

Humanities Collaborations and Research Practices: Investigating New Modes of Collaborative Humanities Scholarship

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Introduction

“Humanities Collaboration and Research Practices: Exploring Scholarship in the Global Midwest” is a project that examines the community of practice engaged in the Humanities Without Walls (HWW) Global Midwest initiative. This paper presents analysis from this investigation into the collaborative research practices of Global Midwest awardees to understand how humanities research happens at the level of practice, process, and collaboration.

Background: Humanities Without Walls

Humanities Without Walls (HWW) is a consortium funded by a \$3 million grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation that links the humanities centers at fifteen research universities throughout the Midwest to launch a “set of innovative and experimental initiatives enabling them to advance education and research in the humanities.”¹ The two core HWW initiatives were a series of pre-doctoral workshops for scholars in the humanities interested in exploring alternative academic (alt-ac) career paths and a competitive RFP to fund multi-institutional collaborative teams to conduct projects that explore grand research challenges.

The challenge invited scholars to submit proposals for projects related to the theme of the “Global Midwest.”² With its emphasis on multi-institutional, interdisciplinary collaboration; its focus on innovative, applied research; and its inclusive approach to recruiting tenure-line scholars with varying degrees of experience with digital humanities and collaborative research, the HWW Global Midwest program presented a rich and highly refined set of research cases for the HCRP project to explore the evolving nature of humanities research. The value of such study can be seen in previous social scientific studies of scholarly information use and research practices in the humanities.

Background: Humanities Practices and Collaborations

In recent decades, studies have placed particular emphasis on how information behavior changes in digital environments.³ The American Council for Learned Societies’ Commission on Cyberinfrastructure released a groundbreaking report in 2006 that made key recommendations for treating cyberinfrastructure for the social

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sciences and humanities as a strategic priority, but also encouraged digital scholarship more generally with an emphasis on collaborative research projects.⁴ Christine Borgman explored the possibility of “mak[ing] digital scholarship a leading force in humanities research,” and explicitly called upon the humanities community to “invite more social scientists as research partners” and “make themselves available as objects of study.”⁵ Concurrently, there have been increased studies of collaboration among scholars engaged in the digital humanities and its impact on humanities scholarship.⁶ With increased attention to scholarly collaboration in the digital humanities, further themes emerged around credit and authorship, the relationship between collaboration and infrastructure, and the role of project management for alternative academics and other scholars in the humanities.⁷ While the majority of the social scientific studies above employ qualitative methods, quantitative methods have also been employed to study collaboration networks in terms of project membership.⁸

In the vein of these previous studies, our aim for the HCRP project is to explore the evolving nature of humanities research through the HWW Global Midwest project awardees, a cohort of humanists well situated to reflect upon how collaborative and experimental research initiatives affect their research practices and requirements, scholarly communication throughout the research process, and final research outcomes.

Methods

We examined the HWW Global Midwest community through two forms of empirical study: qualitative interviews with Global Midwest awardees and a series of quantitative visualizations. The project team conducted semi-structured interviews from fall 2015 through spring 2016 with twenty-eight researchers who participated in projects funded by the first round of HWW Global Midwest awards. Participants were asked about the aims of their collaborative projects, processes for developing collaborations, types of resources used to support collaboration and project management, challenges encountered, data sharing practices, and how their research approaches and methodologies were influenced by engaging in collaborative research (see Appendix A for full interview protocol).

