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# Supporting The Changing Research Practices Of Scholars Across English Literature And Modern Languages And Literatures At Swarthmore College

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*Supporting the Changing Research Practices of Scholars across English Literature and Modern Languages & Literatures at Swarthmore College*

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## INTRODUCTION

In collaboration with ITHAKA S+R, and the Modern Language Association of America (MLA), Swarthmore College Libraries examined the research practices of scholars in the departments of English Literature and Modern Languages and Literatures spring 2019. This project includes research teams from 14 academic libraries with the intention to identify services to better support scholars. Swarthmore, together with Haverford College, worked at critical junctures in the project to maximize insight as the only liberal arts colleges participating in the larger study. ITHAKA S+R is a non-profit organization that helps “academic and cultural communities know what is coming next, learn from rigorous and well-designed research studies, and adapt to new realities and opportunities.” The MLA is a non-profit that “promotes the study and teaching of languages and literatures through its programs, publications, annual convention, and advocacy work.” The Swarthmore College research team was comprised of Pamela Harris, Associate College Librarian for Research and Information and Roberto Vargas, Research Librarian for Humanities and Interdisciplinary Studies.

This report introduces the scope of the departments of English Literature and Modern Languages and Literatures at Swarthmore College and describes the methodology in more detail. Findings are presented under four major themes: Interdisciplinary research; cross institutional and international scholarly research networks; digital transformation; and challenges and opportunities in international scholarship. Recommendations chart potential avenues of growth for better support of research practices in our digital age. The appendices list participating institutions and interview guide.

Swarthmore College and its libraries are located in southeastern Pennsylvania in a residential setting that is also an arboretum. Despite its small student body, approximately 1620

students, there are seven libraries/collections at Swarthmore: McCabe the main library with holdings in the arts, humanities, and social sciences and a special collection of fine press and artist books; Cornell Science Library; the Underhill Performing Arts Library; two independent special collections, Friends Historical Library and the Peace Collection, as well as the Beit Midrash Collection of Hebrew Texts and the Black Cultural Center.

Swarthmore, as part of the Tri-College Library Consortium along with Haverford and Bryn Mawr Colleges, takes advantage of a long history of cooperation and a unified, online catalog, Tripod, in building a research-quality collection. Through the consortium and a network of cooperative arrangements with other academic institutions, the Libraries provide students and faculty access to cultural and scholarly resources from libraries across the globe.

## DEPARTMENTS OF ENGLISH LITERATURE, MODERN LANGUAGES & LITERATURES, and SPANISH - SWARTHMORE

The Department of Modern Languages & Literatures offers courses that balance traditional objects of study with emerging interdisciplinary areas such as gender and sexuality and media representations of cultural values. The department includes the following sections: Arabic, Chinese, French and Francophone Studies, German Studies, Japanese, and Russian. The Department of Spanish, newly formed in the fall of 2019, provides an understanding of the literatures and cultures of Spain, Latin America and the Caribbean, and Latinos in the United States. These departments share faculty with Global Studies and Literatures in Translation. English Literature is a separate department, exploring writing and cultural production from all over the world.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study was coordinated through Ithaka S+R and the MLA. Swarthmore College Libraries are one of fourteen institutions of higher education participating (see Appendix A for list of participants), and one of two liberal arts colleges. In the fall 2018, the research team obtained IRB approval and sent email invitations to relevant departments with nine faculty members

agreeing to participate representing the following subjects: English Literature, French, German, Russian, and Spanish. Participants were selected to represent a range of departmental and disciplinary interests as well as tenure-status. Inclusion of Haverford College transcripts gives a total of 16 interviews, allowing for a larger sample with which to informally compare concerns unique to the institution versus relevant to liberal arts colleges more broadly.

Participating faculty were interviewed for one hour using questions provided by ITHAKA S+R (see Appendix B). Audio files of the nine interviews were transcribed by an external service, Transcript Divas. ITHAKA S+R received anonymized interview metadata from participating institutions. The collected data was analyzed using grounded theory methodology, as per Strauss and Corbin.<sup>1</sup> The research team developed the coding structure and applied it to the transcripts from both Swarthmore and Haverford in order to identify the most salient themes. Despite finding overlapping themes, Swarthmore and Haverford recommendations are reported separately.

## FINDINGS

### Interdisciplinary Research

Interdisciplinary research was a major theme observed in most of our interviews. Many of the participants highlighted the ways their own research has become increasingly interdisciplinary in nature. In our context and for the faculty interviewed, this means participating in research being done within Art, Sociology, History, and Film & Media as well as using some of these discipline's research methodologies. A modern languages faculty stated:

"I work with contemporary film including experimental productions made by young film makers or artists and also what we call visual arts, traditional visual arts. It could be paintings, installations, and performance art" and "if I have to explain from the methodological or conceptual point of view I work with anthropology...performance studies, urban studies, sociology, [and] political science".

