

Interview with [Professor Meredith Martin](#) (Faculty Director of The Center for Digital Humanities at Princeton)
November 17th, 2015

Melissa S: Just to jump in, because I know your time is very valuable, can you say a little bit about your role in [Princeton's Center for Digital Humanities](#), and how you came to be involved with DH and also the Center?

Meredith M: This is the Center for Digital Humanities at Princeton's second year with a physical location. We started last year officially, but before that, we were an initiative that I started with a number of faculty colleagues as well as colleagues from the University Library and from our Office of Information Technology . We began as a discussion group, bringing together faculty from across all divisions of campus -- from computer science, from sociology, from all of the humanities departments. These discussions began in September of 2011. Over the course of the 2011-2012 school-year, we developed four focus groups after holding a a day-long meeting in January 2012. We decided collectively that we wanted to do some research on what Princeton could offer and was already offering, since we are so resource-rich. We wanted to investigate whether we needed to have a Center at all. The preliminary meetings in the fall of 2011 were primarily to talk about what other peer institutions had and what kind of possibilities there were to support digital work at Princeton. We talked about collaborative and interdisciplinary possibilities across campus. Then we thought about how we might develop a kind of white paper that we aimed to complete by the end of the spring term of 2012. We also started thinking about a mission statement for the initiative itself at that January meeting.

After our January meeting, we broke into those four focus groups that met separately over the course of the spring 2012. These were defined by the group as "teaching and research," "infrastructure," "funding," and "programming." Programming meant basically inviting people to campus to give talks, but also offering workshops Princeton wasn't already offering. Infrastructure was tasked with thinking about what Research Computing, the McGraw Center for Teaching and Learning, the Library, etc., was already doing. At the end of that spring the four focus groups turned in a separate section of a vision statement to a steering committee that we had assembled. That vision statement was then put together by the steering committee over the course of the summer of 2012.

With the advice of what we called an "executive committee" including the Chief Information Officer, the Deputy Dean of the Faculty, the Executive Director of the Humanities Council, and the University Librarian we turned the vision statement into a document asking for a Center. This was their strong advice.

Over the course of the fall 2012 we revised the document and submitted it, and then I worked closely with the Provost over the course of that year, approved officially sometime in early 2013. In that approval process we were approved to hire an Associate Director, which is the first thing that we wanted so that it wasn't completely grassroots, faculty run with all of us doing this volunteer work that was not recognized service.

Basically 2012/2013 was revising the proposal, and 2013/2014 was the year of the search for the Associate Director, and that was also the year that I was officially named the Faculty Director of the "Center"; however we didn't yet have a physical Center. I spent most of that year (13/14) fundraising, and I raised half of the total operating budget with support from 25 different departments and divisions as a three-year commitment with a substantial amount of that support coming from Princeton's Humanities Council. I took this broad-based campus support to the Provost's Office and the new Provost (the former Provost had been named President) were very supportive when they saw the work we had done. The University Library took the Center for DH as an administrative home at the University and funded the search for the Associate Director, as well as helped us to become a fully-fledged academic unit (the first in the University Library). Being an academic unit rather than an administrative unit at Princeton means that we can have faculty teach, support research grants for graduate students and stuff like that. Jean Bauer was hired in the academic year in July of 2014, and 2014/2015 was her first full year, and now 2015/2016 is her second year.

We now have a temporary (they call it "swing") space that we were given at the beginning of last year, Fall 2014. It's in the former psychology department. Some of our offices are converted observation rooms that are more like small closets with one-way glass. We put some particleboard up so that they don't look so horrible, but we have equipment, we have space, we have our stuff there. We're in our official third year as a Center, but we didn't have any physical space except the last two years so we really think of this as our second official year.

Melissa S: This sounds so familiar to me. Humanities people coming to DH, not necessarily through tech, but through working together with a lot of library collaboration.

Meredith M: It wasn't as much library collaboration as OIT at Princeton. Actually [we] didn't have that many librarians involved other than librarians who were actively working in GIS (of which we have many) and one "Digital Initiatives Coordinator" hired by the library but not trained as a librarian. Since 2007, I have been working on my own digital project called the Princeton Prosody Archive that certainly led me to think "what's going on at Princeton? Why can't Princeton help me instead of me having to go to all these other Universities?"

