Research Practices among Literature and Languages Faculty at Haverford College

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**Introduction**

This report describes the results of a study we conducted to determine how literature and Romance languages faculty at Haverford College perform research and the challenges they face. Our work was coordinated by Ithaka S+R, a research organization with a focus on academia. Thirteen other college and university libraries are also participating in this project and our collective local reports will form the basis of a general assessment by Ithaka S+R.

Our study comes at a time of continued evolution in the fields of literature and Romance languages not only in terms of new directions in scholarship but also in how it is disseminated and taught. Noteworthy recent developments in these fields include a greater investment in interdisciplinary work, the advent of public humanities, the proliferation of research databases and other information resources, and the rise of scholarly uses of social media. As we learned in the course of our study, these developments directly inform the way scholars at Haverford think about and conduct research. In this report, we have synthesized our findings into four main themes and provided recommendations for addressing the issues that they raise. The library already works closely with faculty in literature and Romance languages, but what this report shows is that there are exciting opportunities for further collaboration.

**Research Methodology**

The project kicked off with a workshop, organized by Ithaka S+R, which featured librarians from the other participating colleges and universities (including our colleagues at Swarthmore, Roberto Vargas and Pam Harris). In the workshop we received advice about the study and performed some exercises to help us prepare to carry it out.

After the workshop, we contacted tenure-track or tenured faculty by email to describe the project and to ask for their participation. In all, seven faculty members agreed to participate: four from the English department, two from French, and one from Spanish. Four of the participants are associate professors, two are full professors, and one is an assistant professor.

After scheduling meetings, we conducted in-person interviews, generally lasting about forty minutes, using a modified version of the question-sheet provided by Ithaka S+R. Audio recordings of these interviews were transcribed by an external transcription company and then we anonymized the transcripts to preserve personal information. The next step was to code the transcripts according to a variety of categories, which we identified and refined in collaboration with our colleagues at Swarthmore, so that we could then pinpoint the most relevant and pressing themes. Working in tandem with Swarthmore allowed us to see issues that were of common concern for liberal arts colleges while also recognizing the culture and experiences unique to each campus.
Themes

I. Conducting Research Beyond Literature and Languages

As scholarship in English, French, and Spanish has become more interdisciplinary, faculty are branching out beyond their home discipline and conducting research in a wide array of fields and subfields. At Haverford, faculty have sought out primary and secondary materials in such disciplines as architecture, film, mathematics, philosophy, photography, political science, popular music, and religious studies. This broadening of research interests carries certain challenges as faculty are not always prepared to conduct research outside their discipline in an efficient and comprehensive manner. As one faculty member put it, “because my training is in literature, I know how to use those databases really well. With photography it’s usually – I feel less equipped to know where to go a lot of the times.”

When confronted with the need to explore a new discipline, faculty apply various strategies to make up for their lack of familiarity with relevant information resources. Some use the “follow the trail of footnotes” method to dig through scholarship they already know in order to identify significant books and articles related to the topic and field they are investigating. Others rely on Google to retrieve relevant information (this is especially the case when the research goal is to find popular sources as opposed to scholarly monographs or articles). A very common strategy is for faculty to tap into their scholarly networks, whether at conferences or through social media such as Facebook.

We learned, in fact, that social media has been a boon for faculty as it makes it possible for them to quickly and effectively canvas a large number of scholars. One faculty member said: “I’ve had a couple experiences lately where a Facebook thread has produced a richer bibliography than I could produce on my own.” Using social media in this way benefits not only the faculty member seeking new knowledge but also other scholars who may, whether in the present or sometime down the line, have an interest in exploring the discipline/topic in question.

II. Expanding Audiences

In addition to incorporating new fields of study in their research, all interviewed faculty also talked about expanding their readership beyond scholarly peers to reach new audiences. This takes different forms. One respondent developed a book project knowing that he wanted to address a general audience and bring scholarly thinking about disability studies and sexual theory to bear on the life of an American folk artist. In another case, what began as a small effort to make some scholarship available online has become a rich website about African authors consulted by both Francophone and English-speaking scholars and students. The faculty member describes this kind of public humanities as "giving back" to important stakeholders, both
by facilitating their access to needed information and making them part of a wider, ongoing conversation.

This connection to stakeholders enriches all the participants. In securing permissions to publish photos, one respondent was put in touch with tribal elders who held the rights. Their questions and concerns added further dimensions to the author's understanding and expanded the audience for whom she was writing in a significantly meaningful way (for more information on scholars engaging with indigenous communities see Ithaka S+R’s report on Indigenous Studies). Some faculty asked how their institution could be more involved in this effort to engage the public. Given the absence of peer review and lack of "brand name" recognition with blogs and other forms of public humanities work, institutions can do more to make faculty writings better known. One respondent argued that this was an important responsibility for the institution and would help convey the school's mission.

This issue regarding connections between institutions and audiences leads to the related question of tenure and promotion when faculty produce work addressed to the general public. Some respondents acknowledged that they wrote a scholarly monograph within the peer review system in order to secure tenure and were now able to work on a documentary or a website that will reach very different kinds of audiences. In these cases they expressed disappointment that the tenure system has remained inflexible. Yet several others held up examples of colleagues who had successfully navigated the system while justifying their non-standard work on the basis of its intrinsic originality and importance. One respondent saw a change in institutional support for public humanities work, saying, “I think in some ways it’s almost favorable for a place like this, to have that kind of public engagement, more than scholarly engagement.”

