

Transforming the Landscape of Labor at Universities Through Digital Humanities

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At Salem State University, we have developed the Digital Scholars Program, an undergraduate digital humanities research program that responds to the university's commitment to student success. The process of doing so, however, revealed a number of challenges based on our institutional context: a lack of models for digital humanities at regional comprehensive universities, the difficulty of fostering ethical faculty and librarian partnerships, and inequalities in labor conditions across university units. Contextualizing these obstacles in relation to scholarship on digital humanities at regional comprehensive universities, the complexities of collaboration, and labor practices in digital humanities, this essay discusses how we have managed our successful partnership as librarian (Edwards) and faculty (Risam), as well as the lessons we learned from scaling our collaboration to work with other colleagues.

Salem State University was founded in 1854 as Salem Normal School. Like most regional comprehensive universities, the school transitioned from normal school to teachers college to state college, and Salem State was granted university status in 2010. Regional comprehensive universities like Salem State “share a learning and teacher-centered culture, a historic commitment to underserved student populations and a dedication to research and creativity that advances their regions’ economic progress and cultural development” [1]. Salem State is also the most diverse institution in the Massachusetts state university system, with a significant percentage of the student body coming from underrepresented backgrounds. The university serves a primarily undergraduate student body of 9,000 students and offers 32 degree programs in the liberal arts, business, and health and human services. Salem State also offers master’s degrees to several thousand students. Like many regional comprehensives, Salem State prides itself on being “student-centered” and, drawing on its origins as a teacher training institution, considers itself a “teaching university.” Consequently, our work developing digital humanities initiatives at the university has necessarily been focused on its instrumental value for our undergraduate student population.

At the same time, we have had to negotiate the growing pains that the university has experienced in its shift from college to university, as well as its struggle with its institutional identity. One area of uncertainty that has influenced our partnership is how the change to university status affects the work of faculty and librarians. Faculty and librarians have always had to demonstrate that they are meritorious in teaching or development of library programs, service, and research for tenure and promotion, but the university status has increased expectations in the area of research. These expectations have grown despite no corresponding decrease in responsibilities -

teaching load for faculty or workload for librarians - to meet the new standards for scholarship. These challenges are compounded by fiscal constraints. Through years of inadequate funding, Massachusetts has cut higher education spending by 14% since 2001. In response to ongoing budget cuts, the number of librarians at Salem State has decreased by 25% since 2008, with positions left empty because of retirements or resignations remaining unfilled. While our digital humanities initiatives have led to increased research emerging from the university archives and special collections, they have also created additional responsibilities that are not part of our already-full job descriptions. Moreover, the dearth of models for digital humanities programs at regional comprehensive universities has required us to invent the ethical collaborative and labor practices that respond to the specificities of a teaching university.

Libraries and Digital Humanities at Regional Comprehensive Universities

Regional comprehensives have been slow to adopt digital humanities initiatives, whether centers, programs, or ad-hoc collaborations like ours, which is dependent on individuals assuming extra responsibilities. This is, in part, because their missions focus on teaching, rather than research. Although a few regional comprehensive universities have begun developing digital humanities initiatives, a lack of funding combined with heavy workload for faculty and librarians also has impeded the growth of the digital humanities at the majority of non-flagship public campuses.

While digital humanities scholarship is overwhelmingly concerned with work taking place at research institutions and well-funded liberal arts colleges, digital humanities projects at regional comprehensive universities focus on undergraduate education and tend to be small projects that benefit their college and regional communities. Libraries are at the forefront of these activities. For example, Jacksonville State University has worked to “promote new and useful information services” to their community [2]. They have participated in a consortial project with the Network of Alabama Academic Libraries, with attention to content of value to their “immediate user community” - faculty and students. As a result, the library worked on the digitization of unique collections related to the history of Alabama, including Southeastern Indian records and African American oral histories. Western Carolina University has emphasized student success, developing an institutional repository that includes student scholarship and class-based projects with special collections material [3]. In Massachusetts, libraries at every institution in the state university system have supported some form of digital scholarship, with the largest institutions hiring Digital Initiatives librarians and creating institutional repositories that promote open access to faculty and student scholarship and special collections. At Salem State, we have also situated our digital scholarship initiatives in the library. We could not run the Digital Scholars Program or our other digital humanities programs without the resources – collections, expertise, and intellectual leadership – that are housed in the library.

