Scholarly Publishing across the Disciplines: *Interviews with Geneseo Faculty*

**Part II: Faculty value of online and digital scholarship**

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**Overview**

As access to digital works, collections and scholarship becomes readily available, the nature of how scholars value and perceive digital scholarship and the more broadly defined “digital projects” begins to take shape. One outcome of the interviews was the clear indication that the Geneseo faculty (across all departments and disciplines) do not have a common definition for the term digital project, online project or digital scholarship as it may be understood by the different disciplines. We asked Geneseo faculty about how online or digital projects were valued in their discipline. Of the 87 faculty members interviewed for this report, 13% of faculty reported that online or digital projects have little or no value within their discipline, another 10% report that there is much value placed on digital projects and another 16% report that there is a conditional value placed on digital projects. This is heavily dependent on other factors, such as growing value within the discipline over time. Amongst the Humanities faculty, in particular, there is an increasing recognition that there is value in online/digital projects, but in many faculty members’ estimation it is a conditional value - only if the digital project is of high quality and peer reviewed. As one Geneseo faculty member stated, “...what is valued is peer review, not what format a project takes…”

![How are online/digital projects valued in your discipline?](image)

**Figure 1:** Percentage of respondents, by general discipline area, to question, “How are online/digital projects valued in your discipline?”
Challenges

While some sciences faculty may view the sharing of datasets as happening digitally, they may not think of it as the creation of new knowledge, but rather as a method of sharing and gaining access to research which produces new lines of thinking, inquiry or ultimately, scholarship. As one scientist put it, “Sharing the code becomes more common...” but he was also unsure about how the theoretical community deals with this type of situation and uses the code to create new scholarship. Where does the digital project fit in this equation? Many scientists are already sharing their work through institutional or disciplinary repositories (32% of sciences faculty interviewed), but do not see how this fits into a broader concept of digital scholarship. Social sciences faculty in several departments have experience with digital projects, but were still unsure how to place value on them for promotions and tenure, evidenced by this comment, “the onus is on the scholar to make a case for rigor of the work.” In a few cases, tenured faculty may discourage non-tenured colleagues from engaging in digital projects as they work towards tenure, simply because they are unsure of its value in the promotions and tenure process. Some humanities faculty do point out the value of publishing online, but may face a scholarly community which values traditional publishing more, and as one faculty member stated, digital projects are “valued only as a supplement to ‘real’ scholarly work...” which must be done in print.

By far the most common question by faculty interviewed across disciplines was the concern about the value placed on digital projects and how it is measured in the scholarly output of department, discipline and campus - can or should it be used as material for promotions and tenure? Many faculty are divided on this question; even within departments, there can be a difference of opinion.

Across the social sciences and humanities faculty, a common response to our question, “How are online/digital projects valued?” is illustrated by the following response from a social sciences faculty member, “Some are publishing in online journals for the first time... but for the most part it isn’t the preferred mode...” Many social science and humanities faculty perceive that publication in “online journals” was a different and unknown part of the scholarship continuum, rather than, in many cases, simply a digital version of a print publication. To many faculty members, the online publication is the digital facsimile of the print publication, but to others, the term “online journal” means an entirely different type of publication. For the latter group, there is concern and confusion about the questionable quality of online-only journals, the lack of a print counterpart and the cost of access (toll-access or open access). However, other Geneseo faculty see few differences in the medium of communication. One faculty colleague responded to our question about the value of digital projects saying, “The biggest distinction here is whether or not the publication source is peer-reviewed. The medium isn’t that important.”

Interestingly, some social sciences faculty responded that while their Geneseo department placed some value on digital projects, these projects are not valued by their peers or the discipline itself. Faculty, especially when it comes to their sub-field or department, are unclear about the value placed on digital scholarship, and whether it has a place in their field and their body of work, as illustrated in Figure 2.
Especially telling is that 28% of the total faculty interviewed were unsure of the value of digital projects overall – to their discipline, department or to their campus. This was typical across sciences (36%), social sciences (22%) and humanities (29%) faculty we interviewed. And, across all the disciplines, the faculty are unclear of the campus’ value of digital projects as valuable or equally valuable contributions to the disciplines’ body of scholarship.

Conclusion

There is a lack of a common definition of the term digital scholarship, online project or digital project, especially as it relates to the field and disciplines within departments, which currently prevents many faculty from exploring new contributions to their field within this medium. The library could help departments explore options for publishing digitally, whether through the development of educational workshops and programming or by offering tools, platforms and the technical assistance to create new digital scholarship projects online.

Secondly, faculty are unsure about the perceived value of digital scholarship as it relates to promotions and tenure on campus, as well as how the campus administration and Faculty
Personnel Committee view digital scholarship in the realm of scholarly communications and its impact. The library may be a good facilitator for an open dialogue about digital scholarship, scholarly communications and the promotions and tenure process, whether through open meetings and discussion groups, lectures, or workshops.

In addition, the library could facilitate scholarly communications and development of digital scholarship projects by providing opportunities for Geneseo scholars to make connections online with their disciplinary colleagues here on campus or within higher education networks.