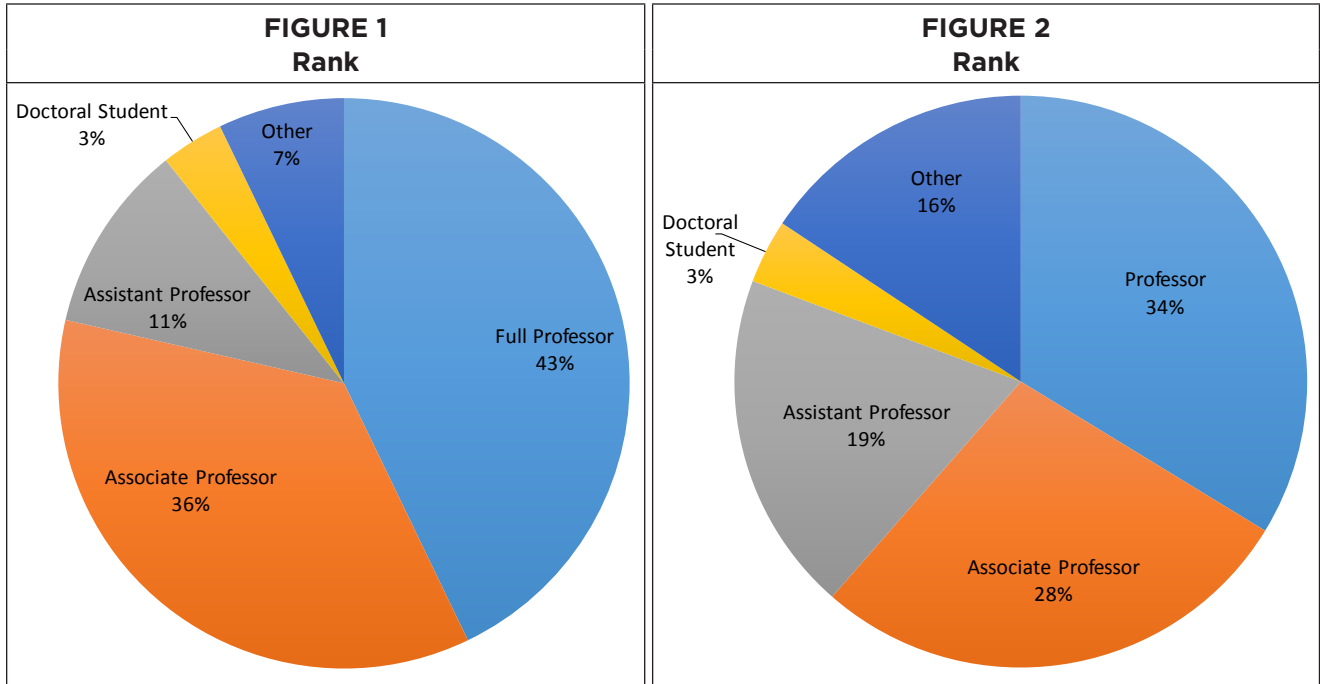
We recorded, transcribed, and coded the interviews in ATLAS.ti 7. Preliminary codes were developed inductively based on themes identified in the raw transcripts, and each transcription was coded multiple times to ensure inter-coder reliability. This study applies a qualitative analysis method that expands upon prior studies by William Brockman and Carole Palmer on scholarly research practices in the humanities, combined with a theoretical grounding in qualitative content analysis.⁹

