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Learning about grey literature by interviewing subject librarians

A study at the University of Rochester

During the 2003–04 academic year, staff at the University of Rochester (UR) River Campus Libraries studied how faculty members find, use, and produce grey literature to do their scholarly work. We formed a research team that included an anthropologist, librarians, a graphic designer, computer scientist, programmer, and cataloger, and we learned the methods of work-practice study.¹ With funding from the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS), we then interviewed 25 faculty members in art and art history, economics, modern languages, linguistics, physics, and political science with the hope that what we learned would be useful in designing additions or modifications to our institutional repository.²

As we conducted and analyzed the interviews from this study, we discovered that some important questions about grey literature remained. What exactly constitutes grey literature for UR's faculty in today's digital world? To what extent do our faculty members create and use grey literature, and might that material be deposited in our institutional repository?

We also knew that the information gained from the departments studied under the aegis of the grant was necessarily limited, and we were interested in somehow expanding the reach of the study. We wanted to know which types of grey literature are most prevalent in all the disciplines and departments on our campus, not just the ones represented in our study. Could we tap into the expertise of subject librarians who work with faculty to inform our understanding of the grey literature used in other academic departments?

Ultimately, we hoped that what we discovered would be useful in providing support to faculty who wished to make their grey literature available via our institutional repository. To learn more, the five subject librarians who were part of the larger research team (the authors of this paper) interviewed all of the River Campus Libraries subject librarians on the topic of grey literature.

Getting started

To begin, the five of us questioned each other about our own faculty members' use of grey literature to ensure that we were asking the right questions and to get a sense of how best to conduct the interviews. Interviewing subject librarians was important for several reasons. In our larger study, it was difficult to ask faculty some of the most basic questions regarding grey literature. *Grey literature* is not a term used by most faculty members. In addition, we found that faculty research, even within the same department, tends to be narrowly focused, making it a cumbersome and unrealistic task to get a general sense of the variety

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and range of grey literature from faculty members only. By contrast, our librarian colleagues were readily accessible to us, already had some familiarity with grey literature and with our project, and were enthusiastic about exploring the topic with us.

While most librarians are familiar with the term *grey literature*, we discovered that there was much that subject librarians did *not* know about grey literature, especially in disciplines other than their own. We all found it useful to pool our knowledge and make cross-disciplinary comparisons.

For consistency's sake, we provided a standard definition at the beginning of each interview. We defined grey literature as, "that which is produced by government, academics, business, and industries, both in print and electronic formats, but which is not controlled by commercial publishing interests and where publishing is not the primary activity of the organization."³

In each interview we asked the same three questions:

- Do you know of materials in your area that would fall into the grey literature category?
- Do you get requests from faculty for grey literature? If so, what do they request?
- Has your interaction with grey literature changed within the past few years? If so, what do you think caused these changes?

Participation in the interviews was entirely voluntary. There were no "right" or "wrong" answers. We simply wanted to know what subject librarians thought was important grey literature for their departments. Each interview was tape-recorded and lasted for 30 minutes or less. After each interview, the grey literature team prepared a written summary and asked the librarian we had interviewed to review the summary for any corrections or omissions, which were then incorporated into the final summary. Altogether, we interviewed 20 subject librarians who are responsible for 25 disciplines.

In addition to interviewing subject librarians, we met with staff in the Interlibrary Loan Department to ask about the grey literature requests they receive from faculty

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Table 1. Grey literature important to multiple UR departments

Type of grey literature	Number of Departments
Conference presentations and papers	17
Theses and dissertations	13
Datasets	6
Technical/research reports	5
Videos	4
Teaching materials	4
Government publications	4
Preprints	3
Working papers	2
Invited talks	2
Miscellaneous materials to supplement publication	2
Audio	2

members. These discussions were also a rich source of information.

What we learned

Faculty members and graduate students in all disciplines use a number of types of grey literature. The most prevalent types are listed in Table 1, which shows that theses and dissertations are important to more than half the departments, as are conference presentations and papers. Ten additional types of grey literature are significant to at least two departments, with datasets being important to six.

