

Immersion Program for Doctoral Students in the Humanities Cornell University Library

1. Administrative Information

Project Title: Immersion Program for Doctoral Students in the Humanities

Award Amount: \$25,000

Project Cost: \$25,000

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Project Director: Kornelia Tancheva, PhD

2. Project Summary

The Cornell University Library Immersion Program for Doctoral Students in the Humanities was a four-day intensive course offered in January 2012 by the Cornell University Library in partnership with the Cornell University Graduate School, the Knight Writing Center, Gannett Health Services, Cornell faculty and others at Cornell University to address the scholarly and organizational needs of second-year doctoral students in the humanities.

It was the result of previous research both nationally and at Cornell University, as well as a direct follow-up of a previous grant-supported ethnographic study conducted by the Cornell University Library and the Columbia University Libraries.

It is well documented that Ph.D. students in the humanities take longer and drop out of their programs at a higher rate than those in the sciences or social sciences. In recent years there have been a number of major, large-scale studies on this issue, including the Council of Graduate Schools Ph.D. Completion Project (CGS), a seven-year, grant-funded endeavor in two phases; the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation's Graduate Education Initiative (GEI), and the National Research Council Assessment of Research Doctoral Programs. In addition, the National Science Foundation tracks the number of degrees awarded in its annual Survey of Earned Doctorates. Cornell has participated in all of these studies.

The published results from these studies, as well as numerous small-scale empirical studies demonstrate that the number of doctorates awarded in the humanities has steadily been declining since 1998, while those in science and engineering have increased. While the mean registered time to degree in all disciplines has increased since 1978, it is still the longest in the humanities: 9 years in 2003 from 7.5 in 1978, compared to 6.9 in engineering, up from 5.8 in 1978; 6.9 in the life sciences, up from 5.9 in 1978; and 6.8 in the physical sciences, up from 5.9 in 1978. Even more troubling is the fact that, not only do those who enroll in doctoral programs in the humanities take longer to complete their degrees than other disciplines, but their completion rate within a ten-year period is the lowest: 49%, compared to 55% for mathematics and physical sciences, 56% for the social sciences, 63% for the life sciences, and 64% for engineering. Finally, the cumulative attrition rates at year 10 in the humanities are 32% compared to 27% in engineering and 26% in the life sciences.

The identified factors that influence the time to completion and the retention rates are varied: discipline specificity, institutional characteristics, availability of financial aid, quality of advising, clarity of program requirements, quality of family life, job prospects, lack of community, etc.

In the wake of the research referenced above, institutions such as Temple, Yale, Stanford, and the University of Pennsylvania have begun to offer “boot camps” to help graduate students finish their dissertations. These boot camps are offered by writing centers and focus on the writing of the dissertation. To our knowledge, however, none of the programs are aimed specifically at students in the humanities.

In order to investigate the specific needs of graduate students in the humanities, and whether the library can positively impact the quality of their education and the completion and retention rates, Cornell University Library conducted a collaborative ethnographic user needs study with Columbia University Libraries in 2010-2011. The study was supported by grants from the Gladys Krieble Delmas Foundation, and the Council on Library and Information Resources (CLIR), with additional funding from the respective Graduate Schools at Cornell and Columbia, and the two libraries. We interviewed 45 graduate students in the humanities and conducted five focus groups.

The study revealed two general trends. The first is that graduate students encounter obstacles to completing their degrees at an early stage in their careers, well before they begin to write their dissertations. Our data revealed that successful timely completion of the degree is not just about writing the dissertation; it requires a set of skills and attitudes that many graduate students struggle to acquire. These include research skills, information management skills, organizational and time management skills, and the ability to transition from being a student to an independent scholar, which includes, but is not limited to, learning how to write as a scholar.

The second trend has to do with the decentralized nature of big research institutions, specifically Cornell. Like our peers, Cornell University has several campus entities which offer services and workshops aimed at graduate students, including the Graduate School, the Center for Teaching Excellence, the Knight Writing Center, the Library, and Career Services. Individual departments also offer courses intended to serve as introductions to the professions, structured or unstructured orientation sessions, and guidance by faculty and advisors. What our data demonstrate, however, is that it is a rare graduate student who discovers these services, much less takes advantage of all of them in a timely and efficient manner.

The Immersion Program was developed in response to the trends identified in our 2010-2011 study. We addressed the first trend by attempting to methodically and synergistically equip doctoral candidates in the humanities at an early stage to complete their degrees more efficiently and in a timelier manner, and to become more productive and successful scholars in the future. Our program proposes that the second year of graduate studies is the optimal timing for intervention, as it focuses attention on the process of evolution, refining research processes, and setting clear expectations for the years ahead. Midway through the second year, the immersion course takes place after students have become acculturated to the academic environment but before they are faced with the rigors of balancing teaching responsibilities, preparations for qualifying exams, and beginning original research. During the second year of coursework, students have accumulated enough experience with research to appreciate the value of learning information management techniques and are ready to consider how they might begin to shape their future scholarly identity.

We addressed the second trend by setting out to develop a new service model for libraries to become a locus of graduate students' transition to independent scholars. The format of the immersion program offered a unified approach to meeting the needs of the target audience through the active collaboration between all the partners and positioned the library as an increasingly important facilitator in a humanities graduate student's scholarly pursuits.

