

**SCHOLARLY COMMUNICATION INSTITUTE 6:  
HUMANITIES RESEARCH CENTERS**

**University of Virginia  
July 13-15, 2008**

***Introduction and Meeting Summary***

With funding from The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, the Scholarly Communication Institute (SCI) began in 2003 with the goal of providing an opportunity for scholars and leaders in scholarly disciplines and societies, academic librarians, information technologists, and higher education administrators to design, test, and implement strategies that advance the humanities through innovative information technologies. The Institute convenes each summer at the University of Virginia.

Institutes 1-4 focused on the promotion of digital scholarship and its supporting infrastructure in digital humanities (SCI 1 and 3); and in selected academic disciplines (Practical Ethics in SCI 2 and Architectural History in SCI 4). In 2007, SCI 5 took a broad look at visual studies, a set of image-based methodologies, resources, and technologies that present special opportunities and challenges in the digital world.<sup>1</sup>

In SCI 6, participants undertook an exploration of humanities research centers and their potential to advance technology-enabled scholarship. Centers afford a flexible organizational model that serves as home to interdisciplinary investigations and the development of new research agendas. They were called out as sites for innovation by the American Council of Learned Societies (ACLS) in its 2006 report, *Our Cultural Commonwealth: Cyberinfrastructure for the Humanities and Social Sciences*.<sup>2</sup>

SCI 6 was designed to determine what collaborative actions a group of humanities centers might undertake that would promote technology-enabled scholarly communication. Though we are particularly interested in how new technologies can advance scholarship, the goal of this meeting was to engage centers organized in a variety of models and with differing orientations towards technology. In this report we use the term “humanities research centers” to denote both those centers that were conceived with the express purpose of addressing issues of technology—often called digital humanities centers—as well as those more traditionally conceived, with no specific technology agenda. Digital humanities are academic pursuits “using information technology to

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<sup>1</sup> For more background on the Scholarly Communication Institute, see <http://www.lib.virginia.edu/sci/>.

<sup>2</sup> For the report and its background, see <http://www.acls.org./programs/Default.aspx?id=644>.

illuminate the human record, and bringing an understanding of the human record to bear on the development and use of information technology.”<sup>3</sup>

A wide spectrum of research centers were represented at this institute: local, campus-based centers that serve all humanities and social science faculty; discipline-specific centers; a national center of excellence that formed around a rich collection of rare primary-source materials; a digital humanities center housed within an academic department; a digital humanities center that constitutes an academic department; a campus-based center that supports experimental work in digital humanities; and an international institute that relies on digital technologies to share multilingual resources and maintain an international network of collaborators. Also represented were several centers still in the development phase with explicit plans to focus on new technologies.<sup>4</sup>

The fourfold **goals of the meeting** were to:

- identify shared aspirations for the humanities, focusing on those particularly enabled and promoted by new information technologies;
- look at the current landscape of centers, identify complementary strengths among centers, and investigate areas of potential collaboration;
- develop a framework for collaborative action; and
- engender a conversation about common challenges and solutions that participants will continue among their peers.

To achieve these goals, SCI leadership assembled a group of distinguished scholars and academic professionals with complementary experience and perspectives on humanities research centers. Participants included:

- directors of humanities research centers;
- scholars whose research and teaching has been transformed by imaginative uses of new information technology and who are themselves practicing new forms of scholarship; and
- academic officers and administrators who play key roles in university infrastructures, together with funders who make this possible.

### **Shared goals and a framework for action**

By the end of the meeting, participants had identified several concerns and challenges around which they could make common cause. A consensus emerged with respect to:

- the desire to integrate new information technologies fully into the mainstream of research and teaching
- the urgent need to agree on what constitutes a contribution to scholarship in the digital era (i. e., one no longer tethered to print and privileges the scholarly monograph above all else)
- a view of how centers may complement each other and constitute a whole greater than the sum of its parts (“the ecology of centers”)

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<sup>3</sup> Schreibman, Susan, Siemens, Ray, and Unsworth, John, eds. *Blackwell’s Companion to Digital Humanities* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004) xxii.

<sup>4</sup> For a list of participants, see <http://www.uvasci.org/current-institute/invited-participants/>.

- what potential centers have to effect desirable changes

Participants identified a common framework for action, with concrete steps moving forward:

- to align centers with complementary strengths;
- to capitalize on special opportunities for traditional and digital humanities centers to collaborate on areas of common interest; and
- to develop and seek funding for a project or an initiative that could address one or more of the strategies identified.

There are existing networks of centers that do act to coordinate interests and actions, among them the Consortium for Humanities Centers and Institutes ([CHCI](http://www.chcinetwork.org/)), with over 150 allied institutions across the globe; and [centerNet](http://digitalhumanities.org/centernet/), an alliance recently forged among several dozen digital humanities centers.<sup>5 6</sup> Individuals from centers allied with one or the other consortia participated at SCI. These groups could be the framework through which centers could “work together and form alliances...to fill knowledge gaps and transfer expertise across campuses.”

### **Next steps**

SCI leadership will work with the leadership of the CHCI and centerNet to explore the development of a common agenda, the substance of which may include:

- methodological issues with respect to digitally-enabled research; and
- how to credential digital scholarship through an examination of what constitutes a contribution to scholarship in today’s academy.

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.chcinetwork.org/>

<sup>6</sup> <http://digitalhumanities.org/centernet/>