

SUPPORTING SCHOLARS IN LITERATURE AND WRITING STUDIES AT NEW YORK UNIVERSITY

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CONTENTS

Introduction	1
Theme 1: Interdisciplinarity.....	3
Theme 2: International scope of research	5
Theme 3: Discovery and Access	9
Theme 4: Research Training.....	11
Recommendations and conclusion	13
Appendix 1: Interview questions.....	16

Introduction

In 2018 and 2019, Ithaka S+R, in partnership with the Modern Language Association, carried out a study of the research practices of language and literature faculty at thirteen colleges and universities across the United States, including New York University. This study was the tenth in Ithaka’s ongoing Research Support Services Program.¹ A team of researchers at each participating institution conducted interviews with faculty, analyzed the interview transcripts, and prepared a local report discussing challenges and opportunities for supporting these faculty in their research and scholarly communication.

The New York University team interviewed a total of thirteen faculty members from a range of language and literature programs and departments. These faculty have research

¹ Danielle Cooper, “Announcing a New Project on Language and Literature,” Ithaka S+R Blog, August 15, 2018 (<https://sr.ithaka.org/blog/announcing-a-new-project-on-language-and-literature/>).

interests covering a wide variety of languages, regions, time periods, theoretical approaches, and types of material; they range from clinical faculty to full professors. We asked them questions (developed by Ithaka S+R for this research project) about their current and past research projects, their use of primary and secondary sources, their methods, their training, and their scholarly outputs, both traditional and nontraditional. We include the questions as Appendix 1 at the end of this report.

Our team read through the interviews and tagged them for recurring themes, then identified what we considered the predominant themes, which are as follows:

1. **Interdisciplinarity.** Nearly every scholar we spoke with described research interests that crossed disciplinary lines.
2. **International scope of research.** Many of our interviewees work on research topics that require international travel or access to hard-to-find materials in other countries.
3. **Discovery of and access to library materials.** These areas consistently pose challenges to faculty during the research process.
4. **Research training, particularly at the graduate level.** Many faculty in literary studies receive little formal training in research methods, which leads to concerns about the preparedness of graduate students.

We discuss each of these themes below the main body of the report. We conclude our report by making recommendations for the NYU Libraries' consideration, based upon the themes we observed and the comments we heard from our interviewees.

A few more general themes emerged from our research, some expected and some less expected. Many of our interviewees described their research as taking place in the context of the precarious state of the humanities, citing the "enormous stress" on their profession in the current moment. Concerns about the quantification of research output, about "neoliberal encroachment" on the profession, and about the fraying of scholarly and intellectual

communities came up repeatedly. This is not a new or unfamiliar situation, but libraries should continue to be aware of how it affects their patrons' research activities and goals.

The interviews also revealed interesting discrepancies between faculty members' scholarly interests and the infrastructures and tools built into research libraries. For instance, despite the attention that digital scholarship (and digital humanities) have received in research libraries in recent years, very few interviewees said that they were seriously involved or even interested in digital scholarship projects. This may have been due to the small number of interviewees in our pool, since we know that the Libraries' Digital Scholarship Services department helps numerous faculty and graduate students at NYU every year. But the lack of emphasis on the digital humanities also suggests the difficulty of undertaking digital scholarship in an environment where (as many of our interviewees said) evaluation processes still privilege journal articles and monographs as the preferred form of scholarly output.

Theme 1: Interdisciplinarity

Practically all of our interviews revealed that our respondents see themselves as multidisciplinary scholars: either trained as such, or working in multidisciplinary departments, or routinely crossing over between various disciplines. Some scholars investigate topics that straddle multiple fields, such as medieval literature and history. Some find that their research on literary figures leads them to a wide range of other fields, including politics, intellectual history, music, philosophy, sociology, and even business. Even as their research topics become more granular, these scholars often cross both academic and international borders. Some unexpected interdisciplinary connections arise from teaching, developing curricula, or conversations with colleagues, especially in departments that encourage an interdisciplinary approach.

When scholars conduct new research outside of their area of training (for example, when examining a primary text in a completely new context), they inevitably raise the question: "How

much do I know about the shape of the field?" It results in a self-guided, driven-by-necessity style of continuing learning. This self-improvement drive offers tremendous satisfaction, but also a sense of anxiety about whether "i's were dotted and t's were crossed" in a new unfamiliar field.

