

CONFIGURATION AND SUPPORT MODELS FOR HUMANITIES COMPUTING

MEETING OF APRIL 17, 2008

DIGITAL HUMANITIES INITIATIVE AT BUFFALO

Purpose of the meeting:

To recommend a plan for providing technical support for humanities research in the College of Arts and Sciences

Present: Jeff Good, Maureen Jameson, Bruce Pitman, Peter Rittner, Steve Roberts, Lisa Stephens, Matt Stock

Meeting participants gathered to discuss how humanities scholars

- can describe their research to an expert and be guided in the choice of technologies to implement a digital project
- can secure the services of programmers and project managers
- can acquire the hardware and software they need to carry out their projects
- can arrange for long-term care and maintenance of projects they may develop
- can acquire the training they desire to become actively engaged in the technological aspect of their project
- can be advised of impending developments in technology which are likely to affect the sustainability of their projects

Peter Rittner asked whether online training (a la Skilsoft) could be suitable for the training needs for faculty. Jeff Good wondered whether novices would make good decisions about which software packages to learn. Maureen Jameson thought that novices might prefer a more traditional style of instruction.

Discussion of the choice of appropriate technologies – “solutions integration” – then began. Steve Roberts suggested that the Digital Libraries will be a likely source of assistance in such initial consultations, and he reported that the DLC will have a heavy focus on the humanities and hopes to hire three people. On the other hand, given that not all humanities faculty projects will be of the digital library type, and given also that the DLC will have limited resources, it doesn't necessarily make sense for the DLC to be the “aggregator” (ie, the entry point through which faculty have access to services from a variety of units). Matt Stock observed that faculty members don't agree on where service aggregation should be located. Maureen pointed out that while the initial consultation certainly requires an expert in technologies, it is also critical that the “listener” be trained and adept in a humanities field. She had also discovered that both parties to the discussion need to avoid naive belief in the perfect transparency of language. Jeff Good said it was important for there to be sustained and frequent conversations between project sponsors and people doing the ultimate implementation.

Peter was concerned that the need for programming services could potentially overwhelm all available supply, and he thought that one function of the discussion should be to develop a rational process for allocating what few resources we are likely to have. Previous models, which simply worked on a first-come first-served principle, have not been entirely satisfactory.

A consensus emerged for a useful role to be played by the DHIB in these initial stages of faculty conceptualization and consultation. Through some mechanism yet to be defined (brown-bag lunches, use of the wiki, etc.), DHIB will “take in” queries from faculty members who want to do projects, and then follow roughly these steps:

- discuss the scholarly activity / project thoroughly with the colleague
- report on the project and discussion to a “board of campus advisors” (ie those present at the meeting and others to be identified later)
- solicit from the board any recommendations about campus technology specialists who could offer, say, a 30-minute consultation on the activity / project
- advise the colleague to apply for internal DHIB and IRDF funding
- work with the colleague to prepare an external grant proposal
- negotiate a percentage of overhead to be returned to DHIB from the external grant

The question then arose: suppose a faculty member wins a grant, or has independent resources. Where then does he or she turn for programming services? One model is to simply outsource the programming; the advantages here are in accountability. Graduate students who receive stipends can frequently do good work, but there is little accountability, especially when the sponsor and the student are in different departments. Matt pointed out that there is a tremendous talent pool among undergraduates, and said that they could be paid on an hourly basis, without long-term commitments which survive the usefulness of the student’s contribution. When other-than-State funding is available for graduate students, they can be paid as consultants, and there too there can be some “answerability.”

The question of direct faculty engagement in the technologies was discussed. Bruce said faculty in the sciences could get grants to pay for programming, but that the grants would never be funded without the faculty member sitting down and learning the programming and getting some initial results himself or herself. He thought that DHIB expectations on this particular subject should be articulated early. There ensued a discussion about the not-very-rapidly evolving status of digital expertise in humanities disciplines. Despite the efforts of the MLA, it did not seem likely that tenured faculty would necessarily come to view the acquisition of technical knowledge as germane to the discipline’s scholarly mission. However, the group thought there was great promise among the graduate students, and much to be gained from providing them with training which would make them competitive for a variety of post-doctoral employment opportunities. Maureen mentioned that the DHIB had briefly discussed the possibility of some kind of interdisciplinary graduate track. Bruce thought that it made sense to explore the possibility of a graduate certificate, initiated by the DHIB. Lisa Stephens expected that after a few grant cycles, interest and enthusiasm among graduate students would grow.

Peter said that for the hiring of undergraduates, funds were available from CURCA (the undergraduate research initiative) and the Honors College. Matt thought CCR (the supercomputing facility) might be able to provide some input, given a broadening of its mission.

Maureen asked that those present at the meeting agree to serve as a “board of advisers,” and members responded with cries of joyous disbelief.