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<sup>1</sup> Corbin, J., & Strauss, A. *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory*. Los Angeles: Sage publications, 2014.

In addition, of the few faculty who still do “traditional” modern languages and literature research, some noted this trend towards interdisciplinary research. A senior faculty member remarked how they see the different approach to literature from junior faculty and that although they are trained “in a more traditional [way],” they still try to keep up with the times. Such differences in approach means that those experimenting in new forms of research, including interdisciplinary research, have to continue to make their research viable, legitimate, and legible to their own field and colleagues. This challenge is compounded in a liberal arts college where one department (Modern Languages & Literatures) combines what would be six separate departments in a larger institution.

Lastly, the increase of interdisciplinary research among modern languages and literature faculty means that faculty are familiar with the resources of other fields and are constantly learning how to create a bridge to their own field. Nonetheless, some did express a struggle in finding the appropriate resources within the library given that research topics can include a vast array of subjects outside of their fields. One solution to this problem comes in the form of the next theme.

### Cross Institutional & International Scholarly Research Networks

Faculty in Modern Languages and Literatures are continually and, for the most part, primarily using their academic and social networks to keep up with their field, either on their own subject of expertise or adjacent ones. Through many of our interviews, the faculty expressed the importance of the people they know across institutions, both locally and internationally, such as the archivist in a city in France or a historian in Spain. One participant stated, “I’ve been building a network of artists and authors and intellectuals who are really connected to the contemporary scenes who are local and I will contact them and just sometimes say have you heard of this and that.” Without contacts such as this, materials like art catalogues with minimal print runs would be inaccessible/unattainable. Another participant said, “being at the conference, seeing the book exhibits, talking to the people, it’s super-valuable.” Often the importance of knowing scholars across institutions goes beyond knowing them personally. Knowing their work helps participants keep up to date and informs their own research. One participant noted: “I want to be part of a conversation that is not only done by scholars working in the United States, you know. I want to know if these issues have already been discussed. I don’t want to publish a book and then find out that someone published something very similar

and I don't even quote it because it's in Brazil or because it's in Brazilian Portuguese or Spanish.”

Given that the material most of the participants use for their research is in a non-English language, social media plays a key role in building these networks. “Facebook is actually a very active place, probably the most active place for academic networking at least for me and the people I know.” Given the nature of these strategies to keep up-to-date, libraries, broadly speaking, are poised at the periphery of these scholarly networks. Faculty expressed their wish for the library to enter into these networks but also acknowledged that, oftentimes, their research needs are so specific it would be unfair to expect the library to meet them.

### Digital Transformation

Transformational changes within the academy continue to shift the narrative of scholarship. Although we anticipated more conversation around the topic of digital transformation, engaging in and being critical of new modes of information production and sharing, most faculty instead reported on expectations of and challenges with ‘the digital’ in terms of access. Access in this regard is defined as access to digital scans or digital born materials.

Expectations of ready access in our digital culture fall short of reality. There is an acknowledged lack of quality and of comprehensiveness in digitized material including secondary and especially primary sources, requiring scholars to go to the source or archive. This is especially true of international materials. “Nothing is digitized. There are still little gems. Like in the Biblioteca Nacional. They've done a lot of digitization but not everywhere. There's still work that needs to be done.” Although faculty did not expect Swarthmore College Libraries to have access to every rare resource, nonetheless expectations remain high for accessible quality digitized material. Further complicating the landscape, ephemeral objects of study defy digitization: exhibitions, artists, performances, whereas born digital experimental video and photographs present other challenges, such as access, organization, and preservation.

When discussing physical versus digital publishing of their own scholarship, faculty expressed interest in distributing research in other formats but acknowledged the pressure to publish in traditional channels. As one participant noted, there is “concern that people read literature, watch a performance, attend an art show, but the published critique grows dusty on a

bookshelf.” How does one “transform the traditional book into something else” while actually working on something that matters and is more widely accessible, especially when not trained? Overall, digital access on a global scale produces singular challenges, international and various library catalogs and database algorithms differ, access to subscription databases varies across institutions, and “stuff falls through the net in international publishing”. Faculty would like access to other academic’s work, both as creative inspiration and to be certain they are not duplicating previously investigated topics or missing a critical piece of scholarship, however they find it hard to make their own work available in a digital format. This paradox suggests an opportunity to scale up recognition of and support for new modes of scholarship within the academy. At a liberal arts college, the organization is small and agile enough to foster partnerships and explore experimental solutions, something that may move slower through a larger school with well-defined bureaucratic divisions.

