

Digital Scholarship and Liberal Arts Colleges – Executive Briefing

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Introduction:

The distinctive experience of a contemporary liberal arts college education combines close mentorship with active inquiry-focused learning based on primary evidence. Increasingly, methods of inquiry and sources of evidence in all the liberal disciplines are digitally mediated, opening new kinds of scholarly questions and introducing new methods for answering those questions.

This “digital turn” presents liberal arts colleges with significant opportunities for enhanced engagement with faculty, prospective and current students, and alumni. It also poses important challenges to our technological and organizational infrastructures, challenges that Library and IT groups within our organizations are already trying to meet in a variety of ways. These steps, in their turn, are increasing opportunities for collaborative learning within and across Liberal Arts Colleges. Continued attention to, and investment in, the opportunities and challenges of digital scholarship will contribute to positioning liberal arts learning in the strongest light possible. In this executive briefing, we sketch a vision of those opportunities and recommend some ways for senior leadership to support and enable digital modes of scholarship in their institutions.

Digital Scholarship within the Liberal Arts College and Larger Landscapes:

Digital scholarship is an increasingly compelling topic of discussion within the academy. For some scholars, this area of inquiry represents new and exciting avenues of exploration. As the discussion and practice evolve, scholars and disciplines are examining and endorsing digital scholarship. Long-established humanities foundations such as the ACLS, MacArthur, Mellon, and NEH have recognized this methodological turn in their grant programs, in their policies, and in their advocacy work.

Rapid changes in digital technology have radically transformed the landscape of communication and information. Throughout these changes, the fundamentals of scholarship have remained constant. Scholars, faculty, and students continue to examine and interrogate the world around them through research within or across disciplines, draw on a variety of evidence types – now often multi-modal – and use the methods of their disciplines to create new knowledge. Modes of education, however, have expanded and changed significantly as technology facilitates unprecedented access to scholarly resources, collaboration among students and faculty, self-paced analysis of material in preparation for engagement with a community of scholars, and new approaches to publishing. Just as the Internet and social networking have transformed communication in our everyday lives, so are they beginning to expand and transform disciplinary and cross-disciplinary methods of research and scholarship.

Large data sets, common in biology and astronomy, now exist in the humanities and social sciences as large corpuses of data and text. Mapping and data visualization increasingly play a role in historical research and related disciplines, and the practices of close reading of rare books, manuscripts, and original sources are now complemented regularly with encoding, analysis, annotation, and re-contextualization online. In addition to addressing new questions or new methods, products of digital scholarship often engage new audiences and include pathways for access to previously unavailable or sequestered knowledge and sources. Digital scholars

frequently participate in open source and open access communities that are designed to share and disseminate tools and knowledge through multiple paths. Digital scholarship maintains the tradition of deeply rigorous intellectual engagement and complements that tradition with powerful new forms of broad accessibility and practice in the types of cross-role, cross-disciplinary collaboration that prepare students for professional life beyond college.

Transformational Learning:

Traditionally collaborative by nature, the liberal arts college is well-positioned to facilitate these flexible, dynamic and nimble learning opportunities where students are able to apply broad-based critical thinking skills typical of a liberal arts education to the digital environment. Application of such skills positions students advantageously in a world where technology predominates, ensuring our graduates' capacity to flourish in that fast-evolving world. Because digital fluency and critical analysis of newly available options are such critical success factors in contemporary life, the development of a robust digital scholarship program that prepares students well is a wise investment for liberal arts colleges seeking to sustain and augment our competitive advantage in the marketplace.

Digital scholarship has active learning at its core: students, faculty, librarians, and academic technologists are learning through practice and through working together in multi-disciplinary teams. Faculty and students together produce new knowledge in ways that are memorable for the students and fruitful for all who have access to the scholarly work that is published. As part of the digital scholarship ecosystem, librarians and academic technologists are teaching faculty and students about the best tools and sustainable methods for creating and publishing multi-faceted scholarship. These skills and associated decision-making practices translate directly to the ability to evaluate, select, and transform available tools and data to meet future professional and personal goals.

Cultivating Engaged Citizens and Alumni:

The Western tradition of scholarship is, fundamentally, exoteric: scholarly work is made public so that it can be critiqued, tested, used and re-used in the advancement of knowledge. For students to “close the loop of inquiry,” they must have the experience of exposing some of their work to public view. The practices emerging in digital scholarship provide many different kinds of opportunities for students to place their work in visible, accessible, and enduring spaces and to experience both the pride of accomplishment and the risk of critique. Long after a conference presentation has concluded, students can show their works of digital scholarship to advisers, colleagues, prospective graduate schools and prospective employers. One of the things that is special about liberal arts colleges is the focus on learning in community and embracing responsibility to community. Making work public and facilitating dialogue with a broader community is a practice at the heart of digital scholarship and aligned wholeheartedly with the community-focused values of liberal arts education.