As an integral part of this self-education, many respondents commented on experimenting with methodologies for which they did not previously feel a need or have any training, but which became *de rigueur* once the perceived confines of a discipline were breached. For example, two scholars reported departing from their field's traditional training in theory and moving to working with physical objects. Another scholar works with non-canonical, non-mainstream ephemeral print and visual materials and has become fully immersed in library, information, and archival studies. Yet another respondent reported repurposing the methodology of American studies for her own project "because some things I wanted to write about hadn't yet been developed in Latin America studies."

These new methodologies forced some researchers to reevaluate their established methods, ask new questions and reposition their primary area of expertise within this new context. One comparative literature scholar reported that "structuring such an interdisciplinary, idiosyncratic project was quite challenging... trying to feel some kind of mastery over these multiple interlocking fields." The new norm of interdisciplinarity also prompted several respondents to address the issue of specialist librarians ("the library should not be in the business of declaring our fields"). Scholars with an interdisciplinary emphasis may perceive liaison librarians in traditional subject areas as only covering some of their needs.

Others reported that they adapted the methods in which they were trained to their new scholarly interests. New methodologies may be in the making; one scholar noted a trend toward "mak[ing] the traditional disciplines more like [booming] media studies." Another scholar foresees an entirely new field forming out of a confluence of "anthropology, visual culture studies, and [...] for the lack of a better word, a cultural historicism approach." The same scholar

remarked, “I don't do literary studies like I was maybe trained to do. It's more cultural criticism, but one that takes historicism into account... it is a challenge because to make your work legible to different disciplines is not an easy thing.”

As this comment suggests, interdisciplinarity boosts, but also occasionally limits, academic exposure. If you are active in a fairly niche field and the academic output venues are less numerous, being shored up by a more popular discipline allows you to publish and present more broadly. One art historian whose work crosses over to the area of public intellectual history of a particular geographic area remarked that his work is not read by fellow art historians, but rather by the scholars of that region. It ultimately altered his professional trajectory, and academically he now finds more affinity with area studies scholars rather than art historians. However, his departmental affiliation limits this scholar's exposure to professional conferences outside of his primary field.

Interdisciplinarity is perceived as a norm. However, it is not universally accepted for academic tenure and promotion processes, which greatly depend on individual departments' and disciplines' requirements and teaching evaluation policies. One scholar suspects that his shift from one discipline from another was not well received in his department. Another lists kinds of publications and other academic endeavors (such as curating an exhibit, or writing an introduction to an art catalog) that would be considered valid academic contributions in one department, but not in another.

Theme 2: International scope of research

Interviewee: That's part of the beauty of the project, too: the travel.

One of our most prominent discoveries was the degree to which the respondents are engaged in international scholarship. Their research interests take them to various parts of the world and often crosses more than one national border (eg. Indian and Russian mutual

influences in literature; international artistic movements that unfolded at the same time in Latin America as well as Europe). Many respondents know at least one language other than English, including languages outside of the European canon. As we discuss further in Theme 4 (Access and Discovery), scholars report reading materials in these languages as a matter of routine, but finding them is often not easy. Although interviewees' familiarity and fluency in foreign languages was obvious during the interviews, at least one observed that in his experience, some scholars lack the skill, or know fewer languages than was the norm in the past.

The most common concerns and challenges of international scholarship revolve around several large issues: access to collections; a bias towards "Western" materials, especially in digitization projects; a lack of uniformity in libraries around the world; and a need to keep primary sources in their country of origin. This section outlines these challenges as we heard them from our interviewees.

Many respondents commented on the difficulty of accessing local print materials as part of their international research. These materials include first editions that were never reprinted; obscure local periodicals, especially in regions with many local languages; publications from small imprints or university presses, even in major European languages ("Spanish and Italian ... publishers are not good about sending works in to bibliographies," observed one interviewee); and European reprints of materials published in other countries, since these reprints are often excluded from library approval plans. All of this leads to a situation in which, as one scholar said, "it's virtually impossible" to study some regions "unless you travel."