The program included:

- Keynote address by the Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School at Cornell
- *Resources for Graduate Students at Cornell*, a session led the Assistant Dean of Graduate Student Life and Career Advising and the Associate Dean for Inclusion and Professional Development
- *Note Taking and Personal Productivity* (Reference Librarian)
- *Managing Stress* (Health Educators from Gannett Health Services on)
- *Subject Specific Power Research Skills in History and English* (Reference Librarians)
- *Time Management and Procrastination* (Counselor/Therapist and Dissertation Coach)
- *Beyond the Chronicle: Researching Other Dissertations; Finding Grant Opportunities Outside Cornell; Digital Humanities Grant Opportunities and Requirements* (Reference Librarian)
- *Writing and the Dissertation* (the John S. Knight Director of Writing in the Majors)
- *Advanced Citation Management* (Reference Librarian)
- *Digital Consultation & Production Services on Managing Your Personal Research Files: Backing up, Archiving and Organizing* (Library staff)
- *Creating Alerts to Keep on Top of Current Scholarship* (Reference Librarian)
- *Technology Unconference* (30-minute sessions) including: Finding and Using Images. Scanning & OCR. Using a Camera as a Research Tool (Reference Librarians)
- *Copyright and the Doctoral Candidate* (Library Intellectual Property Officer)
- *Resolving Personal Conflicts* (Human Resources)
- *Becoming a Humanities Scholar in the 21st Century*: discussions with Cornell faculty
- *Reflections on Being a Humanities Graduate Student at Cornell: Graduate Student Panels* (Graduates from the English Department, Medieval Studies, Romance Studies)
- Wrap-up discussion among participants and grant team

We devised the program to address diverse aspects of the scholarly life of a 2nd year doctoral student in the humanities. Certain sessions covered issues in related non-academic areas. We believe it also offers other academic libraries a model for supporting humanities graduate students with their scholarships.

3. Process

The project supported a .25FTE Project Manager who was responsible for all logistical components of the work, including applicants' tracking, program and room scheduling, documentation assembly and distribution, and financial analysis.

In addition, the PI and two reference librarians devoted a considerable part of their time to recruiting program presenters, working with the other campus units, and recruiting participants. In addition to the two reference librarians, additional library staff was brought in to teach sessions during the immersion program.

The initial recruitment step was to approach directors of graduate studies at the target departments in order to guarantee their endorsement. Once this had been secured, a list of the target student population was compiled, and e-mail invitations sent. Applicants were asked to write a two-paragraph essay on why they were interested in taking the course, and to provide demographic information. Even though we had aimed for 15 students, the demand was greater and we decided to admit 17 to account for possible drop-outs. Once the program began, one participant could not join because of travel complications, and another dropped out, which left us with the initially intended number.

No major organizational or policy changes were necessary, since all the sessions took place in the library during the winter intersession when most of the presenters were more readily available. Minor adjustments to the schedule were made as the program progressed, most notably allowing for more time for informal discussions among the graduate students themselves.

4. Project Results

In order to evaluate the program, we employed the following assessment instruments to gather data from the participants:

- A pre-program survey, which measured the students' self-perception of research skills, graduate work information awareness, and expectations for future accomplishments, as well as collected demographic data
- A pre-program skills and information awareness test, which provided an objective measure of research acumen and information awareness
- A post-program survey
- A post-program test (The combination of pre- and post- evaluation allowed us to gauge immediate impact on general perceptions as well as actual lessons learned.)

Additionally, four months after the program we met with some of the participants for a discussion, and to inquire whether the immersion program had a perceptible impact on their confidence, performance and work habits.

The assessment instruments and the data collected in the wrap-up discussions, demonstrate that the program successfully addressed all aspects of a graduate student's scholarly life. Additionally, it offered support, community and resources for the participants in related non-academic areas. It is our belief that future second year doctoral students in the humanities can greatly benefit from this program, and that other academic libraries can use this model as a way to advance graduate students' scholarship at their own institution.

In addition, we learned that humanities graduate students were not aware of the variety and depth of library services and expertise. Many humanities graduate students are challenged and not able to keep up with evolving technologies, tools, databases, and strategies for scholarship. While many of our participants were aware that they could register for library workshops on some of these topics, with so many competing priorities, our participants felt that they couldn't take the time to attend. An immersion program allows participants to set aside time to focus on building skills and provides a methodical and incremental approach. Academic libraries are uniquely qualified to provide instruction in these areas. Feedback from graduate student participants was overwhelmingly positive on the sessions offered by the library.

The program was successful both from the Cornell Library's perspective and the perspective of the humanities graduate student participants. Participants were enthusiastic about the program as a whole. They rated sessions that focused on the library and its services (copyright management, reference, etc.) and tools, strategies, and technologies for research (effective database searching, citation management, file management and backing up, finding and using images, etc.) to be one of the most valuable aspects of the program. The majority of participants said they intended to make use of these new skills and practices in their future work.

The discussion sessions over lunch with recently graduated doctoral students and faculty about being a successful humanities scholar were also rated highly. Additionally, most of the other sessions had opportunities for discussion. As the participants became more comfortable with us and each other, discussion became more open and free-flowing. Our previous study had made us aware that humanities graduate students often struggle with feelings of isolation. We did not entirely anticipate the intense sense of community created by the shared experience of this four-day intensive program. Our 15 participants told us this was much appreciated and even transformative.

Next Steps

Feedback from presenters and participants allows the grant team to refine and improve our immersion program. Plans are already well underway to offer a three day program in January 2013. We hope to make the program a yearly event to be held each January during winter break.

Our immersion program is a model that can be adapted by other institutions. Academic libraries can support graduate students by serving as facilitators for immersion programs. The need for such a program in the humanities is particularly compelling, but other disciplines could benefit from this approach, as well. By collaborating with a variety of campus partners, academic libraries can create immersion programs to address the specific needs of their own doctoral students in an integrated manner.

Resources

Lib-guide:

<http://guides.library.cornell.edu/content.php?pid=280179&sid=2307780>

This is a companion website for the program.