BRIEFING PAPER
for Digital Project Leaders

Faculty members who create digital humanities projects, even quite successful ones, may face difficulty in developing reliable sustainability plans that cover all their ongoing costs for maintenance and enhancement. One source of potential support is the faculty member's own college or university. But gaining the degree of support needed, whether in the form of ongoing funding, staff time, access to special equipment, or other in-kind contributions, cannot be taken for granted. Rather, this arrangement is often the result of careful planning and some advocacy on the part of project leaders, and it seems to happen most often when the institution has a real stake in the resource at hand.

The following briefing guide offers questions to help project leaders consider the future needs of their resources and frame the value of their own work when seeking support from their host institutions.

What will you need in the future?

What will your resource require in order to continue to deliver value after the end of the grant period?

Most project leaders do an excellent job of envisioning the work needed during the grant period, but considering what is needed to sustain the project's impact post-grant is just as important.

- What impact do you want your project to have?

- What ongoing development or activities will be necessary post-grant in order for that to happen? Adding new content? Upgrading hardware or software? Promotion and outreach? Project management?

- Which activities can be best executed by others, such as a library or IT partner? Which activities must you do, or at least find a way to fund, yourself?

Whether projects remain independent endeavors or embed themselves in larger platforms or infrastructures (e.g., an institutional repository), most will need to think about how to undertake activities to ensure consistent access and impact. Simply developing a plan for basic storage is not enough, in many cases, to ensure adequate access and impact. Thinking through these questions beforehand will allow you to develop a strategy for sustainability and value. For additional detail on developing a post-grant strategy, see Ithaka S+R's Framework for Post-Grant Sustainability Planning, http://sr.ithaka.org/sites/default/files/files/Framework_20130718.pdf.

What are your succession plans?

Have you considered what will become of your digital resource should you move on?

Many project leaders demonstrate deep devotion to their work, but few have considered what will become of the project they have created should they move to another institution or when they retire. Past research indicates that having a "champion" for a project is one of the most important points in developing a sustainable project. Thinking about exit plans, documentation of key processes, and building in associates or partners who can take on the work is an important part of a long-term sustainability plan for any major digital resource.

- Establish a clear succession plan for ongoing management of the resource. Who will run the project, if not you? Will the resource be deposited with the library, the IT department, or a discipline-based repository? Does documentation exist outlining standards and practices?

Who are possible partners within your institution?

Ideally, you have been working with either the library, the IT department, or another campus-based partner from the start, so that costs and standard formats have already been built into the plans for your project. If this is not the case, it is time to determine who these partners might be and how you might work with them.

Questions to consider when approaching potential partners include:

- What support will the partner provide: Storage? Preservation? Curation? Marketing and outreach?

- What value will the partner derive from this partnership?

- How will the partner be credited for this arrangement?

- Over what time period will this support be required and be available? What plans are in place beyond that time?

How does your project align with institutional priorities or solutions for support already in place?

Does your project present unique value to your institution? Why is your institution uniquely suited to supporting your resource?

Library, IT, and university administrators we have spoken with report that they are more likely to agree to take on projects that they did not initiate themselves if (1) the projects are strongly aligned with their own institutional mission, and (2) the projects have been created in ways that are technically compatible with the systems they already have in place. You may find it helpful to speak directly with institutional leaders, academic administrators, library directors, or IT managers (among others) in order to explicitly identify the research and teaching priorities and commitments of your college or university.

Questions to ask when studying institutional priorities:

- Are there specific areas of expertise or subjects of interest within the support units or departments at your institution?

- Are there any current institutional initiatives for supporting digital resources? The library might have a repository, or the social sciences might have a data research center.

- If these priority topics or initiatives exist, how will your project fit into those structures or advance those topics?

Making the case: why should your host institution help to sustain your resource?

A common assumption is that a faculty member's host institution will willingly take on support of her digital projects, but this is not always the case. In order to draw host support, whether from a library, a center, a central IT department, or other campus-based unit, you must present some type of value to the institution. Ideally, this bond has been forged in the early days of your project. But if not, it will be even more important to take into consideration the value your project offers, whether because of a substantial or highly enthusiastic audience of users, demonstrable importance in research or teaching, or close alignment with the history or mission of the institution. Ideally, supporting a project that has demonstrated value will reflect well on the institution that sustains it, and an institution's lack of support for such a project will reflect badly on it.

You should be able to speak clearly and decisively about the impact of your resource. Considering basic questions about audience and usage and impact will help you to structure an argument for why your host institution should support your resource. The person you should approach with your case for support will vary by institution and project needs, but we anticipate that this may be a provost, a dean for research, or the head of a support unit such as the library.

- Who are the people using your resource? Do you have figures on the size or composition of these audiences?

- How are they currently using your resource?

- Are there any other indications that the broader community is noticing your resource?

- What other positive impact does your host institution derive from supporting or being associated with your resource? Conversely, will your host institution be viewed poorly for allowing your resource to expire or move elsewhere?

- What is the unique value of your project? What needs does it satisfy that other resources may not?

- How will the community respond if your resource is discontinued?

- At the same time, you should be clear about the support and terms that you expect from your host institution.

- What specific activities and funds does your project require? What will such activities or funds be used for?

- What costs will be borne by the project itself?

- What other measures are you taking to minimize the ongoing costs and needs of the resource?

- Will there be any possibilities in the future for generating revenue from your resource or from related consulting or advisory work?

- Over what time period will you require support? (Explicit signed agreements for defined periods of time are relatively rare, and you may have to agree to less stable implicit agreements for support.)