Supporting the Changing Research Practices of Religious Studies Researchers
ITHAKA S+R Research Project 2016

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In 2016, the field ethnography team examined the changing research methods and practices of academic religious studies faculty at Asbury Theological Seminary. One of our primary objectives was to identify services and to better support them. Based on the interviews, the field ethnography team has found that the underlying research methods of many religious studies researchers have remained fairly stable and are recognizable even with the introduction of a variety of new tools and technologies. The field ethnography team identified a number of opportunities to improve support and training, which they present as recommendations to Asbury Theological Seminary's Library Instructional Services, other libraries and their archives or special collections, scholarly societies, and funding agencies.

For archives and special collections departments, the field ethnography team recommends continuous improvement related to access through improved content management systems for libraries (transferring traditional finding aids), digitization projects, building connections among users, and instructing religious studies researchers in the use of archives. We also recommend that archives/special collections develop a system for religious studies researchers that will enable proper citation and a research notes management system that facilitates management of digital artifacts.

For libraries, the field ethnography team recommends continuous improvement in the resource provision for collections that needs to include addressing changing format preferences, collaborating with other library associations or libraries to maximize collection accessibility, and improving discovery environments to comprise the full range of needed materials. The field ethnography team also recommends that libraries continue to develop new models to support research that addresses religious studies researchers in discovery and access to needed materials.

For scholarly societies, the field ethnography team recommends initiatives to regularly record and monitor changes in research practices of the specific field within the larger field of religious studies. Tracking these changes will assist in identifying support needs and assist scholarly societies in engaging professionally with librarians and archivists, as well as other research support providers to address the identified needs.

Finally, for funding agencies, the field ethnography team recommends a variety of opportunities where there is funding potential that could address some of the professional development needs of religious studies researchers. It could also provide support to the support providers as well as build bridges between religious studies scholars and research support providers.

Religious Studies Research Support Services Project

Introduction

Over the past five years, Ithaka S+R has conducted in-depth qualitative analysis of research practices as well as associate support services needs in several academic fields. Past research projects have been completed for the fields of art history, chemistry, and history. For each field, Ithaka S+R sought to generate a thorough description of the each field's practices and needs. Subsequently, they went on to make operational recommendations for libraries and others to best utilize in support of their research going forward.

This Religious Studies Research Support Services Project supported by the American Theological Library Association consisted of an advisory committee drawn from the field. Approximately 18 universities and seminaries serve as research sites with their librarians spearheading the project on campus (See Table 1). Each library chooses how to staff its field ethnography team.

Table 1

Asbury Theological Seminary	Baylor University
Brigham Young University	Columbia University
Concordia Theological Seminary	Emory University
Harvard University	Jewish Theological Seminary of America
Luther Seminary	Naropa University
Princeton Theological Seminary	Rice University
Temple University	Tufts University
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill	University of Notre Dame
Vanderbilt University	Yale University

Ithaka S+R facilitated a methodology development and ethnographic training in the spring of 2016 at Columbia University. The Asbury Theological Seminary field ethnography team (Paul A. Tippey, Ph.D.; Thad Horner, MLIS; Wesley Custer, MLIS) interviewed five full-time faculty researchers and conducted institution-specific analysis (see Appendix A). Ithaka S+R will review all interviews and assemble findings into a public report. Ithaka S+R will publicly issue a final report with all field ethnographers acknowledged as co-authors (see Appendix B).

New technologies have been impacting academic religious studies research and teaching for years. For many academic fields, including religious studies, changing or developing new research methods are redesigning the way the nature of research is conducted, even the types of research questions that researchers are asking has changed. The day-to-day research routines are digitally enabled and enhanced. Researchers and librarians are finding themselves facing the need to innovate in order to be competitive in such a changing world.

Asbury Theological Seminary library will have the benefit of institution-specific findings and analysis that yield actionable findings for local services. This research project will also facilitate dialogue among interested participants to help them consider possible cross-institutional collaboration.

Methodology

In this first phase of the project, the field ethnography team interviewed five full-time faculty members. These interviews occurred face-to-face conversations and lasted approximately sixty minutes in length. The interviews were digitally recorded for the purposes of transcription and analysis. Interview questions focused on four fundamental areas: research focused, research methods, publishing practices, and state of the field.