Moreover, as the liberal arts have always done, digital scholarship cultivates a critical perspective on the world, including a critique of digital technology itself. Liberal Arts Colleges are especially well positioned to help students become engaged citizens who understand and can think critically about the technology that shapes communication, commerce, and politics in our world today. At the same time, scholarly engagement with that technology builds skills that will be essential to their post-graduation success. This combination of intellectual and practical preparation, and particularly the engaged, collaborative learning experiences that are inherent to digital scholarship

projects, will, we believe, help cultivate deep and lasting relationships between our institutions and our students who are becoming alumni -- relationships that are crucial to our long-term success. Collaborations with mentors are a foundation of lifelong relationships, and digital scholarship is a site for developing robust mentorship programs that transform into alumni/institution relationships that last and thrive.

Further, we are seeing robust digital scholarship projects serve as an attractive component in the recruitment of new students. Communications and Admissions are now using published digital scholarship projects as a way to highlight what is exciting, distinctive, and strategically differentiating about our institutions - and these stories highlight the combination of intellectual engagement and the pleasure of working in rigorous ways in a community.

From the Margins to the Center:

Libraries, closely aligned with Information Technology and Academic Technology departments, sit at the center of the production of digital scholarship. As a result, many libraries and IT organizations have already begun to shift resources in support of digital scholarship. The reorganization of staffing structures, the additional training of librarians and instructional technologists, and the creation of collaborative teams within organizational structures across the college and beyond, all contribute to advancing the value proposition of the liberal arts education and to moving liberal arts education meaningfully and successfully into the 21st century.

The combination of resources within academic libraries -- subject expertise, technological expertise, metadata and information expertise, and a rich range of multi-modal collections-- is central to the success of digital scholarship. So, too, is the relative proximity of all of the key players for digital scholarship (faculty, students, librarians and academic technology staff) in small liberal arts colleges as compared with the more significant organizational and disciplinary boundaries at larger institutions. Taken together, digital scholarship enhances the Liberal Arts learning ethos where rich collaboration is facilitated across roles in intellectually dynamic and exciting ways. These collaborations are leading to the generation of new knowledge and transformational learning. Supported by these partnerships, we are building communities within and across LAC institutions and in dialogue with R1 counterparts to explore these digital models and to transform educational and scholarly models for the contemporary era.

Senior leadership will need to support these ongoing organizational changes. We are small organizations with ambitious goals; we cannot afford to have individuals or very small teams in silos across separate areas of the institution. Digital scholarship requires an organized, nimble and collaborative team that can draw on best practices established over decades in library and academic technology operations.

These organizational changes and shifts will help move digital scholarship from a marginal niche to an integrated approach to contemporary scholarship across the curriculum. Further, they will aid in the development of technological fluency for students, faculty, and staff as we all prepare to work with data and tools in ways appropriate to evolving world practices. With the right investments and priority at this critical phase of technological evolution, digital scholarship ultimately becomes contemporary scholarship, and our institutions remain able to support students in becoming viable contributors and leaders in a contemporary world.

Recommendations:

We encourage our fellow senior leaders at liberal arts colleges to join us in enabling a pathway that establishes digital scholarship as core to our educational enterprise. Meeting the challenges represented by digital and emerging modes of scholarship will also create the foundation for future opportunities, including building effective practices for cross-institutional collaboration among LACs and between LACs and research universities. Beyond the limited scope of digital scholarship per se, establishing the kinds of collaborations required by digital scholarship also enables sharing of resources to sustain other forms of essential institutional practice into the future.

Ultimately we want individuals across all areas of our colleges to be well-versed in working with digital tools to conduct their scholarship and to accomplish their work. At this stage of evolution from traditional analog to digital practices, we need to be able to consolidate efforts and expertise in order to develop programs that help broad swaths of the community to develop digitally enabled and enhanced skills and ways of working. We recommend the following for our colleges individually and collectively:

- Understand digital scholarship as a means for students to develop combined critical thinking skills with digital fluency as part of contemporary and future work requirements, and advocate for appropriate investments to make digital scholarship possible at scale.
- Support a regular cycle of funding that enables continuous innovation, which relies on a core team to develop models for sustaining effective projects, programs, and services in partnership with faculty and their scholarly research cycles. Increase support for professional development for staff and faculty. Share specialized expertise, such as GIS or data visualization, across colleges, and connect these experts programmatically with the core institutional teams and programs that are sustaining programs and practices at the local college.
- Leverage expertise, tools, and infrastructural support of Libraries and Information Technology groups to collaboratively support the digital scholarship needs of faculty and students. Support realignment of staff (already underway in some LACs) to enhance collaborative learning, research and project development in sustainable and scalable ways.
- In library redesign projects, financially support design and development of digital collaboration studios and, where required, the addition of associated staff.
- Invest in the continued digitization of cultural heritage materials and foster a commitment to open access to ensure the scholarly record will be available into the future. Ensure institutional participation in national and international consortia and organizations to create and sustain new infrastructural elements of digital preservation, digital curation, and digital asset management for teaching, learning, and research.

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momentum toward integrating our best models into the fabric of our institutional practices in order to enable contemporary scholarship and students' long-range success.