

Executive Summary: Supporting Humanities Doctoral Student Success Cornell University Library and Columbia University Libraries

Recent studies in higher education indicate that humanities doctoral students show the highest attrition rates and longest time to completion relative to other disciplines. The Cornell University Library and the Columbia University Libraries collaborated on a study (funded by the Gladys Krieble Delmas Foundation, the Council on Library and Information Resources, and their respective Graduate Schools) to identify how the library might better support doctoral students in the humanities, given this context.

The objectives of the study were twofold: (1) to conduct a user-needs study of doctoral students in the humanities at Cornell and Columbia to determine if and how library services and collections impact attrition and completion rates, and (2) to propose possible library intervention strategies that could positively address these two issues. The one-year study, which included focus groups and one-on-one interviews with students, was completed in February 2011.

Preliminary findings are based on the analysis of 45 one-on-one interviews conducted with students in the English, history, medieval studies, art history and religion departments, among others. Study participants had been enrolled in a doctoral program an average of three years. Two-thirds of the study participants had completed their coursework. Overall, participants were satisfied or very satisfied with their academic program, level of funding received, library collections and library services. Not surprisingly, humanities doctoral students are heavy users of library physical spaces and spend between two and six hours in the library, often daily. The top three activities in which study participants engage when they visit the library are reading, doing research using library resources, and browsing collections. Fewer than half of the participants reported that they regularly write in the library.

Five themes emerged from our interviews concerning the challenges students face in successfully completing their academic programs. Among them, students emphasized the importance of accessible space for both quiet, individual study and group activities supporting dissertation writing and discussion groups. They stressed the significance of communities of support for promoting both their academic success and emotional well-being. Students expressed their needs for assistance with information management strategies and frustration with citation management applications. Lastly, they conveyed their concerns about project and time management, publishing and professional engagement, and their varying degrees of self-assurance as developing scholars.

Opportunities for expanded and new library services will be identified in each thematic area, by each library. At Columbia, implementation of recommendations from this study coincides with the development of the Digital Humanities Center. At Cornell, they will inform the feasibility of an immersion program for graduate students in the humanities.