Demographics

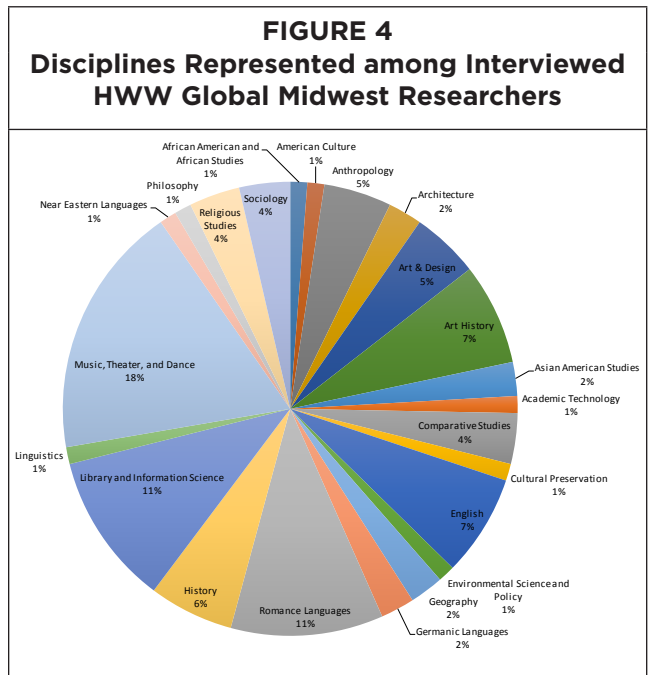
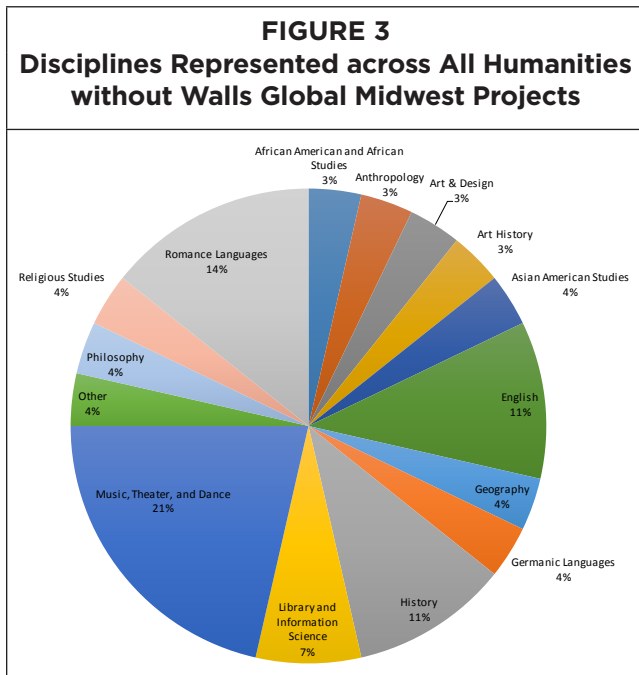
We interviewed 28 project awardees, including nine principal investigators and 18 team members from twelve projects awarded in the first round of HWW Global Midwest. In addition to the HWW Global Midwest project awardees, we also interviewed one member of the overarching Humanities Without Walls project team.

The majority (79 percent) of interviewees were tenured faculty, having achieved the rank of associate or full professor at the time of the interview; only 11 percent of interviewees were assistant professors; and the remaining interviewees were in non-tenure-line positions (see Figure 1). Compared to the broader pool of HWW Global Midwest awardees (fig. 2), the demographic group most underrepresented among our respondents was non-tenure-line project participants. Tenured professors were slightly overrepresented, due primarily to our emphasis on prioritizing interviews with project principal investigators, 86 percent of whom were tenured faculty.

While the gender identification among participants was nearly evenly split between male and female—49 percent and 51 percent respectively—across all HWW Global Midwest awardees, interview respondents were slightly skewed. Among respondents, 57 percent identified as male and 43 percent identified as female.



Our initial goal was to interview the principal investigators for each project and at least one project researcher from each collaborating institution. Ultimately, we reached one third of the total pool of potential interviewees: While we fell short of our initial goal, we succeeded in reaching team members from all but one of the awarded projects (excluding our own project, n = 13), and the respondents largely represented the wide range of disciplinary areas as well as institutional affiliations associated with awarded projects (Figs. 3 and 4).



Analysis

We identified several major thematic areas that reflect the issues, concerns, and needs surrounding humanities research collaborations, particularly in regards to how libraries can respond to new information and research needs in the humanities. The major themes that emerged in our analysis include: adaptive research practices, diverse modes of scholarly communications and dissemination, and building collaborative networks of scholarship. In each of these areas, respondents also identified notable challenges and benefits in engaging in collaborative and experimental humanities research. As our study primarily examined the first phase of the HWW Global Midwest initiative, our analysis offers a picture of the project's potential dynamics in the midst of the initiative.