Melissa S: I'm curious in its inception, how you came to name the Center, how everyone agreed to call it a Digital Humanities Center? The class that I'm in has been talking a lot about people's aversion to that term, some claim that it's too ubiquitous and maybe be a buzzword that covers too much, compared to others who use it [[here](#) and [here](#)]. I tend to like that about it, and obviously CDH likes it as well. I'm curious how CDH conceives of the term, "digital humanities"?

Meredith M: As we say on the website -- it's the first thing we say, "while the global digital humanities community is constantly defining and redefining itself, we embrace and include some understanding that respects and investigates the myriad of ways that digital methods and technology are opening an avenue to research, and the human experience." We've never been only a humanities Center, and I think we chose the term because it's what the administration recognized. People knew what it was, and I think

anybody that works in digital humanities recognizes this inaccuracy. To me, it's really the same thing as "English." The English department doesn't just teach English, but teaches Anglophone literature, Critical Theory, history of the book, etc.. For us it's a necessity so that people recognize us to some extent but it doesn't necessarily mean that "digital" or "humanities" is all that we do. For instance, we advise as much about data cleaning as network analysis, and we have many social scientist and computer scientist collaborating and working in the center alongside humanists.

Everything does have to pertain to the human record, but that doesn't necessarily mean that's the only funded avenue of humanities research. We try to address that in the second line of our statement on the first page of the website. We're not ambivalent about it, but we understand that it's constantly evolving and changing.

Melissa S: I actually found the section of the website "[New to Digital Humanities](#)" very useful. You have a really great [article](#) that I'm going to include in the interview. I think it will be really helpful to our class. And that's actually a great comparison to English departments, I hadn't thought about it that way.

In being interdisciplinary and, in using that approach, can you describe any projects that come to mind, that can contextualize how that's done at [the CDH]?

Meredith M: All of the projects are inter-disciplinary. There's not a single one that really doesn't. If you want to look at the projects page and tell me which one you're interested in hearing about, I'm happy to tell you more about it. Every single one of the projects involves two or three different disciplines. If you want me to name what the disciplines are, from the project page, I'm happy to do that, but it's even clear from the description. The ABC folks were using TEI and now they're using visualizations, so there's computer science involved. The Prosody Archive engages with the history of linguistics, obviously computer science if you're thinking about how to code non-standard characters, history of the teaching of English, some pedagogical history, it's not an archive of poetry, it's the art of studying poetry, it's also historical.

Melissa S: I was really interested in the [ABC](#), the one dealing with children's literature, and what was going on there.

Meredith M: What the students do in Children's Literature is to think about how computers need to be taught how to read, just like children need to be taught how to read. The first iteration of the course presented a parallel between children's literature in the ABC Books archive and thinking about text encoding, and its challenges, which becomes a theoretical problem for the students. Many students in the class completed an archival project where they selected a book and analyzed the morphology of the book. We also have them think through how they might code the book differently – for animals, colors, shapes, etc. There's a lot of discussion about computer reading, and about reading in general, and about literacy, media literacy, computer literacy.

The class is supported by the Center, which means there is a graduate student who oversees the other graduate student instructors. At Princeton there is the Professor and

then we have discussion groups, which Princeton calls “precepts.” There are] 450 students currently enrolled in the spring 2016 Children’s Literature class. And each of those students will go to lecture twice a week, but then once a week they’ll go to their discussion group, and that will be a small group of no more than 12 students, taught by a graduate student. But one of those discussions will be taught by the professor.

In those discussion sections, the graduate students will give the students the option of doing a digital humanities project in lieu of a traditional paper. Not all of them have to do with text encoding this year. We have a head “assistant instructor” or AI, who coordinates the graduate student instructor and trains them in digital methodologies digital pedagogy, and in how to evaluate digital scholarship. Then there’s an ongoing course website where they’re continuing to build a database of all these ABC Books from the rare books collection, from the Cotsen children’s book library.

Melissa S: Oh wow. I didn’t realize the amount of pedagogy that went into that project, that’s great.