Equity in Library/Faculty Partnerships

Despite the significance of the library to the university's digital humanities initiatives, inequities in the labor expected from librarians, particularly when contrasted with faculty expectations, have posed challenges to our partnership. Librarians have been considered faculty in the Massachusetts state university system since the system-wide union was formed in the 1970s. They are eligible for tenure, rank, and sabbaticals. However, inequality is embedded in the Massachusetts state universities union contract. Aside from the standard twelve-month work year for librarians versus nine months for faculty, there are differences in rank, pay, and librarians' control over their schedules. Faculty tend to disappear between June 1st and August 31st, when they are "off-contract," while librarians are still required to report to work. This poses a challenge to the continuity and sustainability of digital humanities projects and initiatives. Perhaps the most important impediment in terms of collaboration, however, is the inability of librarians to receive the compensation that faculty members do for work on grants. Given the increasing workloads of librarians at institutions such as Salem State, there is little incentive to take on even more work.

Aside from the unique institutional impediments at Massachusetts state universities, the working relationship between faculty and librarians seems to be a universal problem. One sociological study found an "asymmetrical disconnection" between the two groups:

The perception among faculty is that librarians' work is service-oriented - their primary duties are the organization and facilitation of access to knowledge and other resources. By contrast, faculty see their own work as focusing on the production and dissemination of knowledge. As many sociologists have discussed in numerous contexts, contemporary society generally views service-oriented work as being of lesser importance than production, primarily due to the implicit superordinate-subordinate relationships that appear inherent in service. Ours is not a society that considers service an honored form of labor (especially relative to production), and academic culture reflects these larger social attitudes. [4]

Indeed, a significant strand in library literature addresses whether librarians should have faculty status at all. Scholarship in favor emphasizes the benefits of faculty status to the integration of librarians more fully in the "education mission" of the university, some of which is due to improved self-perception of librarians. The literature opposed to it questions whether librarians have the ability to do research. These arguments tend to focus on lack of time (because of librarians' twelve-month contracts and their fixed daily schedule, which is roughly analogous to a heavy teaching load); lack of administrative support for research as it would take time away from the provision of services; or a lack of training for research in M.L.S programs.

While library scholarship emphasizes service to faculty, digital humanities scholarship has challenged the service model with attention to collaboration and labor ethics. When calling for a digital humanities statement of values, Lisa Spiro writes that collaboration is essential and she looks to the American Library Association's "Core Values of Librarianship" for inclusion in any digital humanities statement of values. Vitaly, digital humanities has the potential to bring faculty and librarians together in a way that interrupts the usual "librarians in service to faculty" paradigm. As Spiro notes, "Bridging these two communities, the digital humanities community brings together core scholarly values such as critical dialogue and free inquiry with an ethic focused on the democratic sharing of ideas" [5]. Miriam Posner also addresses the need for a culture of collaboration: "Many of the problems we have faced 'supporting' digital humanities work may stem from the fact that digital humanities projects in general do not need supporters - they need collaborators" [6]. Further emphasizing the role of librarians as collaborators, Micah Vandegrift and Stewart Varner call on librarians to rid themselves of their "academic inferiority complex":

"Librarians" working in and across digital areas, who have been called many things over time, need to proudly identify themselves as DHers, and fully expect to be regarded as such by peers, colleagues, faculty and administrators, and let the broad work they do engage with that community. [7]

The empowering message of the digital humanities community has influenced Edwards's relationship to faculty-librarian collaborations. From the beginning of our conversations about creating the Digital Scholars Program for undergraduates and developing the institutional digital humanities project *Digital Salem* to which the Digital Scholars contribute, Risam emphasized that the relationship should be one characterized by collaboration rather than service. This was a new concept for Edwards, as her previous working relationships with faculty - and the evaluation standards that predate Salem State's university designation - have been centered around providing service. The work we began relied on Posner's advice: "When librarians do collaborate on projects, it is important to find ways to impress upon scholars that DH expertise is a specialized, crucial-and frankly, rare-skill, not a service to be offered in silent support of a scholar's master plan" [6]. Through collaboration with Risam, Edwards became aware of inequities in the treatment of librarians by faculty, such as fellow librarians not receiving credit for the important and extensive work they do on projects, an all-too-common problem at Salem State. Through our collaboration, we have put these labor issues at the forefront of our work, with the goal of challenging them through our partnership.