### Challenges and Opportunities in International Scholarship

Participants reported on inherent challenges when conducting international research, starting with extensive travel, being conversant in many languages, and learning to navigate political or cultural expectations. Archival research in and of itself presents challenges which are compounded when working in another country. Most participants admitted to a lack of any formal training and experience in the navigation and use of library catalogs and especially archives, “I don’t know how to find it, actually”. The nature of research in a foreign country which involves the pursuit of the rare, unusual, or ephemeral has its own set of expectations and set-backs.

Navigating a private archive, in a foreign country, with rules and policies that differ from place to place can be extremely challenging and time consuming, “Everything was in this house that is by the ocean. There was all this humidity and things were kind of destroyed. And then they were so jealous of their stuff they wouldn't let me [see everything].” The question of archives was almost universal, “...will they allow academics access to that or not? Is it publicly available or not? And some of it was publicly available. Some of it is for researchers only and some of it was sort of behind closed doors that I actually got a peek behind the curtain after I'd been there for a month.”

When researching a topic, scholars must often evaluate the quality of editions and translations, asking themselves if the scholarship was published in its native language, the language of the country of research, English, or another language. There are situations in which a book translated from French to Spanish would be a better quality edition than one published from French to English, depending on the skill of the translator and the similarity of the languages.

Faculty express interest in having acquisition librarians who could attend specialized book fairs in order to build unique collections. Many publications receive small runs of 100-200 copies, and prove difficult to acquire, whereas visual culture, contemporary art, exhibition catalogs also elude the average liberal arts college library collecting parameters.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings in this report are not meant to be exhaustive but rather highlight some of the broad and common themes reported in the interviews. The four findings, *Interdisciplinary Research*, *Cross Institutional and International Networks*, *Digital Transformation*, and *Challenges and Opportunities in International Scholarship* offer the Swarthmore College Libraries a unique opportunity to address some of the challenges with the following three recommendations.

In our analysis of the transcripts, we noticed that each finding is not independent of the other but rather is complementary. For example, many of the participants are able to conduct interdisciplinary research because of their cross institutional and international networks. Without these, it seems, interdisciplinary research would be increasingly more difficult. Our recommendations for this section take into account this dynamic and approach the findings as a whole interconnected narrative. In this way, we also hope to address topics not included in this report since they also form part of the bigger picture.

*Recommendation 1: Provide an environmental scan to bring the libraries into the research network circle and to address interdisciplinary challenges*

As stated in finding #2, some participants wish the libraries could play a bigger part in their research network. A way to address this wish without investing all of our budget in unique



resources, would be to provide an environmental scan of their research topic highlighting library resources and offering to procure relevant materials. Their cross institutional and international network is incredibly valuable but often the faculty travel to their research destinations without a complete picture of what is available through Swarthmore's Libraries. This is by no means a fault of their own but highlights the large ecosystem of resources faculty must navigate in order to find information pertinent to their research. Given that Swarthmore is a small liberal arts college, librarians are liaisons *and* collection developers for multiple subject areas. This means librarians are adequately equipped to aggregate the library resources of which the faculty may be unaware.

In addition, some participants highlighted the challenges that come with interdisciplinary research. Librarians at Swarthmore are uniquely situated to act as what Jeffrey Knapp from PSU calls "Interdisciplinary Facilitators." Since librarians support multiple departments the environmental scan would also act as a bridge between the disciplines in which the faculty is conducting research. The environmental scan serves as a stepping stone, elucidating what the library does and doesn't have in order to inform faculty research as they travel and connect with their network.

#### *Recommendation #2: Offer pre-sabbatical consultations*

Many of the participants stated their need to travel abroad for research purposes, especially during sabbatical. The libraries can offer pre-sabbatical research consultations to faculty. In addition to getting a sense of what the library can offer while abroad, having a consultation right before the faculty leave for sabbatical would ensure the libraries remain in the research network. The consultations could include the ordering of research resources, contacting colleagues across institutions to let them know one of our faculty is coming to do research, and offering, when able, ways to approach the catalogue or archive of an institution. In a way, creating a sabbatical "care package" that faculty can refer back to while traveling or from their office. In addition and when time permits, these consultations could be used to address gaps in training, especially for junior faculty engaging with library or archive materials.

#### *Recommendation #3: seek opportunities to promote faculty research*

Given faculty interest in connecting with scholars across institutions and creating communities within specific fields, the libraries can continue seeking opportunities to promote faculty research, broadening their research impact. Cognizant of evolving trends in publishing, the Swarthmore College Libraries created a new position this year, Scholarly Communication Librarian, to build upon the already important work being done with faculty bibliography and to promote faculty publications. To play a role in the formation of scholarly networks, we should consider highlighting contributions and work not constrained by traditional expectations and tenure, but open to interpretation. This includes, but is not limited to, open access publishing, book reviews, conference papers, speaking engagements, and digital scholarship.

