Scholarly Publishing across the Disciplines: Interviews with Geneseo Faculty

Conclusion

By Liz Argentieri

Overall, many of the findings concerning the research and publishing landscape at Geneseo are pretty much in line with what may be expected at an undergraduate college that places teaching and learning at the head of its list of priorities. Faculty mention “modeling good scholarly behavior” for their students as one of the factors motivating them to publish (along with intellectual engagement, contributing to the field, and tenure), and while most are hesitant to share their research data publicly, they are willing to share it with students.

Geneseo faculty are continually finding ways to involve students in their research and publishing endeavors, thereby providing them with a high-impact learning experience. At the same time, undergraduate students present several challenges to faculty’s desire to collaborate with them, even within the sciences and social sciences where collaborations are more common than in the humanities. Unlike graduate students, most undergraduates lack the knowledge, skills, ability to travel, and long-term availability that meaningful collaboration requires.

The faculty interviewees constituted a fairly representative sample in terms of disciplines and academic status, and virtually all of them were currently engaged in producing some sort of scholarly output. Across the disciplines, articles published in peer-reviewed journals were seen as the highest type of scholarly output, but often the form of output depends on the discipline (e.g., books ranked highest among humanities faculty) and career stage (e.g., some tenured faculty cited the “luxury” of writing for a wider audience). Faculty still working to gain tenure were most concerned with the rigor of the publication – only peer-reviewed will do.

Indeed, the primacy of tenure concerns and the need to publish in peer-reviewed outlets influences nearly every aspect of faculty’s research and publishing behavior and decisions. Although many expressed frustration with the peer review process, few so far have embraced open access (OA) publishing venues -- which are relatively speedier, less biased, more supportive of authors, and can potentially reach wider audiences -- as a viable solution. Interestingly, OA’s ability to increase visibility of authors’ works is not largely seen as a selling point by younger, untenured authors and is even seen as a negative by some. Milne’s continuing efforts to raise understanding and perceived value of peer-reviewed OA journals as legitimate and frequently, better, alternatives to print (OA week observance/activities, partnering/creating OA journals, professional development, promotion (blog, newsletter, word-of-mouth) may be changing faculty perceptions, but slowly.
Faculty attitudes regarding digital scholarship was enlightening, starting with the realization that there’s a general lack of definition of what it is. One thing faculty across the board could agree on, however, is that its value (to them, their departments, their fields, and the college) depends whether or not it is scholarly, peer-reviewed, and rigorous enough to count toward tenure or promotion. Overall, humanities faculty appear to be the most receptive to the idea of digital scholarship and scholarly projects. Perhaps this is because much of their work has traditionally been solitary and low-tech; and now with the potential both to collaborate, and to employ 21st-century technological tools to create new knowledge, they have exciting opportunities for scholarship in a new medium. It may also be due to the ambitious, high-profile success of the Digital Thoreau project, led by faculty in the English department.

These interviews also revealed to librarians (and probably some faculty who hadn’t thought much about it before) that there is much work to be done in the area of data storage, preservation, and sharing. This is not to say that there is widespread alarm about the loss of data, but rather that there’s been no systematic approach to saving and sharing. Indeed, as mentioned earlier, faculty here do not seem too concerned about sharing their data except with their students and to fulfill certain grant requirements, yet most would seem to welcome guidance from Milne and/or CIT on storing and saving their data. Milne is currently exploring best practices in data archiving and preservation, as well as how to help faculty share and acquire data sets, and is taking a leadership role on campus in bringing these issues to light.

Throughout the three and a half years since the faculty interviews began, even as our data was still being “crunched” and our conclusions formed, Milne librarians have taken steps to address many of the issues as they have been revealed. These have been mentioned in the Report’s separate chapters, as have the areas where we believe we can still develop to help faculty—working more closely to help train undergraduate students to be more effective research assistants; facilitating open dialogue concerning the place of open access and digital scholarship in the tenure process; providing nuts-and-bolts assistance with both traditional and new forms scholarly publishing; etc. The new Scholarship and Publishing website was launched in early 2014 as an answer to many of the concerns revealed by faculty not only in our interview sample, but in our day-to-day conversations and interactions with all faculty. Listening to faculty and students is the single best way for Milne librarians to remain responsive and relevant in the scholarly life of the campus.

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