Adaptive Research Practices

The HWW Global Midwest researchers often encountered situations that required stepping outside their research practices, investigating their methods, and being open to unfamiliar techniques of their collaborators. Respondents frequently found themselves working with partners who have widely different research practices, while sharing common topical interests. The researchers coalesced into groups that engaged in sometimes uncomfortable experimentation in order to pursue in-depth research explorations, ranging from movement and dance to water quality in Midwestern communities. Interdisciplinary approaches brought surprising discoveries as well as complex disagreements that linger beyond the projects.

They used new and unfamiliar tools, as well as more traditional and familiar methods and approaches, while others creatively pushed themselves and their colleagues to experiment with approaches beyond their established academic milieu.

Interdisciplinarity and Cross-Disciplinarity Work

Broad inter- and cross-disciplinary work characterized both the research areas and teams' make-up of Humanities Without Walls Global Midwest projects. Projects included diverse treatments of an initial concept: For example, research focused on waterways also included "ethnic leisure and labor in the Great Lakes." Interests, rather than methodologies, frequently brought the groups together. Scholars and performers learned from each other and sometimes found themselves in unfamiliar territory, such as improvisational dance. Teams were highly interdisciplinary as well, comprising a range of disciplines and fields such as filmmakers, oral historians, independent scholars, teachers, museum curators, and librarians. One respondent suggested that the value of this initiative derived in part from the collaborative process, noting that "project-based learning has afforded individual faculty members to do work in the humanities, but stretching it even further, to do collaboration with non-university experts."

Methods of Collaborative Analysis and Investigation

Methodologies varied greatly within the projects: leaders often mediated group differences, and in some projects, graduate research assistants mediated the cross-disciplinary encounters by asking "focused questions... to help figure out how their areas of expertise would come together." Several groups preferred face to face conversation: One group had a week-long residency that included dinner meetings, at which they would review what they discovered that day and how it affected their perception of the Global Midwest.

Many groups worked very carefully to develop a method of analysis. One group was "in constant dialogue with a lot of different groups about what the shape of the project should in fact be and what sort of questions we should focus on." Others focused on method over content, as one historian explained that they started to understand "how a performer uses historical research ...to produce amazing things." The same project used several

methods, including a short film, interviews, investigating precise research questions, and a performance of dancers and scholars rolling around on the floor.” This type of development of collaborative methods was described by one group as a process that “unfolds in an uncertain and, in that sense, an egalitarian manner because no one knows yet what the thing will be. These dynamic and educational elements of collaboration influenced how the participants’ research approaches evolved as well.

Shifting Approaches to Research

Participants described shifts in their research, publication, and pedagogical opportunities. One interviewee described her work as “a loop.... not a straight line.” Others placed great value on “working with other scholars,” leading to “discovering =different research areas.” Individually, some respondents noted a change in their audience moving away from academic to work intended for policy makers or community leaders.” Respondents also observed shifts in their pedagogical approaches from developing web sites to aspiring to collaborative teaching processes. Researchers also sought ways to make more immediate community impacts through shifts in their approaches to research, as scholars applied their humanistic methods “to address important political, cultural and social issues.”

Tools for Research

Several collaborative groups used popular file sharing and communications software and tools (table 1). Other teams incorporated existing software platforms that had been used in other digital humanities projects such as NINES and Mesa, and the researcher noted that “we’re using an existing infrastructure and we’re applying it in a quite different way.”

File Sharing and Communication	Software
Box	Final Cut 10
Dropbox	YouTube
Google Drive	Omeka
Zotero	Project Websites
Email	Garage Band
Video and cameras	NINES Platform
Telephone/Skype	GIS and mapping software

Storage frequently was one of the most important pieces of research infrastructure, particularly for storing recorded data such as interviews for archiving and research protocol policies. One participant noted the complexity necessary to “protect what we had agreed to for IRB.” Another team’s frustration with the varying IRB processes among schools led to their attempt to create a “kind of gentle IRB” process that would facilitate research and data sharing via “a protocol that could be approved at all of our universities.”