## CONCLUSION

Scholars at Swarthmore are experienced researchers navigating a complex information landscape, moving with agility between institutions, countries, and languages. In an era when expectations of digitized material are high, it is clear that researchers continue to rely on site visits to physical archives. Scholars in these fields continue to hold reverence for the object, be it a book, a letter, an exhibition catalog, etc. as they design methodologies, conduct research, gather information, interpret findings, and share work broadly. Overall shifts in scholarship generate optimism as scholars pursue areas of interest by combining traditional and evolving modes of research. Highlights include broadening the definition of how one conducts literary studies, the rise of literary prizes acknowledging the value of international scholarship from previously marginalized countries, and the ability to increase relevance and reach through interdisciplinary scholarship.

## APPENDIX A

Brown University

Columbia University

Haverford College

Georgetown University

Indiana University-Bloomington

Johns Hopkins University

New York University

Rutgers University

Swarthmore College

University of Illinois - Chicago

University of Illinois - Urbana Champaign

University of Pennsylvania

University of Utah

## APPENDIX B

### Semi-Structured Interview Guide

#### Research Focus and Methods

Describe the research project(s) you are currently working on.

- Tell me a bit more about how the research for the project has unfolded step-by-step [choose one project if multiple were listed above] E.g. developing the topic, identifying and working with the information needed for the research, plans for sharing the results]
- How does this project and process of researching relate to how you've done work in the past?
- How does this project relate to the work typically done in your department(s) and field(s) you are affiliated with?

#### Working with Archives and Other Special Collections

Do you typically rely on material collected in archives or other special collections? [E.g. rare books, unpublished documents, museum artifacts]. If so,

- How do you find this information? How did you learn how to do this? Does anyone ever help you?
- Where do you access this information? [e.g. on-site, digitally]
- How and when do you work with this information? [e.g. do you use any specific approaches or tools?]
- Have you encountered any challenges in the process of finding, accessing or working with this kind of information? If so, describe.

- To what extent do you understand and/or think it is important to understand how the tools that help you find and access this information work? [E.g. finding aides, online museum catalogues “do you understand how database x decides which content surfaces first in your searches,” and, “do you care to understand?”]
- Are there any resources, services or other supports that would help you more effectively work with this kind of information?

### Working with Secondary Content

What kinds of secondary source content do you typically rely on for your research? [E.g. scholarly articles or monographs]

- How do you find this information? How did you learn to do this? Does anyone ever help you?
- Where do you access this information? [e.g. on-site, digitally]
- How and when do you work with this information? [e.g. do you use any specific approaches or tools?]
- Have you encountered any challenges in the process of finding, accessing or working with secondary sources? If so, describe.
- To what extent do you understand and/or think it is important to understand how the tools that help you find and access this information work? [E.g. algorithmic bias, processes for creating and applying keywords, “do you understand how google scholar decides which articles surface first in your searches,” and, “do you care to understand?”]
- Are there any resources, services or other supports that would help you more effectively locate or work with secondary sources?

### Scholarly Communications and Evaluating Impact

How are your scholarly outputs [e.g. books, peer reviewed journal articles] evaluated by your institution and to what ends? [E.g. tenure and promotion process, frequency of evaluations]

- Have you observed any trends and/or changes over time in how scholarly outputs are being evaluated? [E.g. shift in emphasis between books vs. articles, shift in emphasis in the extent to which the prestige or impact factor of a publication is considered]
- Beyond tenure and promotion, does your institution evaluate your scholarly outputs towards any other ends? [E.g. benchmarking your/your departments performance using analytics software] If so, how, and to what ends?
- What have been your experiences being evaluated in this way?
- Have you observed these kinds of processes having a larger effect on your department and/or institutional culture?

To what extent do you engage with or have interest in any mechanisms for sharing your work beyond traditional publishing in peer reviewed journals or monographs? To what ends? [E.g. posting in pre-print archives to share with peers, creating digital maps or timelines for students, creating outputs for wider audiences]

Do you engage with any forms of social networking, including academic social networking, as a mechanism for sharing and/or engaging with other scholars? If no, why not? If so,

- Describe the platform(s) you currently use and how.
- What do you like best about the platform(s) you currently use and what do you like least?
- Are there any other ways the platform(s) could be improved to best meet your needs?

Beyond the information you have already shared about your scholarly communications activities and needs, is there anything else you think would be helpful for me to know about your experiences?

## Research Training and Wrapping Up

Looking back at your experiences as a researcher, are there any forms of training that was particularly useful? Conversely, are there any forms of training you wish you had gotten and/or would still like to get? Why?

Considering evolving trends in how research is conducted and evaluated, is there any form of training that would be most beneficial to graduate students and/or scholars more widely?

Is there anything else from your experiences and perspectives as a researcher or on the topic of research more broadly that you think would be helpful to share with me that has not yet been discussed in this conversation?