Digitization helps with some of these issues, but only up to a point. Many foreign collections are digitized, but it is often difficult to discover them online without already knowing that they exist. At the same time, while the digitization of remote collections revolutionized access, it is still important for scholars who study material culture to have full access to physical originals. Working in a foreign country also means working against the clock and within a budget, navigating local bureaucracies, and dealing with anxiety about completeness of coverage

(comments on this issue included “do I know all places where to look[?]” and “your research becomes what you see”). Several respondents confessed to using piracy sites to obtain otherwise unavailable materials, especially when traveling overseas without library access. At least one scholar feels that it is a good sign if their own academic work is pirated, because it means someone is really interested in it.

Another major theme was that of “Western” bias in the availability of digitized materials, full-text databases, metadata, and other research tools. We noticed a general consensus that it is easier to access the academic literature of North America and Europe online than materials from other areas of the world. Some western portals are better than the others in this respect (the MLA Bibliography is perceived as more internationally inclusive than Google Scholar, JSTOR or Project Muse). Even if a researcher is fluent in a local vernacular, they may not cite local sources because these sources are not readily available. Often, scholars are forced to seek access to texts through online or in-person academic networking. One scholar also lamented the tribalism of the American tradition and the difficulties it creates for international research: “What tends to happen is national schools develop that are very divergent, that would describe the same object in utterly different ways. And I think it's pretty valuable to try to get across those barriers.”

Another issue for scholars with an international focus is the sheer variety of academic and library practices across the globe, multiplied by cultural differences and, sometimes, geopolitical considerations. Practically all archives or special collections have their own institutional rules and policies around access to and reproduction of materials. This can be difficult for traveling scholars to navigate, but can also prompt new avenues of research. One respondent, for example, remarked that learning how non-American institutions function made him ask questions which he would not have otherwise thought of asking. Another scholar described how she was able to offer her subject expertise in processing a new collection in an overseas library: “When I was trying to find things, they learned things. They also started filling

out their own knowledge base when I took things out. ... So I was able to give them something back to them.”

Several scholars expressed strong desire to work with local collections on-site or return them to their countries of origin. A few are also engaged in gathering primary materials themselves in innovative ways. In one case, a scholar was actively assembling a collection of non-canonical, non-mainstream materials in a variety of formats, with the help of local volunteers who combed through secondhand book stores and flea markets. The scholar strongly feels that these objects should remain locally, but is working with several national institutions in their region of origin to digitize them and make them available internationally. Another scholar was concerned that small-press publications in South Asia are not getting digitized because of lack of funds and know-how, and remarked that cooperation with western institutions would benefit all parties.

While most interviewees discussed the challenges of access to international materials, some mentioned the challenges of scholarly publishing for international audiences. One interviewee weighs the pros and cons of publishing in both English and Spanish, which would allow for the translation of previously untranslated Spanish sources, and also make the research available to receptive audiences in both scholarly communities. However, there would be a significant difference between English and Spanish editions: Anglophone audiences would require more background explanation than Hispanophone audiences.

Several other curious issues cropped up during the interviews, such as dealing with the idea of national patrimony, pride, sense of proprietorship and misgivings about access to foreign researchers, especially if the object of the research is an internationally known figure. With lesser-known figures, the experience may be different: some scholars cited above-and-beyond assistance from local archivists and scholars. Cultural differences may also manifest themselves as gender bias in male-dominated societies.

Theme 3: Discovery and Access

Interviewer: I just want to go back one step ... how do you look – where do you look for books? Do you go to the library catalog? Do you go to OCLC? Do you go to the Library of Congress?

Interviewee: Amazon.

Interviewee: I'm always frustrated that I'm not finding the perfect next collection to look at. It does still seem mysterious – you know, ... what's where, what exists, and probably more what doesn't exist.

The interviewees' methods of discovering and accessing relevant materials vary considerably. While some make use of library catalogs, scholarly indices, and archival finding aids, others make little or no use of library discovery tools. Instead, they rely on commercial search engines (Google and Google Scholar), commercial websites (such as Amazon.com), Academia.edu, and assistance from librarians and colleagues. A significant number of interviewees mentioned exchanges of information with colleagues (either in person or virtually) as one of their main ways of finding about and accessing relevant materials.