Epistemology

Merging epistemological approaches could enhance the research process, but the difficult combination of methods also occasionally fractured research partnerships. Respondents appreciated being able to “see how each other was thinking,” yet there were also difficulties. A respondent noted how they disagreed with a performance

interpretation, acknowledging its “different leverage on the material.” One participant discussed the “epistemological difference between divides... that take a long, long time to sort out and a high level of trust. The constraints were pretty real.”

Respondents had notably positive viewpoints overall toward their experiences. One noted, “I’m hoping that this project re-centers anthropology...reclaiming of what it is and what it ought to be in the contemporary moment.” Several participants echoed the sentiment that the experience was “a very rich and rewarding project because we came from different disciplines. We could learn from each other.”

Networks of Scholarship

When reflecting on the nature of collaboration, respondents described their engagement as “a form of collective learning,” “a virtual program,” an effort to “bring people together in a common intellectual space,” and a process that “involves determining shared goals, finding a diversity of resources in the room, figuring out when to work collegially.” Another respondent observed the technological infrastructures that support collaborative work were transformative for their practices, noting that “it’s stunning that we’re able to do this across these kinds of distances.”

How Collaborations Developed

Projects selected for HWW Global Midwest awards represented a mixture of pre-existing and new collaborative teams. Responses suggested a difference in motivation between a desire to work specific colleagues, and a desire to find colleagues as a means of securing funding. The nature of collaboration varied considerably. Among respondents who were not the principal investigators, collaboration processes were described in a variety of ways, ranging from full engagement (“a democracy of participation”) to a more tangential participation (“I was invited to join into a collaboration”). Another respondent remarked that different collaborators assumed leadership positions at different times.

Experience in Collaborative Environments

Respondents were quick to comment on their past experiences with collaboration, or lack thereof. Researchers who specialized in film and performance cited an existing culture of collaboration within their fields. Others expressed their own discomfort with the practice of collaboration. Another dimension of the research collaborations was the involvement of colleagues from outside the Humanities Without Walls consortium. Engagement clearly extended beyond the consortium, and in interviews, several respondents cited colleagues beyond the Midwest and internationally who are directly invested in their Global Midwest projects.

Credit, Co-authorship, and Collaboration

Many respondents were mindful of the importance of providing appropriate credit and recognition for project partners. One respondent noted, “the notion of collaboration was built around the idea that both parties would be equally acknowledged.” Negotiating appropriate credit also revealed moments of tension within projects. One respondent observed that “there was a little bit of misunderstanding, and some disagreements with who is being acknowledged for what.” Respondents differed on whether they planned for their collaboration to culminate in co-authored publications. One respondent noted, “I didn’t expect a lot of co-authoring, more of a co-design of the platform.” Another viewed co-authorship as an important “end product collaboration.”

Sustaining Collaborative Relationships

Multiple respondents discussed the goal of sustaining collaborative relationships beyond the grant. The most common approach that respondents expressed interest in pursuing was to develop follow-on proposals for financial support from other granting agencies. Where sustaining the outcomes of the project was more important than continuing the collaborative relationship, an alternate approach frequently cited by respondents was to embed project materials in courses. The future of collaborative approaches to humanities research is an aspect of sustainability as well, and the willingness of several respondents to participate in future collaborations suggests promising continuance and expansion of these collaborative approaches.

Scholarly Communication and Dissemination

The strategies and tools that respondents described for disseminating their research—both in interim phases along the way as well as final products—varied in scope, formats, and breadth. Performances, films, websites, traditional written work, and academic presentations were among the most dominant types of formats they cited. Yet a number of respondents also envisioned using a hybrid of formats to fully express their research products: One respondent described their hope “to create some kind of interactive map [and] ideally a repository of sounds.” Another discussed their strategies for sharing of interview data as a format of dissemination, noting “we’re still processing the data [and] deciding how to feature it.”