III. The Challenges of Student Research

One faculty member’s statement about the interconnection between teaching and research applies generally to the faculty we spoke with: “I’m one of those professors for whom teaching and research are closely related.” Engaging with students in discussion-based courses can provide faculty with new perspectives on texts they are interested in. Teaching can also have an impact on a faculty member’s sense of the potential audience for their research, as one professor indicated: “I have toyed with the idea of rewriting this manuscript...for a more general audience, because I routinely teach a course on this topic, and I see how it meets with great interest in my students, and they bring a lot to it.”

The faculty we interviewed all indicated a commitment to having their students gain and develop research skills. Putting this into practice, however, involves certain challenges. In general, as we learned, faculty come by their research skills in an ad-hoc, trial-and-error way over the course of their training and careers. The lack of a systematic approach can make it challenging for them to effectively communicate research knowledge to students. Another roadblock is that students often lack experience and in-depth subject knowledge which can make
it difficult to perform such tasks as distinguishing the important voices in a field from relatively minor contributions. As one faculty member noted: “I have a student working on the notion of “play” in the Renaissance. If she finds a hundred sources on “play,” she doesn’t sense what the juiciest ones to look at are.”

Faculty handle these challenges in a variety of ways. One is to turn to the library for in-class bibliographic instruction and one-on-one research consultations with subject librarians. Faculty also spend time in class instructing students about how to conduct research, though this is not a common practice as it takes away precious time from discussion of assigned texts and topics. One faculty member has developed a particularly efficient way of dealing with this challenge. She integrates research instruction into the time allotted for workshopping papers, an approach that gives students a sense of ownership over the research process. Students share research techniques and resources with one another, and work together on accumulating sources (they often write on overlapping subjects) so that they can develop a robust, shared source base.

IV. Finding Research Tools

As they do research, scholars often have questions requiring precision searches in search engines, catalogs and databases of both secondary and primary sources. In order to take full advantage of the power inherent in any information system, it is necessary to be aware of the kind of content it contains and to have knowledge of search techniques. All respondents used information systems regularly but expressed some concerns involving their queries as well as whether those systems excluded relevant materials: “Again it’s always hard to tell if the limit is me or the limit is the system. I’m always like – well, you know, what terms am I not using or whatever in terms of my own ability to navigate the systems.”

One faculty member commented on limitations in even the most standard resource, the MLA database.

Sometimes, especially in my field, an article – you can find – you know, the MLA bibliography is not completely comprehensive. So sometimes it will include titles of articles in a collection and sometimes it won't. This is what I have discovered. Or it might include titles of books, but not the information that this particular book is talking about a particular writer that I'm interested in will not be there.

Faculty, especially those working in cultural traditions outside the English-speaking world, need to keep up with research done in other languages and published outside of the United States. This involves using databases that have different search protocols and index bodies of literature that rely on complex publishing systems. These databases are especially important in providing a global context and in bringing recognition to scholars beyond the Anglophone orbit.
In using primary source catalogs and databases, respondents often felt that their searches were hit and miss rather than systematic. When they found an unexpected account that gave them a first-hand view they were engrossed but wondered what else they might be missing. While researchers made excellent use of known archives and giant repositories like Google, they underutilized wayfinding in catalogs like ArchiveGrid as well as in primary text collections, ranging from the popular press to scientific journals. Some respondents highlighted the roles archivists played in connecting them to new material, while others emphasized the importance of serendipity.

**Concluding Thoughts**

As we compare our themes with those identified by our colleagues at Swarthmore we find some broadly similar trends. Literature and Romance languages faculty at both Haverford and Swarthmore spoke to the importance of research agendas that encompass multiple disciplines and the power of scholarly networks, especially when accessed through social media. Faculty at both schools rely significantly on archives (physical and digital) for primary sources, and are mostly self-taught in research methodologies. On the Haverford side, there was particular emphasis on the various, positive ways in which research intersects with pedagogy. Faculty teach from their research, and, in the process, model effective processes of intellectual inquiry for their students.

**Recommendations**

**Research beyond Literature and Languages**

- Facilitate research in new disciplinary areas in consultation with faculty. Incorporate this goal in one on one work with researchers as well as instruction support for classes.

- Work with individual faculty members to help them incorporate visual resources in teaching, research and publications. Assist in identifying pertinent works, learning the status of individual images and securing rights for display online and in print.

**Expanding Audiences**

- Work with the communications department to promote faculty publications appearing in blogs, websites and other venues not covered in standard research databases. Serve as a conduit for faculty's public humanities work to interested groups including librarians, researchers and membership organizations.

- Strengthen faculty and student connections with groups that share their research interests including providing the means for identifying more scholarship from other countries.
Student Research

- Work with faculty on incorporating research instruction into 100 and 200 level courses so that students are equipped to effectively perform research as part of their thesis projects.

- Provide faculty with resources and strategies for helping their students navigate the research process with greater confidence and facility.

Research Tools

- Consult with faculty on their searches for source material from libraries and archives. Leverage finding aids, scholarly footnotes and advice from local librarians to maximize benefits for faculty research trips.

- Suggest alternative strategies for potential research problems. This could involve specialized techniques in databases that deviate from standard organization and search protocols. It might also include practical advice on accessing research tools or primary sources held by a small number of libraries.

- Develop project for identifying and scraping ad-hoc bibliographies scholars put together on twitter and create a website for preserving and sharing them in an accessible manner.