Future Bright For Digital Humanities Projects

By Sara Gilliam, University Communications

Brett Bobley, director of the Office of Digital Humanities at the National Endowment for the Humanities, recently compared UNL's scholars to the 1927 Yankees - the ball club that included Babe Ruth and Lou Gehrig.

Foundations are scrambling to fund UNL's Center for Digital Research in the Humanities projects, and faculty members have received so many awards it's hard to keep them straight.

A joint initiative of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln Libraries and the UNL College of Arts and Sciences, the Center for Digital Research in Humanities is advancing collaborative, interdisciplinary research by creating unique digital content, developing text analysis and visualization tools and encouraging the use and refinement of international standards.

None of this success comes as a great surprise to Katherine Walter or Kenneth Price, codirectors of the center. They have watched the digital research community at UNL expand and flourish for nearly a decade - to date, the center has collaborated with faculty in nine departments, and has engaged more than 100 students in research projects.

Established in 1998 as the Electronic Text Center, the program was different from other universities' initiatives.

"At many schools, E-Text centers were geared toward mass digitization of library collections without regard to a scholarly perspective," Walter said. "From the beginning, we focused on the scholar and the scholar's desire to work in a digital medium on their own humanities research."

Price came to UNL from the College of William and Mary, already immersed in work on the Walt Whitman Archive. Around the time he accepted an endowed professorship at UNL, he received his first NEH grant, and shortly thereafter he and Walter received additional funding from the Institute of Museum and Library Services.

Four years later, the center was designated a UNL Program of Excellence.

"Suddenly, significant money was coming in to the humanities," Price said. "At the same time, the university was looking to realign itself in difficult budgetary times. There was a movement to not just have the university weakened by budget cuts, but to actually build on strengths, and do the difficult work of identifying points of excellence and enhancing them. We were fortunate to benefit from that process."

"Beyond the university wanting to bolster external funding for humanities, the center's projects are very interdisciplinary in nature and this attracted notice," Walter said. "Also, our projects are garnering national and international attention, and this leadership is great for any university."

Both Price and Walter believe that digital humanities have flourished at UNL because the administration "gets it." The process of cultivating digital research in the humanities - and establishing protocols for faculty in the field - has been the result of cooperation among faculty and administrators, Price said.

"Part of the difficulty is that digital work is by its nature new and experimental," he said. "The Web has been around for 15 years, so there hasn't been a lot of time to develop well-thought-out, matured forms of peer review for Web-based publications. But as a university, do we want to say, 'OK, we're not going to take part in transformative work because we haven't yet figured out all the wrinkles of tenure and promotion as it applies to this? That would really be putting our heads in the sand.'"

Because of the Internet and the availability of digital resources, people are studying the humanities differently than before, Walter said. They have access to remarkable amounts of research and materials, as well as enhanced opportunities to collaborate with colleagues in other fields of study.

Price offered as an example of the unique possibilities of digital humanities research a new UNL-based project on Civil War-era Washington.

"We're just at this point pursuing where the questions lead," he said. "We have broken down traditional ways of pursuing research, in that it's no longer solitary, no longer necessarily leading to an article or a book. It's pulling together a big team and exploring big research questions."

As new software and methods develop, Walter and Price aim to keep the CDRH nimble. Faculty affiliated with the center are exploring dozens of new content areas - for example, UNL anthropologist Mark Awakuni-Swetland has received funding to develop a digital Omaha-Ponca dictionary, and anthropology professors Peter Bleed and Douglas Scott recently launched "Cuban Battlefields of the Spanish-Cuban-American War," available online at http://cdrh.unl.edu/cubanbattlefields.

The center has also been working in partnership with the University of Nebraska Press in order to explore the field of digital humanities publishing.

"The press offers peer review and a level of scholarly integrity, provides an editing function, and brings to the table marketing expertise," said Will Thomas, professor of history. "The press has a long track record of managing the process of peer review and maintaining high standards for scholarship, and that's something that digital scholars need. If Nebraska can be a place that pioneers this relationship between a press and a research center that's going to be a very positive thing."

Thomas added that this collaboration would not focus solely on the work of UNL authors. Its intent would be to publish the best digital scholarship from around the world.

Price believes that a partnership with the press will also address the economic issues of digital humanities research.

"One of the striking features of the Web is that a very large percentage of its content is freely available, yet high-quality content is expensive to produce," he said. "So how do you produce expensive content, and give it away? What role does a press have as a revenue recovery model, if not a generator of profits? These are complex questions we're just beginning to ask."

Kenneth Price and Katherine Walter.