Establishing a "Resilient Network" for Digital Humanities

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It can be challenging to be a solo digital humanist, given the range of skills required, deficits in training, and the need for software, hardware and technical support. As E.E. Snyder points out, researchers may be using digital methods but not consider themselves "digital humanists," and thus exist outside of virtual networks like Twitter and conferences like Digital Humanities (2012). Even as colleges and universities recognize the potential of digital humanities, they often struggle to support and sustain DH projects. Digital humanities centers, like many cutting-edge, interdisciplinary academic programs and centers, are fragile, subject to changing priorities and budget cuts (Sample 2010). Moreover, DH centers may not necessarily be able to support the range of researchers' interests and needs. In any case, many digital humanists work at institutions without a DH center, so they often lack institutional support and immediate colleagues whom they can learn from and with. Sample describes the common situation of the DH scholars who lack centers: "We'll never be able to turn to colleagues who routinely navigate grant applications and budget deadlines... We'll never have an institutional advocate on campus who can speak with a single voice to administrators, to students, to donors, to publishers, to communities about the value of the digital humanities" (Sample 2010). The isolation among many digital humanists also means that effort is duplicated, as, for example, faculty at multiple institutions are developing DH educational materials similar to those being created elsewhere.

Networks provide a potential solution to isolation by linking people with shared research interests and enabling them to exchange ideas and expertise. Nancy Maron suggests that a campus-based network model-- whether with equal partners or "a strong central hub, like a library or a DH center, with many spokes" -- may be a preferred organizational model for DH, as it can balance experimentation and sustainability and combine units' strengths (Maron 2015). Beyond the campus, as Sample argues, researchers can build their own communities that transcend institutions and are more agile and resilient than formal organizations: "Stop forming committees and begin creating coalitions. Seek affinities over affiliations, networks over institutes" (2010). Networks can cultivate collective expertise and facilitate acting on common interests without getting caught up in bureaucracy or being limited by long-term obligations.

Indeed, digital humanists are participating in a range of networks, from global to regional to university-based. Many digital humanists are connected around the world through Twitter's virtual network. At the country or regional level, organizations such as Red de Humanidades Digitales (RedHD), NYCDH, and the Texas Digital Humanities Consortium (authors Spiro and Taylor are part of the steering committee of the TDHC) provide online platforms for researchers to discover each other and share information, as well as organize training and events. Within universities or university systems, digital humanities networks such as the Oxford DH Network and the University of Wisconsin-Madison's Digital Humanities Research Network coordinate events and build community among local digital humanists.

As powerful as these networks are, most do not provide funding for collaboration across institutions on research projects, nor do they organize common work on curriculum. Enter Resilient Networks to Support Inclusive Digital Humanities, a collaboration among George Washington University (GW), Rice University, Davidson College, and Prairie View A&M University funded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation in the spring of 2016. This network aims to advance digital scholarship by sponsoring collaborative projects among faculty, librarians and

students and by developing openly available educational modules that can be used to form a DH curriculum. It brings together private research universities in Washington DC (GW) and Texas (Rice), a public historically black university in Texas (Prairie View A&M), and a private liberal arts college in North Carolina (Davidson College). The co PIs are a member of the library staff and a faculty member from each institution who, together with the project director, oversee the program through bi-weekly online meetings and occasional face-to-face meetings. An Advisory Committee provides strategic guidance for the project.

Between the spring of 2016 and the spring of 2018, Resilient Networks will create:

- A set of openly licensed, adaptable educational modules on digital humanities that can be used in different contexts, such as workshops and semester-long courses. Planned modules include introduction to digital humanities, data in the humanities, the ethos of digital humanities, and framing projects for the public, as well as electives on topics such as text mining and database design and development.
- Cross-institutional projects in which a faculty member, librarian and students collaborate on digital humanities research. To facilitate the cross-institutional projects, Resilient Networks is awarding faculty $5000 jump start packages as seed funding; one is being granted at each institution during year 1, and three during year 2.
- A group of librarians, faculty, and students knowledgeable about digital humanities methods and collaborative approaches. In August 2016, a small group of faculty and librarians gathered at GW for a training workshop on DH project development and humanities approaches to data facilitated by Trevor Munoz. In addition, the Network sponsored a THATCamp at the Digital Frontiers conference hosted at Rice in September 2016 and a THATCamp at George Washington University in March 2017. The network will further support training by organizing THATCamps and providing funding for members to attend intensive DH workshops.
- Intra- and inter-institutional relationships that will facilitate ongoing DH collaborations. Many networks depend on strong personal relationships. Through collaborative work on research, curriculum and training, the Resilient Networks will develop such relationships, laying the foundation for ongoing collaborations.

There are challenges in establishing the Network that are to be expected with a cross-institutional collaboration, including setting common goals, maintaining strong communication, negotiating different academic calendars and bureaucratic systems, and accomplishing tasks in the face of competing responsibilities. In addition, the sheer diversity of digital humanities methods makes it difficult to build a coherent community. On the upside, however, by working within the existing institutional structures at each university rather than creating a separate organizational unit, the work will more likely be sustainable in the long term and better serve the needs of the researchers at each institution. As Snyder cautions, "Decentralised networks that lack both institutional support and dedicated time spent in creating resources will face serious barriers; if there is no position that has explicit responsibility for developing the network, the network may fall by the wayside in the pressure of more urgent responsibilities" (2012). To mitigate this risk, Resilient Networks hired a Digital Humanities Project Director to organize program activities and manage day-to-day operations. Establishing inter-institutional and cross-institutional ties will leverage already-established organizational structures rather than creating new ones. We expect the network to scale to include more institutions, which will expand available expertise. We will be conducting assessments to evaluate the various aspects of the resilient network model to determine its effectiveness in meeting our overall objectives.

In this short paper, we will discuss the network model for digital humanities research and education, results from the first year of "Resilient Networks," and future plans.

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