Meredith M: In the three years of the Center’s start we’ve had specific goals for each year. Last year we focused on intake for faculty research projects. This year we’re focusing on graduate student training and graduate student research, which is why we are training the assistant instructor and giving them tools to do digital pedagogy. We also employ graduate student project managers on every single one of our projects, so all graduate students who are project managers go through project management training. Some of the graduate students, of course, have to learn different technology depending upon the project. Next year we’re focusing on undergraduate curriculum.

Melissa S: That sounds wonderful. You’ve already talked a little bit about the physical space, so I’ll just jump halfway into that question. Are there current plans to, or what are the current plans for, updating the space, or changing the space in the future?

Meredith M: We move into the library’s physical space in 2017. Our main humanities’ library, Firestone, has been under renovation for the past 20 years, and we’re coming to the end of it, we’re at 70% completion. Luckily, they weren’t so complete that we could not squeeze in a Center for Digital Humanities inside the new library. We are not now physically in the library, like I said, we’re in a temporary space that used to be occupied by the psychology department. In 2017, if everything goes well, we will move into our new space in the library. We’ve been involved in its design over the course of this year and even last year, meeting with architects and designers to consider our needs.

It will have office space for our developers and designer, the Associate Director, the Business Manager, the consultants, the post doc, all of that. Currently in our space we have the Associate Director, and basically all the staff is there, except for me because I have an office in the English department. You’re not allowed to have two offices at Princeton because space is at a premium. The Associate Director, [Jean Bauer](#) is there, the two post docs are there, [Claude Willan](#) and [Joseph Yannielli](#). The six-year graduate student, Ben Sacks, is there sometimes; he shares an office. The project manager, [Natasha Ermolaev](#) is there, half of the time, and then our Digital Humanities Consultant from the library is also there half of the time. He has an office upstairs so he kind of

comes down when needed. We have another staff member who is a liaison for the Office of Teaching and Learning, but he's in the McGraw Center, so he only comes over for meetings or if he's working on a project.

I feel like I'm missing someone who is also there. I really can't think of anyone else, there's a lab space. We have a big space that we use for meetings but also for talks. We have large plug-in displays that we mostly use. We have white board walls that we use all the time. Each office had its own computer and stuff like that, and in the meeting room. It's a nice space. It works for us.

Melissa S: That's interesting; we're having a similar problem. We don't really have a digital humanities space, and we're [the class I'm currently in} struggling to conceive what that space would look like, and what we would even put in it. So that helps a lot when thinking about who should be there, and what should be there.

I guess the big topic that has been coming up nearly every week in my class, is the inequalities that can come with DH, or maybe are just always in our discipline, but we're seeing them carried over into DH. I see that the CDH has an upcoming event on that very issue, ["Building Race and Gender and Otherness in DH,"](#) can you talk more about that event, or the center's other efforts at inclusivity?

Meredith M: We're in the process of hiring right now; we have three positions, actually four positions, well soon have five positions we're hiring for. Just at the level of the job search, we are very careful and conscientious to advertise on lists that would reach nontraditional and minority candidates. We're doing a lot of outreach. Both Jean and I are incredibly aware of the need to increase the visibility of diversity in DH. Our executive committee represents a number of different demographics and a number of different disciplines on campus, which is really important to us.

In terms of this year's programming, Jean and I decided that we wanted to try to focus on having primarily women come to speak. We haven't made a big deal out of this, but our three main speakers are Joanna Swafford, Julie Flanders, Natalie Houston coming in the spring, in addition to Meredith McGill who will be on campus teaching for us in the spring. We didn't make any big fanfare about it, but we thought, "you know, that's what we want to do." That's one under-the-radar way that we're doing thinking about gender representation in the field. We're really hoping that with some of these hires we can increase the visibility of diversity in our own staff. We have gender diversity, but we don't have as much racial or ethnic diversity as we would like. We are hoping we can hire to represent the talent we know is out there.

Melissa S: That's great. And in part of doing that and bringing graduate students in for the next generation, as far as students go, has it been difficult to get students to understand this type of work, or are the students who are coming, are they coming with tech experience? Or is that something that the CDH is offering to get them into TEI, into different parts of the tech world?