Productive Partnerships for Student Learning

Taking into account these structural inequalities, the efforts of digital humanities practitioners to draw attention to and remediate them, and our institutional needs, we designed the Digital

Scholars Program, our undergraduate digital humanities research program, to offer digital humanities experiences to our students. At Salem State, student success is a driving force for decision-making at the university. As a regional comprehensive, our student population is markedly different from those of elite institutions, where students are more likely to have access to research opportunities and to experiences with digital humanities. Our students come to us primarily from our local region, north of Boston, though they are increasingly coming from other areas of Massachusetts, other states, and other countries as well, drawn by both cheap tuition and location in historic Salem, Massachusetts. This region is a diverse mix of working class, middle-class, and affluent communities that are urban, suburban, and rural. Some cities in the area have large immigrant populations and communities of color, while other towns are predominantly white. The student demographics of Salem State reflect the diversity of the North Shore of Massachusetts, skewing towards the area's middle, lower-middle, and working class population. Approximately 40% of our students are first-generation college students, 35% are students of color, and our significant transfer student population derives in large part from Boston-area community colleges. Consequently, university programs, initiatives, and pedagogies necessarily must take into account the needs of this student population.

Yet, the needs of students like ours are woefully underrepresented in digital humanities pedagogies, which presume the conditions of elite private universities, flagship research universities, and small liberal arts colleges. With the notable exception of Matthew K. Gold's work developing *Looking for Whitman*, a multi-campus digital humanities initiative at the City University of New York, the bulk of scholarship on digital humanities pedagogy focuses on graduate students and, more rarely, undergraduates in elite academic settings. Moreover, this research does not adequately address the role of librarian-faculty partnerships for digital humanities pedagogy.

As a result, when we began designing a digital humanities program for undergraduate students, there were no models for what we hoped to accomplish. Instead, we worked by trial and error to launch the Digital Scholars Program through a pilot during the 2015-2016 academic year. The pilot program was funded through the university's Strategic Innovation Grant program, which provides small grants for cross-departmental and cross-unit collaboration intended to advance the university's strategic plan. In our grant proposal, we made the case that the Digital Scholars Program would contribute to student success by providing an innovative educational experience to advance our students' intellectual, personal, and professional growth.

Through the program, students from a range of departments (English, History, Interdisciplinary Studies, Theatre, Communications, Music, Art, World Cultures and Languages, Education, and Computer Science) have the opportunity to learn more about digital humanities and how it might complement their educational experiences and their career goals. These students have access to an innovative, interdisciplinary educational experience that builds 21st century literacy skills:

collaboration and communication, critical thinking and problem-solving, creativity and innovation, and digital literacy. Engaging with digital humanities gives students experience with interdisciplinary applications of STEM skills and humanities research methods. We want our students to be prepared for jobs we cannot even imagine yet, which requires the capacity to integrate humanities and technology skills, innovate, and create new applications for knowledge. Exposure to digital humanities helps our students acquire multiple skillsets that equip them for success in the future.

We designed the program with several pedagogical objectives in mind: students would gain hands-on experiences working on digital humanities projects; students would be at the center of the projects we undertook as not only as collaborators but also as intellectual leaders; students would gain experience working with the literature, culture, and history of Salem by designing and implementing digital humanities projects that drew on the university's archival collections developed by Edwards; students would connect their experiences from their humanities majors with digital literacies; and students would learn how to effectively translate their experiences in the program for job searches and graduate school applications.