At the other end of the spectrum are those types of grey literature that are significant to only one department, as shown in Table 2. A wide variety of subject areas is represented here through such items as linguists' dictionaries and grammars, psychologists' tests, and engineers' patents and standards.

While these same results would not be found at all institutions, the patterns seen here can provide insight into another institution's academic context. In our study, for ex-

ample, theses and dissertations are of prime importance to departments offering doctoral programs. At other institutions, one might find sociologists with a strong research interest in datasets and historians who rely on images.

In addition to learning more about the range and types of grey literature used, we discovered that rather than working through their subject librarian, patrons often go directly to our Interlibrary Loan Department to obtain "grey" materials. For example, we learned that interlibrary loan fills more and more requests for media such as DVDs, VHS, and audio files.

Also, many interlibrary loan requests result in Internet links that can be passed on directly to requestors, and, not surprisingly, Google is used by the Interlibrary Loan Department as a means of finding esoteric items. What is obvious is that one cannot make easy assumptions about grey literature. It takes on different forms in different departmental settings. For institutions supporting digital repositories, the lesson is threefold:

- To achieve campus-wide acceptance, repositories need to accommodate a variety of types of grey literatures.

Table 2. Grey literature unique to a single UR department

Type of grey literature	Department
Association papers	Anthropology /Sociology
Images	Art/Art History
Research proposals	Chemistry
Theater and dance programs	Dance
Patents	Engineering
Standards	Engineering
Dictionaries and grammars	Linguistics
Tests	Psychology

Table 3. Types of grey literature associated with departments/disciplines

Department or discipline	Ranking^{T1}	Most common types of grey literature^{T2}
Art and Art History	1	<i>Images, conference papers, theses and dissertations, videos, archival material</i>
Astronomy	3	<i>Theses and dissertations, Astrophysical Data System materials, NASA reports, data, astronomical data catalogs</i>
Biology	3	<i>Conference presentations and papers, sequence databases</i>
Brain and Cognitive Sciences	2	<i>Invited research talks, videos, Cogprints, sign language bibliography</i>
Business	2	<i>Working papers, theses and dissertations, datasets</i>
Chemistry	2	<i>Research proposals and grant applications, conference presentations and papers</i>
Computer Science	1	<i>Technical reports, conference proceedings, preprints, some datasets</i>
Dance	1	<i>Videos of university and guest dance performances, theater and dance programs</i>
Economics	1	<i>Working papers, theses and dissertations, business school papers, datasets</i>
Education	1	<i>Conference proceedings, research reports, theses and dissertations, teaching materials, curriculum guides, psychological tests</i>
English	3	<i>Conference papers, invited talks, teaching materials, bibliographies, unpublished studies and interviews</i>
Engineering	2	<i>Patents, standards, conference proceedings, technical reports, theses and dissertations, U.S. Gov tech reports (EPA, DOE, etc.), corporate tech reports (HP, IBM, Microsoft)</i>
History	2	<i>Conference papers, theses and dissertations, government documents</i>
Laboratory for Laser Energetics	3	<i>Technical reports; conference papers; data sets; theses and dissertations; preprints and eprints; annual reports; bulletins and newsletters; house journals, manuals, and technical specifications and standards; bibliographies</i>
Linguistics	1	<i>Dictionaries and grammars, audio and data to supplement published work, conference papers</i>
Mathematics and Statistics	3	<i>Preprints, datasets</i>

(continued on next page)

Table 3. Types of grey literature associated with departments/disciplines (continued)