Meredith M: It really depends on the type of project. If you do a scan of the website you can see the kinds of workshops that we offer. We try to cover the basics of things like visualization, network analysis, GIS, TEI, things like that. We also have a number of higher-level projects that aren't necessarily on our slate yet, that are in the process of being proposed for next year, that will have a large graduate student and undergraduate teams. A lot of the tech depends on the projects specific needs. For instance, the [Mapping Expatriate Paris Project](#) has trained quite a number of students in TEI, because it's encoding these really interesting, and kind of wacky, library cards. All of the students who are working on that, including the project manager Jesse McCarthy, and the research staff, which are all four graduate students from the English department have . all had to understand and learn what it means to make choices about TEI, and there wasn't really any resistance to it. They just said, "Oh that's what we need to do to work on this project, and this project is really cool."

Now they're all really good at it and can be deployed on other projects. The Phono-Post project has a lot of visualization, has a graduate assistant thinking with them about that along with an undergraduate in Computer Science. The graduate student Natalie Berkman, and whose project is [Digital Oulipo](#), has had the steepest learning curve. She had to teach herself Python, but it was part of what she wanted to do. She did some online courses, and we're trying to hook her up with people who can provide some follow-up workshops. We're really responding to what people need and not assuming everyone uses the same thing since the projects are so diverse.

Melissa S: That's so great, I saw you have two TEI workshops coming up. I'm so jealous, they look great.

Meredith M: Part of our focus on TEI this term is also because Julia Flanders is so well-known in the field so we're letting her do the second one. [Clifford Wulfman](#), who is the DH Consultant and who is also the project lead for the [Blue Mountain Project](#), has training and expertise in TEI so he taught the first workshop. There's also a large team of graduate students from across the humanities departments, actually none from English on Blue Mountain, but they employ four metadata editors.

Melissa S: My last question extends to thinking about the profession and the trajectory that we're on in academia. How you imagine DH work being assessed in the future? You mentioned earlier, all this work that was put into building the space wasn't originally seen as work done as part of your professional time or service, but I think we can obviously see that is starting to change. I'm interested in how you see digital scholarship being assessed, and how you would hope for it to be assessed in the future?

Meredith M: In 2011, which is also when I started this initiative basically, I attended this NEH funded workshop about how to evaluate work in digital humanities and digital media. There was a report that group delivered to the MLA about evaluating DH work for tenure and promotion. I've always been interested in thinking about these higher-level tenure promotion issues, which is why for our project intake process we have the professors and graduate students to submit project proposals that undergo a very stringent peer-reviewed process by our Executive Committee, and then when they do get their projects accepted by the Center it's not, "oh yeah we'll do this for you," it's actually you pass

through quite a large hurdle and develop a work-plan, a design review, a project charter, and a statement of sustainability. All of this documentation is on our website.

We based some of this on the NEH longer version to prepare our faculty to apply for external grants as well. We're about to send out our call for projects, but definitely [check back on the website](#). It shows how many steps people need to go through to get their project accepted because we can't accept all of the projects. Then what we do is communicate with the chairs of all of the departments to give them an overview of what these procedures are so that when they receive a report at the end of the year from their faculty for promotional purposes, they will know that this isn't just a kind of side project. This is a crucial part of their research that has gone through peer review, that has all this documentation, monthly reporting, benchmarking, and that this is a serious research project.

So that's how we're trying to do things at Princeton. Educating the chairs about how to evaluate this work and then educating the Dean of the Faculty so that the faculty and administration understands it's a really big deal when the project gets accepted by the Center. We are not a service shop. We're a research center. So if you have a project accepted, [it's] basically like you got a grant. You are accepted into something that was very competitive.

Melissa S: That's great, I'm definitely going to have to check back on that and share that with my class. We've been really interested in that issue of professionalism and how that is tied to under representation and inclusivity as well.

Meredith M: I think for the graduate students especially, because graduate students can have projects accepted as official Center projects also, it's a really big deal; that means as a graduate student you basically beat out a faculty member, if their project better scoped and thought out. But that's sort of one wonderful thing in terms of going out into the world and talking about your work – you had a project accepted -- but it's also wonderful that graduate students have to learn how to manage a project and integrate that project into their dissertation work. So there are a lot of other ways that they're learning skills that could be an applicable alternative not only in academic careers, but in their own academic careers. Because all academics have to write grants.

Melissa S: That's so wonderful. Thank you so much again for talking with me. I know your time is so valuable and you're so busy. I really appreciate it.

Meredith M: It's my pleasure, Melissa, and good luck with your class.