Ethical Labor Relationships

Aside from these pedagogical aims, we sought to develop ethical labor practices in the relationships between the faculty, librarians, and students who participate in the program. One area of inequality we negotiated was the fact that faculty can be compensated for work beyond their job descriptions but librarians cannot, according to the terms of our union contract. As a result, the grant that funded the program's pilot year could be used to pay Risam for the work running the Digital Scholars Program, but could not compensate Edwards. Yet, effectively running the program required drawing on *both* of our experiences and unique skillsets at the intersections of libraries, archives, and digital humanities. The only fair resolution we could envision was paying Risam, who then gave half of the compensation after taxes to Edwards as a "gift." Although not an ideal resolution, this was our best option for ensuring Edwards was compensated for her work, without running afoul of the IRS and while working within the labor disparities that are coded into the terms of our employment itself.

Another area we negotiated was how to develop ethical partnerships with students. Without other precedents for research programs at the university, we drew on the approaches to student collaboration within scholarship in digital humanities. For example, Spencer Keralis has argued against the "deficit internship," a form of neoliberal exploitation of students facilitated by digital humanities scholars:

Neoliberal ideals of promoting skills building and in-class collaboration allow faculty to benefit from free labor on their projects. Free, that is, to the faculty. Students still pay tuition for these

courses, making them not just unpaid internships, but deficit internships subsidized in no small part by loan debt accrued by the students. If faculty can't get federal money to support their research, this is a back door to getting its equivalent, and students foot the bill in both their labor and their future debt burden. [8]

Students who participate in the Digital Scholars Program have the opportunity to earn course credit for their experiences, though the exact form is dependent on major. English majors, for example, earn independent study research credit. History and Interdisciplinary Studies students earn internship credit, but the expectations of the “internship” from the departments vary, with History expecting 100+ hours and Interdisciplinary Studies limiting the hours to 36 to align with the temporal value of the credit hour. Regardless of the department, however, we mentor the students the same way. Because these experiences are uncompensated – and, in fact, the students are paying for the credit hours they are receiving – we resist the idea that the students are internship workers providing free labor. Instead, we draw inspiration from “A Student Collaborators’ Bill of Rights,” which specifies, “a student must be paid for his or her time if he or she is not empowered to make critical decisions about the intellectual design of a project or a portion of a project (and credited accordingly)” [9]. Since Salem State is facing significant budget constraints and we have not yet found the funds to compensate our Digital Scholars, we operate on a model that positions the students as independent researchers. We guide them through the process of creating a small-scale digital humanities project of their own from start to finish, helping them negotiate research questions, methods, digital tools, and the small failures and iterative practices that are inevitable when developing digital humanities projects.

Most students work with us for a semester, though several students have elected to pursue year-long projects. At the beginning of the semester, we introduce students to the theoretical dimensions of digital humanities to give them conceptual grounding in the methods they will be using in their research. We also show students the collections in the archives that we have selected as foci for the Digital Scholars Program (material on the history of Salem Normal School; the Walter George Whitman Collection, which includes rich material from a professor’s travels in India and China in the 1920s and 1930s; and material documenting anti-racist, feminist, and LGBT activism by students on campus in the late 1960s and 1970s). For the first few weeks of the semester, students explore these collections and identify a topic of interest, as well as an initial research question to shape their digital humanities project. Based on that, students focus more closely on making connections between their research question, archival material, and the digital forms their project may take. The finished projects become part of our institutional digital humanities project, *Digital Salem*, which seeks to tell the unheard stories of Salem, Massachusetts beyond the more popular narratives of the Salem Witch Trials, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and the city’s 18th century global maritime trade.

Drawing on our own backgrounds in digital humanities and archives, we offer students advice and guidance but are careful to not to let our expertise overdetermine the decisions the students make. Instead, we empower them to understand their own roles as scholars and interpreters of history and culture and as producers rather than simply consumers of knowledge, with the goal of authorizing their creativity. This approach is a direct response to the needs of our student population, which has largely been underserved by a K-12 public education system that privileges success on the Massachusetts high-stakes standardized testing apparatus over curiosity and inquiry. In her faculty role within the university's School of Education, Risam has significant experience in the local school districts that serve as our feeders, so she has drawn on this experience to articulate the specific needs of these students that can be met through the Digital Scholars Program. For the most part, these are not students who have been empowered by their education and taught to think about themselves as being part of academic conversations or able to undertake independent research and produce of knowledge. As a result, we are committed to the intellectual empowerment and mentorship of our students, which is directly connected to the ethics of the program and its labor practices.