Department or discipline	Ranking^{T1}	Most common types of grey literature^{T2}
Modern Languages and Cultures	2	<i>Conference papers, theses and dissertations</i> , government and international publications, association publications
Music	1	<i>Conference papers, theses and dissertation, video and audio of performances</i> , musical society newsletters and bulletins
Optics	3	<i>Supplements to published work</i> , company and lab reports (both in-house and published), military standards
Philosophy	3	<i>Conference papers, theses and dissertations, teaching materials</i>
Physics	3	<i>Theses and dissertations</i> ; ArXiv, SLAC, CERN eprints; government documents; reports and data from NASA, NIST, and national labs
Political Science	1	<i>Working papers; datasets</i> ; policy briefs; think tank, institute, and nonprofit newsletters, reports, and statistics; government documents
Psychology	2	<i>Conference papers, tests, datasets, theses and dissertations</i>
Religion and Classics	1	<i>Conference papers, theses, teaching materials</i> , church papers, archival materials
Sociology and Anthropology	3	<i>Association papers, conference presentations, materials to supplement publications, theses and dissertations</i>
Women's Studies	2	<i>Conference papers</i> ; newsletters; research reports from nonprofit, government, NGOs, international agencies; conference proceedings
Writing Program	3	<i>Curricular materials, conference papers</i> , ERIC materials

T1- Ranking refers to the likelihood that the department is a good source of submissions to our university's digital repository. Departments with a #1 ranking are the ones that we plan to approach first.

T2- Types of grey literature that appear in italics are those that are most likely to be submitted by our own faculty into our university's digital repository.

- Interest in various types of materials may be unique to a discipline or have a large cross-disciplinary audience.

- Subject specialist librarians are an important source of expertise about grey literature.

Table 3 represents the distillation of all the discussions with our subject librarians and shows the major types of grey literature used by the UR departments. Putting information into this tabular form was useful in a number of ways:

- Common themes become apparent. For example, theses and dissertations are almost universal types of grey literature.

- Specialized and unusual types of material also stand out. Who would have thought that foreign government publications were so significant to the modern languages department?

- To be honest, for the subject librarians, compiling all the information into this extensive chart was gratifying.

Since subject librarians do not fill many direct requests for grey literature, they tend to believe that they are not very knowledgeable about it. On the contrary, we find that subject librarians have a depth of knowledge about the grey literature used in their own disciplines that is extensive, hard won, and valuable. This knowledge was easily increased by the sharing that occurred as part of the interviewing and debriefing processes.

Lastly, and of most importance for one of our immediate goals, it gives us a guide to the principal types of material that we may expect the various disciplines to deposit into DSpace, our institutional repository.

Implications for institutional repositories

Our institution has implemented an institutional repository, so one of our primary interests in conducting the study was to identify the departments and disciplines that are most likely to be early contributors. In this regard, we paid special attention to the copyright issues associated with each type of material and with what we know of the culture of each discipline. We asked, for example, whether a given discipline was known for sharing, per-

haps by putting its results on the Web as soon as possible, or for playing it “close to the chest” until the results can be formally published.

Based on these considerations, we identified the departments to approach first in soliciting material for our institutional repository. These departments represent disciplines in which grey literature is not currently easy to locate and retrieve. Our expectation is that this targeted, high-probability-of-success approach will give our institutional repository a strong start that only gains momentum in the months and years to come.

We have gained a better understanding of how our faculty members acquire information on their own and thus a better sense of how to support faculty both in bringing outside literature into the university and in disseminating the grey literature produced within the university by our own scholars.

The interview process provided an opportunity to learn more about our colleagues, the departments they support, and the grey literature that is typical in other disciplines. We have a greater appreciation of the huge range of materials and formats covered by grey literature, the overlap of this literature among some disciplines, and the relative importance of grey literature to all our disciplines.

Most importantly, we know how we, as librarians, can help our institutional repository to become an even better instrument for archiving and disseminating grey literature.⁴

Notes

1. Nancy Fried Foster and Susan Gibbons, “Understanding faculty to improve content recruitment for institutional repositories,” *D-Lib Magazine* 11, no.1 (2005), www.dlib.org/dlib/january05/foster/01foster.html (accessed Jan. 20, 2005).

2. UR Research, <https://urresearch.rochester.edu/index.jsp>. Accessed May 20, 2005.

3. D. Farace, Third Annual Conference on Grey Literature, Luxembourg, November 1997.

4. We wish to thank our subject librarians, the interlibrary loan staff, Katie Clark, Nancy Foster, and Susan Gibbons for their contributions to this article. ♪