The more frequent users of library catalogs and scholarly indices tend to make use of a fairly limited number of these tools (in all 13 interviews, fewer than 15 different databases, indices, and catalogs were mentioned). Moreover, the most frequent users of library discovery tools tended to use the databases and catalogs that they were most familiar with, while acknowledging that there might be other relevant resources that they were not aware of. In addition, users of library catalogs and scholarly indices did not mention any complex use of the metadata in the bibliographic records and entries. For the most part, they described “keyword search” across catalogs, aggregators (like JSTOR), and indices, but did not mention other metadata elements (such as subject headings and hyperlinked fields) or filtering functions. In the words of one interviewee, use of one database was limited to “really obvious keywords,” such as proper names, “[b]ut I'm not doing it for more abstract research things.” There does not seem

to be a clear generational qualitative difference among the interviewees in terms of their use of catalogs, scholarly indices, and archival finding aids.

Several interviewees expressed interest in having a better understanding of the bibliographic description of materials and collections and in improving their search methods. "Sometimes I know of a book and can't find it," one interviewee said, "because I don't always know the best practices for subject searches." Another interviewee revealed that they "couldn't figure out how to do searches that got me to the kinds of things I needed in a way that felt like I was understanding what my selection process would be." Several interviewees also spoke about their interaction with library catalogs and finding aids in terms of "frustration" that leads them to commercial search engines: "often when I'm frustrated with our online library catalog, I go to Amazon and search that way."

As we note in Theme 3 (International Scope of Research), some of the interviewees also mentioned the Anglophone and American bias of the metadata in American research libraries. One interviewee pointed out that searching across scholarly and cultural traditions in library catalogs, academic indices, and databases may be a daunting task: "I worked very hard to try to see how things look from the point of view of other [scholarly/academic] tribes when I'm working, and it's really hard to do that, especially across languages."

Several interviewees also stressed the fact that the granularity of the bibliographic description is not always adequate. As one interviewee explained,

it turns out that there's a chapter in that book that you didn't think you needed to read that is actually on the thing that you're talking about. With more and more tables of contents in the library entries, you get around that sometimes, although sometimes your search doesn't even bring you the book because it's not tagged in the way that you are looking for it and that kind of thing. ... [S]econdary sources ... can remain invisible pretty easily.

Finally, most interviewees mentioned the contribution of librarians and archivists to their discovery of materials. However, for the most part, the assistance of librarians and archivists appears as an alternative to the discovery tools. Most interviewees did not mention the role of librarians and catalogers in facilitating the discovery of materials they did manage to find.

Theme 4: Research Training

Related to the challenges of discovery and access, another key theme in our interviews was that of the patchy nature of research training in graduate language and literature programs. Almost to a one, our interviewees remarked that during their graduate education, they received little or no formal guidance on how to do research in their fields. Even the few who mentioned graduate-level assignments requiring them to use library resources still described their graduate-level exposure to research methods as “haphazard.” Interviewees used terms like “ad hoc,” “trial and error,” and “hands-off” to describe the research training they received; some referred to themselves as self-taught.

This is due in part to the hyper-specialized and individualized nature of research in the humanities. Research methods can vary widely depending on a scholar’s areas of interest and disciplinary orientation, and graduate students are encouraged both to make original contributions and to become increasingly self-sufficient over the course of their training. Some interviewees described their own research as so “individual” or “idiosyncratic” that their methods applied to no one else. Comments like these contrast with our observation (in Theme 4, above) about the relatively small number of different research tools that our interviewees described using. For the faculty we spoke with, scholarship in languages and literatures often involves a perception of highly individualized research methods combined with a surprising degree of commonality in actual research practices among scholars. This paradox has clear ramifications for graduate education. When scholars perceive their own research as singular and

highly specific, they are less likely to generalize to their advisees about how to conduct research, even when some of their research methods almost certainly overlap with those of their colleagues. As one interviewee said, “I would never assume that I could be training grad students to work like I do.”