Evaluating Expectations

Bringing other faculty into the program as we began to scale it, however, revealed that common expectations of faculty, librarian, and student collaboration at the university are guided by markedly different ethics than the ones that we explicitly integrated into the design of the program. While we had imagined participating faculty embracing practices like ours – identifying a focus area for research but putting students at the center of the intellectual enterprise – faculty often expect free student labor in the form of code monkeys who can assist with their research and take care of data entry. This misuse of students not only directly contravenes the ethics subtending the design of the Digital Scholars Program but also the values articulated in “A Student Collaborators’ Bill of Rights”: “Students should not perform mechanical labor, such as data-entry or scanning, without pay” [9]. We push back against these practices, but these expectations are deeply ingrained in how faculty understand student research outside the classroom (i.e. students work for faculty, rather than faculty working for the students). Instead, we can only control who we invite to participate in the program and choose to work with ones who consent to the ethics we have established for the program.

Experiences with other faculty reflected recalcitrant expectations about how librarian-faculty partnerships work as well. From the beginning of our work together, we have valued each other's unique expertise and experiences – in the case of Edwards, her more than 20 years of experiences in archives, her encyclopedic knowledge of Salem's history, and her extensive institutional knowledge, and in the case of Risam, her expertise in digital humanities and pedagogy – and the program has only been successful because we respect and effectively

leverage the confluences of our knowledge. In the broader context of our institution, this type of librarian-faculty collaboration (i.e. actual collaboration and intellectual equality) is rare.

More typically at Salem State, as noted above, faculty view librarians as service providers, there to support their work in classrooms and, less frequently, their research agendas. This is markedly different than Risam's approach as a faculty member who regularly collaborates with librarians; she is conscious of the dynamics around labor and intellectual expertise because of her in digital humanities, where such topics have been addressed in scholarship. Because of her awareness of the importance of fair labor practices and commitment to practicing them in her partnership with Edwards, Risam was surprised to find herself also treated like a service provider, rather than an intellectual collaborator, when working with other faculty through the Digital Scholars Program. The dynamic mimicked that of more typical librarian-faculty interactions at the university: the faculty member needed her expertise but did not value it as an intellectual contribution to the larger project.

Guidance for Ethical Collaborations

Seeing the need to address these issues, we applied for and received funding to run a faculty learning community to start a campus conversation on approaches to faculty, librarian, and student collaboration in digital humanities projects. The goal of this faculty learning community was to bring faculty and librarians together for supported work time on digital humanities projects while modelling and seeding ethical labor practices and equitable values for collaboration across units and roles in the university. Through the faculty learning community, more partnerships have emerged between librarians and faculty. Out of this work, our previous experiences, and the connections and complications we have encountered, we have been able to articulate some guidance on fostering ethical collaborations:

Choose collaborators wisely: The excitement over new initiatives and the possibilities of a partnership can sometimes cloud our ability to discern whether or not we are embarking on a project with those who share our values about intellectual credit, compensation, and the role of student labor. Assess the culture of librarian, faculty, and student collaboration at your institution. Identify the structural factors, like our union contract or campus culture, that influence partnerships. Undertake due diligence by asking other colleagues to describe their experiences working with potential collaborators.

Test the waters: Before committing to a substantial partnership, start small by testing your collaboration with a small, proof-of-concept project. While a proof-of-concept is useful for determining the feasibility of a project itself, it is also essential to understanding what the process of collaboration may be like when working with someone. Use your insights from this experience to identify whether the partnership aligns with your ethical values. If there are areas

of divergence, consider whether the discrepancy is a deal-breaker that requires walking away or is simply a matter of further conversation to clarify.

Use project charters: A project charter is an agreement among all collaborators that lays out project objectives; roles of all participants, knowledge and skills that collaborators possess and will commit to building; and the assignment of credit for participation in the collaboration. This is an opportunity to negotiate any concerns you identified from assessing your potential partners carefully and undertaking a small trial collaboration. Clarify your expectations for ethical collaborations and ensure they are put in writing.

