting a unique proposal, the *History Browser* application includes a detailed plan for implementation. A collaborative effort between UVA's Virginia Center for Digital History (VDCH) and the Thomas Jefferson Foundation, the project uses scholars from both institutions as well as students in a dedicated upper level history seminar to develop content for the site. This allows the project to identify a large array of primary source materials in a short period of time avoiding the costs associated with paid researchers (National Endowment for the Humanities, 2008, p. 12). The goal is to create a demonstration model that can be used as a prototype for other projects.

Included in the application is a plan for outreach to ensure that the project's goal of providing greater accessibility to K-20 teachers and to scholars is met. The design calls for the prominent placement of the website link on both the VDCH and Monticello websites. In addition, project leaders are committed to actively promoting the project through presentations and in the scholarly literature. These efforts have been successful and have resulted in collaborations with the Smithsonian Institution, the Eastern Shore Public Library, and the Richard Stockton College of New Jersey (Ferster & French, 2010, p.4).

The *HistoryBrowser* grant application presented an ideal project for the Digital Humanities Start-Up grants. A unique project, it was designed to build on previous scholarship

and web tools expanding them into a unique format (National Endowment for the Humanities, 2008, p.8). This strong foundation helped to ensure the proposal's chance for success. The plans for implementation were well developed as were as plans for outreach and further development. The outreach proposals and unique features of the *HistoryBrowser* provided a broad range of accessibility for the project, meeting the goals of the project developers and the requirements of the NEH funding guidelines. These features make this grant proposal a particularly attractive candidate for the NEH's Digital Humanities Start-Up.

#### The IMLS and NEH: Alliances and Analogs

Unlike the NEH the IMLS does not have a distinct and unique digital humanities grant program. That being said, the NEH Digital Start-up Grants program is actually a joint-venture between the IMLS and NEH, with the former acting as a cosponsor and offering financial support.<sup>2</sup> While the IMLS does not have a distinct digital humanities program, it is a prolific funder of digital humanities projects and has comparably less strict requirements (and larger payout ceilings) in comparison to the NEH-led Digital Start-up Grants program. The Digital Collections and Content project of the Grainger Engineering Library, itself funded by an IMLS grant, offers a complete database of digital collections and projects furnished by the grant agency.<sup>3</sup>

The scope of the database is revealing: the IMLS clearly has invested millions of dollars in digital resource projects relating to the humanities, culminating in hundreds of funded grants. Many of the IMLS grants exceed fifty thousand dollars, some of which approach seven figures. This is in contrast to the NEH Digital Start-Up Grants, which have a maximum ceiling of fifty

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<sup>2</sup> Grants.gov offers a description of the institutional history of Digital Humanities Start-up Grants <http://www07.grants.gov/search/synopsis.do;jsessionid=yJvDTBzKwBhB61Jvmx7nLKM83vbln0nNLBJ8npG7fLr2hD1mRy57!-1135953825>

<sup>3</sup> Available at <http://imlsdcc.grainger.uiuc.edu/>

thousand. That being said, while cash sharing is optional for the Digital Start-Up Grants, for the majority of IMLS grants a ratio of one to one is expected for grants larger than two hundred and fifty thousand dollars and one to three for smaller grants. In this sense the Digital Start-Up Grants reward more innovative and bold initiatives by grantees, while the IMLS grants are more likely to assuage rather than replace costs for otherwise major projects.

One of the ways in which it spearheads the funding of such projects is by way of the National Leadership Grant which specifically offers funding for “advancing digital resources,” amongst “research,” “demonstration” and “library-museum collaboration.” An applicant can apply for a project, planning or “national forum” grant. Project grants are intended for projects which are already planned and just require funding to go forward, planning grants are intended to product proof of concept, prototypes and conduct research into viability of concept and national forum grants are intended to help fund expert intervention into theoretical deficiencies, opportunities and threats. It was this particular grant that recently (October 2011) funded a major digital humanities collaboration project between Brown University and Wheaton College called TEI Archiving, Publishing, and Access Service (TAPAS). TAPAS is intended to be a web-based service “that will allow the scholar to upload, store, and transform their TEI data into a variety of forms — including a project website.” The IMLS grant funds are allocated to enable the development of the infrastructure necessary to sustain such a project (Flanders 2011). This is one digital humanities project, amongst a legion of others, which have been funded by the IMLS.

#### Discussion

The digital humanities are a significant aspect of a cultural heritage which produces and expects access to the digital record. While agency methodology varies, although often in support one another, the relevance of this funding is clear in consideration of the aforementioned

projects: a vast quantity of our national academic humanities projects would not have become actualized if not for national funding agencies. Looking forward those in the library profession must consider national imperatives in austerity against the need to sustain such projects for the sake of preserving and fostering a new type of cultural heritage. Amidst all the talk of funding cuts, the librarian must defend what is most important.

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