The variety of data formats utilized by the researchers suggests that scholars frequently broke out of the traditional bounds of journal articles and monographs to explore the multitude of other ways that their scholarship can be shared.

Impact

For several projects, their HWW Global Midwest grants catalyzed longer-term collaborations, as one respondent observed that “sticking that group together and letting them work some of this stuff out is going to lead to more collaborations.” Respondents also created impacts via diverse platforms for dissemination. One explained, “I think what we’ve contemplated is public dissemination of research using new platforms. I think we’ve contemplated scholarly output in the traditional platforms—journals, whether they’re online or in print—but we have contemplated getting research into the hands of stakeholders who are not scholars.”

Venues

Respondents saw their work being published in multiple outlets, often in ways that evolved with the project itself. One respondent described their project “initially it’s a web presence, but I can see process papers coming out of this in more humanities journals.” Other outlets for publication and dissemination included museum exhibitions, cinemas, YouTube, the classroom, and conferences. One notable challenge for the HWW Global Midwest projects was the lack of interdisciplinary journals that could serve as adequate venues for disseminating the projects’ notably interdisciplinary research, and this could be a potential barrier for the growth of interdisciplinary collaboration.

The platform also sometimes functioned as a publication venue: One respondent observed, “there are few kinds of places where scholarship, once published, then has a continuing life... to me, one of the promises of Scalar that existing online there is a potential for people to comment on and add to and use in different ways.” This suggests that the ways in which audiences can interact with the scholarship can be a critical part of research, and venues that facilitate interactivity may become increasingly important to scholars’ publishing desires and needs.