Value your own contributions - and the contributions of your partners: The success of an effective partnership emerges from shared values and leveraging unique skills to create a project with a sum greater than its parts. However, this is only possible if you fully value what you contribute *and* what your collaborators are contributing. Key to this is understanding that everyone entering into the partnership does so as an intellectual leader, bringing their own experience, skills, training, and disciplinary knowledge to the collaboration.

While these recommendations may seem obvious, our experience suggest that these principles for effective partnerships do not automatically translate to the power- and custom-laden transactions between faculty, librarians, and students at universities. Instead, we have had to take a direct role in modeling and shaping expectations for ethical collaborations among these communities at Salem State. Through this work, however, we have been able to establish expectations for collaboration and, in doing so, are engaged in transforming the attitudes towards collaboration and labor at the university.

Digital Futures at Salem State

The Digital Scholars Program entered its third year in fall 2017, and it continues to attract student applicants. While we solicited our early participants through faculty recommendation, our Digital Scholars' presentations at the university's undergraduate research symposium and word of mouth have led to a growth in participants. Each semester, we consider reducing the number of student participants, given the significant demand the program places on Edwards, who runs the archives without assistance, and the amount of mentoring the students require from both of us to produce strong projects. Yet, we continually find ourselves taking on more students than we intended, since we run one of the few research opportunities for undergraduate students at the university and the only one in digital humanities. For our students, who are not used to receiving such close attention from faculty and librarians, the experience has been significant. We have had Digital Scholars who have gone on to pursue graduate degrees in library and information science and higher education, while others are looking into graduate work in digital

humanities and the history and philosophy of science. Still others are pursuing careers as high school teachers and are experimenting with digital humanities pedagogies in their own teaching.

The program, like the process of undertaking digital humanities research itself, is iterative in its design, as we learn from our experiences working with undergraduates on independent research. Our practices have evolved organically and flexibly in response to our students' interests and the research questions they develop. For example, a number of students have gravitated towards research on activism at Salem State in the 1960s and 1970s, on topics including civil rights, women's rights, and LGBTQ rights. Our students' projects have revealed that current students engaged in activism on campus are making similar demands and that, in some respects, not a lot has changed at the university since the 1970s. These observations have led us to consider whether students 40 or 50 years from now will have access to material on contemporary activism and how we should proceed with archiving activism on- and off-campus, particularly born digital materials on social media. This question captured the attention of one of our Digital Scholars, who expressed interest in working with us on the process of archiving activism itself. Undertaking that project was unlike anything we had done before with the Digital Scholars, but we decided to try it out. In doing so, we realized that students are better positioned to collect material on student activism than we ourselves are. Having the flexibility to take the leap to pursue this work with a student, however, is only possible by virtue of the values around collaboration and labor that we have integrated into the Digital Scholars Program and practiced in our partnership with each other.

The Digital Scholars Program is one of several digital humanities initiatives that we have created and now that these projects have been launched, the next step in our work together is to find an institutional home for digital humanities at the university. We have also been fortunate to be joined in our digital humanities endeavors by a recently hired Digital Initiatives Librarian, Justin Snow, who brings expertise in archives and digital humanities to our work. Currently, these initiatives exist in a liminal hinterland between the library and the English department by virtue of the fact that our home departments are in these areas. As we continue to sustain and grow the Digital Scholars Program, we will be focusing on developing a digital humanities center to support this work. Although we are not particularly tied to the idea of a "center," our only institutional precedent for interdisciplinary and cross-unit collaboration is a "center." Having a center, however, is integral to the growth of the Digital Scholars Program and our digital humanities initiatives more broadly. For example, we need space to house equipment for our students to use for their digital humanities projects, since their own computer access is often insufficient for running the tools they are using. We also need to function as an entity to be able to create partnerships outside of the university and to solicit the internal and external funding we need to further develop our initiatives. Yet, as we pursue these avenues for growth, we do so guided by the lessons we have learned from our partnership and our commitment to transforming the landscape of labor for digital humanities pedagogy.

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