The absence of research training at the graduate level creates a self-perpetuating cycle: when graduate students become faculty and begin advising graduate students of their own, they often replicate the ways in which they were taught. Nonetheless, some faculty are trying to break this cycle. A majority of our respondents expressed concern over their graduate students’ level of information literacy, pointing to students’ lack of bibliographical skills and unwillingness to use resources beyond Google. Several have created some form of research instruction for their students or colleagues, often in partnership with librarians: archival workshops, writing courses that include a research paper, even an entire short course built around undergraduate research skills. A few interviewees mentioned having learned research skills themselves by teaching these skills to students or bringing their classes to the library. If subject librarians want to ensure greater research training and support for humanities scholars at all levels, one possibility might be to develop outreach and instruction programs that directly engage faculty in building research skills into the curriculum, or creating assignments that develop these skills.

One important area in which language and literature scholars do seek and receive research training is primary source research, especially with rare or archival materials. Interviewees whose work had an archival emphasis described learning how to do hands-on primary source research from special collections librarians and archivists, and stressed the importance of this kind of research for their students. Several interviewees who had not conducted archival research expressed a wish to learn more about it. When asked about library services they might want to see, one interviewee imagined a “so you think you might want to work in archives” workshop in which humanities scholars describe their archival research processes for their colleagues. Another interviewee proposed a “summer camp” in which

graduate students could visit a special collection or archive and work with an unprocessed collection.

By comparison, our interviewees were generally less concerned about their training in finding secondary sources, despite some of the issues with access and discovery that we note in Theme 3. A few, however, expressed awareness that the methods they had learned over the years didn't always extend to the full range of research tools now available. They noted that keeping up with changing research methods in an increasingly digital environment can be challenging, not least because of constant demands on their time as a result of the larger environment in which they work – demands that often made every aspect of the research process, from developing an idea to publication, more difficult.

Recommendations and conclusion

Given the themes and concerns that we found in our interviews, we suggest the following recommendations for libraries to better support scholarship in literature and writing studies:

- 1. Consider new strategies for subject librarians to support interdisciplinary research.**
 - Better communicate to faculty and students how subject librarians work together to provide research support for complex interdisciplinary projects. While it is common for subject librarians at NYU to collaborate on interdisciplinary research questions, not all of our interviewees were aware that this was an option.
 - Offer guidance when scholars are learning new fields as part of interdisciplinary research. We observed that the moment of crossing fields often entails a great deal of self-taught exploration. Librarians are in a good position to facilitate this process.

2. **Consider new ways to approach research training at all levels**, including peer-to-peer learning for faculty members, integrating research skills more tightly into the curriculum at both undergraduate and graduate levels, and training in interdisciplinary methods, as detailed above. While many of the Libraries' instructional efforts are targeted at students, these approaches can also benefit faculty, especially those who received little formal research training during their own graduate education.
3. **Expand support for internationally-focused research.** Specific examples may include, but are not limited to, the following:
 - Consider purchasing complete runs of non-English language periodicals that may be hard for scholars working intensively with these kinds of materials to find.
 - Using existing connections wherever possible, work with librarians in the regions that scholars study to offer input into digitization projects.
 - Consider, where possible, initiating international digitization projects that would make the intellectual content of materials available internationally while allowing the source materials to remain in a country of origin (a concern discussed in Theme 2).
 - Wherever possible, make international digitization projects more discoverable, whether through the library's interfaces or through library consortia or collective projects such as Wikidata.
4. **Address patrons' concerns about access issues**, and work with the User Experience team to improve search and discovery features in the Libraries' public-facing interfaces. Consider using other libraries' discovery systems as potential models.

Several of these recommendations connect directly with the NYU Libraries' current strategic priorities. For example, we suggest tying our recommendations on supporting internationally-focused research to the NYU Libraries' current strategic emphasis on inclusion, diversity, belonging, and equity. Another current strategic priority for the Libraries is developing a

communication plan and improving outreach efforts; as we found in our interviews with faculty members, communication gaps still persist between the Libraries and the faculty they support, particularly around awareness of the services that we offer. We hope that this report will provide further considerations for work in all of these areas.

Appendix 1: Interview questions

Supporting Scholars in Literature and Writing Studies at New York University (Fall 2018)

Semi-Structured Interview Guide

Research Focus and Methods

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

- Tell me a bit more about 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 do 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?