The interviews were conducted on-site in the researcher's primary on-campus workspace. These on-sight interviews provided the opportunity for the team to observe the researcher first hand, including items such as research-notes and resources, organizational techniques and personal writing approaches, and tools as used in the research process. Some researchers took the opportunity to demonstrate their work practices during the conversation. Photographs were taken if applicable.

The interviews were guided by an interview protocol as found in Appendix A. They were semi-structured in nature while also being exploratory.

Summary of Findings

Research Focused:

> Religious Studies researchers' research foci are very broad including biblical exegesis and interpretation, theological studies, missiology, and finally practical theology. Despite the wide range of research foci they all shared a more comprehensive approach that included the importance of classical and practical studies by bridging the two. A consistent theme expressed was taking the learning from the academy to the Church and the Church to the academy. One researcher stated it like this: "Why does something like this matter to the church? … And how does it affect the mission of the Church? How do we stay consistent with what the mission of the Church has always supposed to have been about and yet look at this through different lenses, perhaps, than we have before?"
>
> At Asbury Seminary, there is an historical concern that the academy and the local church be joined closely in theological education. The faculty, likewise, tend to show a similar focus in their scholarship.

Research Methods:
Working in the Library & Archives

Religious studies researchers use libraries and archives as a source for materials from both on campus and off. The research focus impacts the needs of support for the researcher. For one researcher the archives was the principal source for their primary resources, for another it was the databases, for another physical books, and for another articles. Religious studies researchers employ a combination of both traditional and emerging scholarly practices. In general, they all organized and managed research notes in some way to secure intellectual control over their particular research topic, however no common method appeared between the researchers. Additionally, a sense or desire for a better way for organizing and managing their research notes was desired.

Research trips to archival departments continues to be an important part of religious studies research despite the wide availability of primary digital sources. Depending on the state of the archives, this can be a relatively easy or a labor-intensive process. If labor-intensive, it may require multiple revisits over a period of time. The initial research using finding aids, consulting with archivists, and investigating digitized items to gauge the relevance of the material can be invaluable in this process. The research process differs for each researcher and project. The research process greatly depends on available funding and time available for travel.

Nearly all religious studies researchers are engaged in continuous searching of materials related to their topics. The digitization of primary resources has altered a variety of aspects of the research process for religious studies researchers. More and more traditional resources "…are available electronically, which is amazing. It is great to have theses resources" (Researcher 1). By using the library login, a researcher can look for resources using Asbury Scholar (discovery environment) to locate and from there look into a specific database or even our library catalog. From there one can search online and find snippets from Google books, Amazon, etc. and then can choose to buy or request the material through inter library loan if needed. "And sometimes, like, if we don't have the article essay, then I can search online for it, and sometimes the author will have academia or, you know, some site, they might have a version of their offprint or something like that, which is very helpful" (Researcher 1).

There was a common theme that the religious studies researcher would appreciate further development of the collection and faster access to the collection, though generally it is not an obstacle that cannot be overcome with preparation. While it is clear that the religious studies researcher interviewed held the library professionals in high regard, in some cases it was clear that there was a lack of understandings of current resources and services. This lack of understanding may need to be rectified to enhance research support.

Publishing Practices:

    In general our religious studies researchers interviewed have published outside of scholarly realms, like in blogs or popular magazines on occasion, but not very often. One researcher responded, "NO, No blog, no nothing. Not Interested." However, the researchers do equally publish for the academy and for the laity. Some understood open access publishing but most didn't know enough about open access to make a judgment. The researchers that did understand identified a current shift to more open access publishing in the last few years, and one is even an editor of an open access online journal entitled "Journal of Inductive Biblical Study". There has also been an emphasis on international publications as well.

State of the field:

    Participation within academic guilds is key to keeping up with the trends in the field of religious studies. This allows scholars to connect with others in the field and have some kind of dialogue. One researcher expressed a desire that as part of research support, the library should setup these scholarly discussions. It was noted that book reviews are also an important aspect for staying informed of trends.