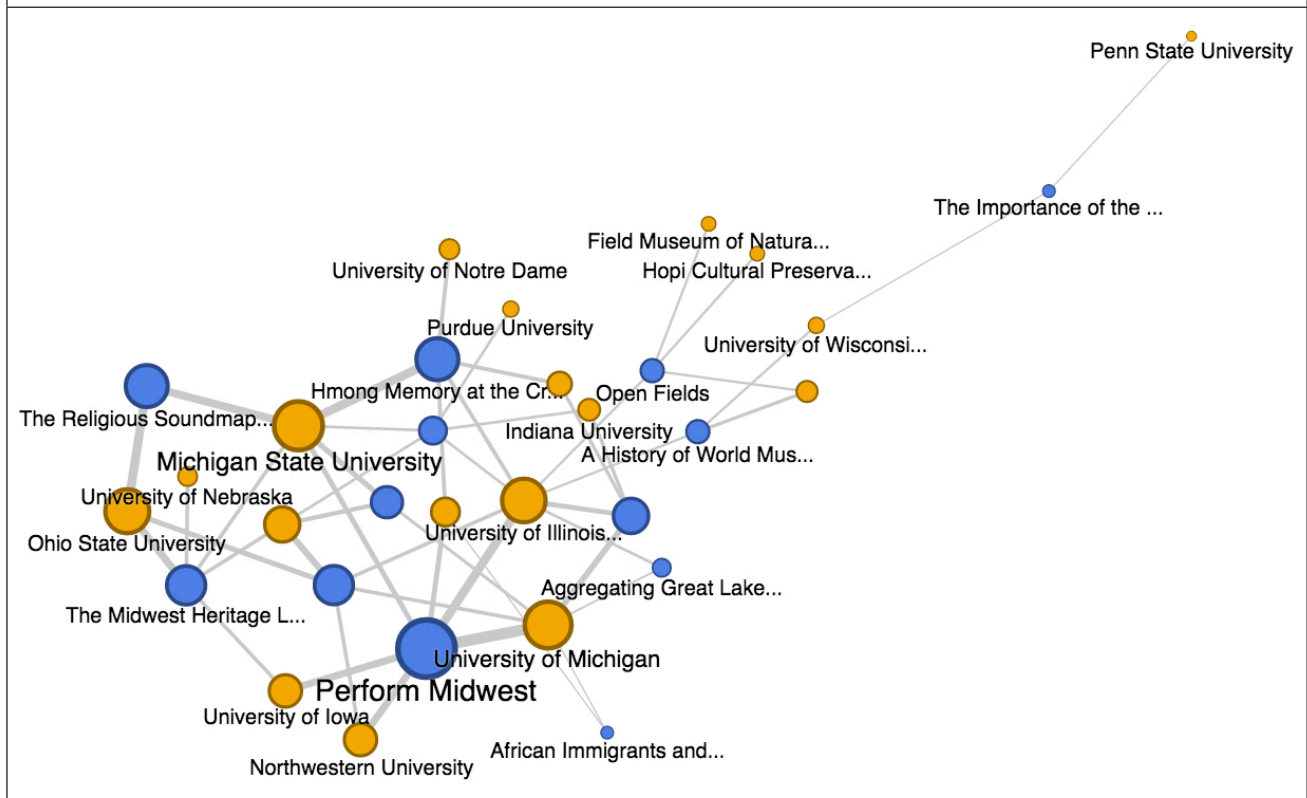
Modes of Representation

Respondents drew upon multi-media and analog forms to represent their data, findings, and ultimate project results. The researchers frequently employed dynamic, multi-modal approaches for representing their work, such as a combination of transitory performance, written choreography, and a workshop. One respondent described how new modes offered by digital tools and diverse media are critical to deepening humanities inquiry:

A lot of humanities fields deal in some way in interpretation and trying to understand the different ways that we can think about all kinds of different texts, and we've also been really limited in the humanities in the peer review system to what we can tell about our projects. In most peer-reviewed journals, it's very hard to put pictures or video or, you know, further tell the story that we're trying to tell.

In their chosen modes of representation, respondents had to think critically about how their data and scholarship was reaching the intended audiences. As one person questioned, "This is the critical question when we look at new platforms and new forms of dissemination. Are they serving the technologies? Are they serving the institutions that get grants to build these digital archives and laboratories for this sort of thing or are they serving those that want to receive the materials themselves?" As humanities research in form and method continue to evolve with digital tools, scholarly communications becomes paramount as researchers seek to connect their scholarship to new and more broadly scoped audiences.

FIGURE 5
Network Diagram Illustrating Relationship Between Projects and Institutions



Network Analysis

The network analysis component of our study is still ongoing, but included here is a basic network graph to provide an overview of how HWW Global Midwest projects are connected to universities within the consortium (see Fig. 5). It should be acknowledged that our own project was a recipient of a HWW Global Midwest award, it is excluded from this network analysis. In this network, the size of orange nodes corresponds to number of awardees at each institution, while the size of blue nodes corresponds to number of team members on each project, and the thickness of lines corresponds to number of connections between a project and an institution.

Perform Midwest was the project with the largest number of team members and the largest degree of multi-institutional collaboration with team members drawn from six different universities within the consortium. Other projects, including “Hmong Memory at the Crossroads” and “The Midwest Heritage Language Network,” also assembled project teams from a large number of institutions. Additional content analysis that incorporates this knowledge may help determine if there is an optimal number of institutional partners for collaborative research. More partners may provide more perspectives and cross-fertilization of ideas, but as the number of partners increase so, too, does the administrative overhead.

Recommendations and Conclusion

Librarians have rich opportunities to engage in new forms of scholarly communications and experimental research collaborations in the humanities. We would highlight three particular avenues for information professionals to consider:

- Collaborate with faculty to support student engagement in research and training on skills and tools: Librarians have more opportunities than ever to collaborate with faculty in teaching students and supporting undergraduate research that incorporates new research methodologies and skillsets. Initiatives such as embedded instruction on research teams and undergraduate research journals are ways that librarians can engage with faculty and become more involved in innovative collaborations.¹⁰
- Create communities of practice around data curation and new modes of scholarly communication: As humanities research delves into new, experimental modes of collaboration, data sharing, and interdisciplinary dialogues, librarians can play roles in providing the services and tools to facilitate these new modes of research. Digital scholarship centers, scholarly communications units and initiatives, and data curation services in today’s research libraries are the most prominent and critical services and infrastructures that libraries provide for researchers. In these spaces, librarians can promote gatherings of scholars through reading groups, workshops and training on data curation and digital research tools, and the provision of repositories for depositing datasets and works of scholarship.
- Build structures and services that enable scholars to experiment with new forms and methods of scholarly dissemination:

HWW Global Midwest recipients frequently sought new ways of disseminating their research findings, as the traditional journal article and monograph could not always fully convey the inputs and gathered findings that everyone contributed. Library-based publishing and research data repositories and services can offer scholars new venues for disseminating their scholarship.

A research summit on collaboration in the humanities was held by the project in fall 2016. Future publications will incorporate the outcomes of this project research summit, along with more fine grained analysis of interview responses based on project membership, institutional affiliation, and personal and professional demographics. We ultimately envision that the full findings and reporting of the Humanities Collaborations and Research Practices project will offer new insights and point to new avenues for exploring the dynamics of experimental and innovative research collaborations in the humanities and humanistic social sciences.

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Appendix A. Interview Guide for Humanities Collaborations and Research Practices: Exploring Scholarship in the Global Midwest

Estimated length: 45 to 60 minutes

Goals of the interview

1. Identify how scholars participate in research practices and how collaboration affects their research processes
2. Determine how humanities scholars define collaboration and the types of information sharing workflows and research infrastructures they build in collaborative research
3. Understand the impact of humanities initiatives focusing on collaboration, like the Global Midwest, and how they expand the global impact of scholarship in the humanities.

Introduction

Hello, my name is [] from the University of Illinois / Indiana University. Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed as part of the study “Humanities Collaborations and Research Practices: Exploring Scholarship in the Global Midwest.”

First let me tell you about the study. The research team is headed by Harriett Green at the University Library at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. This project is supported by a “Global Midwest” grant from the Humanities Without Walls (HWW) consortium, a Mellon Foundation-funded initiative to support large-scale humanities collaborations across institutions in the Midwest.

The full study consists of a set of interviews designed to discover how humanities scholars share data, build self-generated research environment infrastructures for supporting data sharing and research dialogues, and frame their collaborations in the context of their broader research aims and project goals.

Your responses to the interview questions are confidential. Only summary data will be reported, and no individual or institutional names will be used unless you have given explicit permission in the consent form to be quoted directly. Before we begin, let me review the consent form and ask for your verbal consent.

Interview Questions

Background

1. What is your position and area of research?
2. Please briefly describe the focus and goals of your HWW-funded Global Midwest project.

Structures of Collaboration

3. How did you initially envision the “collaboration” element for your project—how do you define “collaboration”?

4. What tools did you decide to use for managing project workflow processes between your collaborators? What would help make the process smoother/what do you need?
5. What are the formats / methods you are considering for publishing your project results?

Data Sharing and Scholarly Communication

6. How are you sharing/disseminating updates about your ongoing project?
7. How has this collaborative project affected the ways that you share research, store data, or conduct your research in general?
8. Where and how are you storing the data for your project?
9. What kinds of challenges did you encounter during this project?

Scholarly Impact and Future Outcomes

10. How do you envision the impact of your project work and publications?
11. Do new platforms and tools open up possibilities for changed scholarly publications and research outputs in the humanities? Could you elaborate?

Demographics

This information will help us to characterize responses, minimize bias, ensure representative series of focus groups, inform recruitment and is optional.

Title and rank:

Academic degrees:

Gender:

Nationality:

Native language:

Other languages used for research:

Years working in this research area:

Closing

Thank you for your time. Your responses will be combined with those of others to provide information about how HWW-funded projects are developing and the types of collaborative research and data sharing practices emerging among humanities scholars.

Notes

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