Draft Guidelines for the Professional Evaluation of Digital Scholarship in History
Department Review Meeting
American History Association Annual Meeting
January 4, 2015

Notes

Linda Downs and Betty Leigh Hutcheson were invited to attend the American Historical Association (AHA) department-head review meeting and observe the discussion of the Association's draft guidelines for evaluating digital scholarship in history. Participants included ten heads of history departments representing research universities, teaching universities, and colleges from across the country, each of whom had reviewed the draft guidelines in advance of the meeting.

The AHA committee described the draft as advocating for and outlining general guidelines for evaluation of digital history for tenure and promotion on a departmental and college level. Edward Ayers, University of Richmond, heads the AHA digital committee and stated that the intent of the draft is to encourage acceptance of digital scholarship by historians without prescribing a set of rules to follow that might quickly become outdated. Individual departments, tenure committees, and provosts should determine each university's specific guidelines. AHA will also prepare resources for departments, such as a list of experienced digital researchers who could serve as outside evaluators of the methodology and content of digital research. The guidelines aim to provide faculty with an AHA sanctioned document for supporting the development of digital research and its evaluation for tenure and promotion.

Discussion and Concerns:
Digital history guidelines are long overdue. The AHA document should take a lead in developing a strong statement on digital scholarship.

The committee should add specific arguments for the importance of digital history guidelines and concrete examples or scenarios of what constitutes or determines evaluation of digital scholarship.

The document should include definitions that indicate when database and tool-building should be considered methodology rather than service. In addition to considering process-oriented activities, the document should give greater attention to the maintenance and support of quality research, regardless of medium.

The group responded positively to the portion of the document that outlines the responsibilities of digital scholars in addition to departmental responsibilities. However, additional paragraphs are needed to guide tenure committees, deans, provosts, and librarians. These groups have a responsibility to understand the arguments surrounding digital history, and to be prepared to provide job descriptions and adequate resources when hiring digital historians.

The AHA draft guidelines recognize that all parties at an individual institution involved in faculty advancement decisions should be engaged in developing evaluative guidelines so that digital research is given equitable treatment when compared to analog research. Guidelines will vary according to institution: Some departments recognize database development and software development as contributions to methodology, but (as at George Mason and Berkeley) often when evaluations reach tenure committees and provosts they are devalued back to service contributions. Learned societies should provide departmental faculty with arguments that can be made above the department level for

tenure and promotion decisions. (The National Council on Public History [NCPH] has a pamphlet that departments can distribute to provosts that includes arguments in support of digital projects.)

Some department heads requested time equivalents for producing various kinds of digital scholarship such as software or databases, as compared to monographs, oral histories, or museum catalogues. A public historian described the process that his subdiscipline had gone through for their approach to history to be recognized as valid for evaluation. He suggested that there be a greater emphasis on "process" as opposed to "product," and that scenarios inserted into the document could provide analogies to traditional research. If this kind of detail is included in the guidelines how can these be kept up-to-date in a practical way? The AHA would need a regular review of the material.

Additional Suggestions
- Share tenure guidelines between university departments.
- Seek assistance from publicly oriented disciplines (such as studio art) or scientific disciplines for a greater understanding of digital evaluation.
- Develop a general evaluation template that each university could modify. The NCHA document, *Tenure and Public Historians*, contains a list of best practices.
- Follow the NEH Digital Humanities Implementation Grant guidelines for defining innovation or develop a separate statement for this purpose.
- Devise a statement about social media as research. Many faculty members consider blogging as research and expect it to be evaluated as such. A sentence could be inserted that begins "If your department determines that blogging is research . . . ."
- Recognize the importance of other types of peer review, such as that of grant applications, and recognize post-publication review as important.
- Provide ways of quantifying non-peer reviewed work.

The AHA committee will revise the draft with the goal of presenting a final document to the council (the CAA and SAH Board of Directors equivalent board) this spring. AHA has funds in their Mellon grant to participate in the CAA/SAH meetings. We will invite representatives to our face-to-face meetings as the CAA/SAH task force progresses.