    One of the greatest challenges and opportunities expressed by more than one of the researchers was "…a great bit of hostility, culturally, to Christian faith. Some of the people who screamed the loudest about openness and this kind of stuff, [are] some of the people who are most ruthless and shutting it down…" However, this has caused the religious studies researchers to change and "…push for fresh thinking."

Recommendations

    This report is based on the field ethnography team's research and their analysis as conducted for this project. We have segmented the recommendations by the audience: archives/special collections, libraries, scholarly societies, and funding agencies.

1) Archives/Special collections
- Improve digital finding aids using content management systems
- Increase digitization of archives material
- Provide archives information literacy training
- Develop a system for researchers' notes management system
- Facilitate the methods and means to archive digitally born material

2) Libraries
- Improve provisions for developing the collection (Dealing with changing formatting)
- Collaborate with others to maximize access to material
- Improve discovery systems and environments
- Develop new research support models for discovery and access to needed material

3) Scholarly Societies
- Regularly record and monitor changes in research practices for identifying support needs and assisting in engaging professionally with librarians and archivists, as well as other research support providers.

4) Funding agencies
- Focus on professional development needs of religious studies researchers and provide support for research support providers.

Appendix A
Semi-Structured Interview Guide
Research focused:
1. Describe your current research focus.
2. Describe how your research is situated within the academy. [Probe for how they position themselves in relation to religious studies and theological studies and if they see their work as connecting to any other disciplines].

Research methods:
3. What theoretical approaches does your research utilize or rely on?
4. What research methods do you currently use to conduct your research [e.g. discourse analysis, historical analysis, etc.]?
5. [Beyond data you produce yourself] What kinds of sources does your research depend on?
6. Think back to a past or ongoing research project where you faced challenges in the process of conducting the research.
   a. Describe these challenges.
   b. What could have been done to mitigate these challenges?
7. How do you keep up with trends in your field more broadly?
8. If I gave you a magic wand that could help you with your research process – what would you ask it to do? [If they cite broader issues, e.g. Lack of time or funding, probe further for coping strategies or workarounds they use to mitigate these challenges with conducting research]

Publishing practices:
9. Where do you typically publish your research in scholarly settings? [Probe for kinds of publications and the disciplines these publications are aligned with]
   a. Beyond scholarly publishing are there any other venues that you disseminate your research? [Probe: e.g. blogs, popular press, classes]
10. How do you publishing practices relate to those typical to your discipline?
11. Have you ever published your research in open access venues such as open access online journals or repositories?
    a. If so, which journals or repositories and what has been your motivation for doing so? [I.e. required, for sharing, investment in open access principles]
    b. If no, why not?

State of the field and follow-up
12. From your perspective what are the greatest challenges and opportunities currently facing religious studies and/or theological studies?
13. Is there anything else about your research support needs that you think it is important for me to know that was not covered in the previous questions?

Appendix B
Timeline
January – December 2016

1. Asbury Theological Seminary Institutional Review Board Approval (January 2016)
2. Methodology development and ethnographic training of field ethnography team (January-February 14, 2016)
3. Conduct local research (February 15-May 13, 2016)
4. Demographic Information sent to Ithaka S+R (May 13, 2016)
   a. Send Interview audios to transcript services
   b. Send Ithaka S+R a list of interviewees (no names, interviewee 1, interviewee 2) with relevant information (e.g. Affiliation(s), methods, topics studied) and 1-2 paragraphs characterizing scope of religious studies at your institution
5. Conduct analysis and write up local report (May 30-August 30, 2016)
6. Ithaka S+R will send you requests for the transcripts to be included in the sample for the final report (May 27, 2016)
7. Review transcripts Ithaka S+R requests (e.g. For anonymity) and send along to Ithaka S+R (by June 3, 2016)
8. Send Ithaka S+R the transcription reimbursement form and copy of invoice for the sample transcripts (by July 1, 2016)
9. Send copy of local report to Ithaka S+R with notification re: whether the report will be made publically available (August 30, 2016)
10. Make report publically available and provide Ithaka S+R with a link (by November 1, 2016)
11. Ithaka S+R final report launched with links to local reports (December, 2016)