This special issue of Polymath considers the accomplishments, status, and future shape of informatics scholarship in the humanities and social sciences at Master’s Comprehensive universities and undergraduate-intensive liberal arts colleges. Informatics scholarship, which applies digital content as a primary methodology, is poised to become standard practice. This movement is underscored by William Pannapacker, who observes in The Chronicle of Higher Education in 2011, “at this point, the digital humanities are The Thing. There’s no Next about it. And it won’t be long until the digital humanities are, quite simply, ‘the humanities.’” As informatics scholarship moves from an experimental endeavor to the forefront of academic practice, finding ways to make digital tools and methodologies accessible beyond the research university has become a priority. In this issue of Polymath, scholars from San Jose State University, Southern Illinois University Edwardsville, Coastal Carolina University, The University of North Carolina at Pembroke, and St. John’s University discuss both the potential benefits and challenges underlying this movement.

Master’s Comprehensive universities and undergraduate-intensive liberal arts colleges provide new avenues for introducing undergraduates to digital scholarship and for shortening the digital divide—the gaps that occur in skill sets and technology literacy for certain members of the population, based on socioeconomic status, race, and region. According to 2009 data from the U.S. Census, the lower the household income and educational level in a family, the less likely people are to have access to or use the Internet. Master’s Comprehensive Universities, like those where a number of the scholars contributing to this issue are employed, were designed to support diverse regional student populations, including first-generation, working-class, and non-traditional students—the very populations who may still lack Internet access at home and who are more likely to use dial-up services or to work on older computers. Even when students have access to the Internet, limited exposure and training has provided them with only basic technological skills. According to educational researcher, Joanna Goode, students develop a technological identity early that can impact their ability to manipulate digital environments when they enter college.

The digital divide isn’t just experienced by students; the concentration of informatics scholarship at research universities has cordoned off access to this scholarly practice so that it may be difficult for some scholars to establish or maintain a foothold in the field. At these teaching intensive universities, bringing faculty and students together may be the best method for addressing the digital divide faced by both faculty and students. In a September 2013 article for The Chronicle of Higher Education, William Pannapacker addresses the elitism that some administrators and faculty perceive within the digital humanities by explaining that “even before DH arrived, liberal-arts colleges were moving from traditional, lecture-based courses toward a model of teachers and students as co-researchers, collaborating across disciplines and cohorts, attempting to build projects that can serve a wide range of needs.” Although Pannapacker’s article primarily speaks to growing initiatives at liberal arts colleges, his claims apply equally to Master’s Comprehensive universities renowned for their undergraduate curricular innovations.

As Katherine Harris explains in her article for this issue, Informatics initiatives have thus far struggled to involve undergraduates, which, according to Jerome McGann, a founding scholar of the digital humanities, is the only way to ensure the future growth of this innovative field. Informatics can provide undergraduates with a deepened understanding of their program of study in addition to major-specific technical skills to take into professional environments or graduate-level study. Master’s Comprehensive universities enroll a diverse body of undergraduate students who, via the digital
humanities and social sciences, could learn not just how to use technology in their daily lives but how to build, manipulate, and effect technological change as they work closely with professors on publishable research.

The Interdisciplinary Research and Informatics Scholarship Center (IRIS) at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville is a living example of the digital humanities and social sciences in action at a Master’s Comprehensive institution working to close this digital divide. Two of the papers in this issue have come out of this digital research center, founded in 2010, with a goal to foster faculty-student informatics collaborations at the undergraduate and graduate levels. As a general rule, IRIS associated projects involve students directly in the conception as well as the work of digital project creation, a philosophy that is well-aligned with the unique capabilities of the faculty and the institution. After a College of Arts and Sciences supported a faculty roundtable to discuss methods of supporting digital research in the humanities and social sciences, the College provided a newly furnished lab in fall 2010, which has been further equipped over time through a combination of University funds and external grants.

Since the Center opened its doors to the academic community, it has undergone a positive growth trend in facility users, with five faculty research projects currently underway as of the 2013/2014 academic year. Many of the student users come from SIUE’s Undergraduate Research and Creative Activities (URCA) program, which provides students a stipend for working individually with faculty on a pedagogically significant project. DeSpain’s article for this special issue discusses the role that the URCA program plays in her scholarship in greater depth. This program, one of many initiatives at SIUE founded to foster undergraduate research, has been paramount for IRIS and its students. The IRIS Center is currently developing an interdisciplinary minor in the digital humanities and social sciences so that students can apply digital methodologies to their fields of interest. The Center’s participants hope that the minor will increase interest in the facilities and provide a new host of well-trained students eager to work with faculty.

However, as a Center in a Master’s Comprehensive institution, IRIS has also faced a number of challenges that seem characteristic of digital humanities and social sciences efforts at comparable universities. These range from how to best foster equitable faculty-student collaborations, to curriculum design, to how the Center’s goals match with institutional policies, procedures, and facilities. As Harris’s contribution explores, one ongoing question is how to integrate digital humanities into curriculum design and construction in a way that engages undergraduates who may have very little experience with technology beyond being passive users. Another pressing issue, as discussed by DeSpain, is how to best involve undergraduates in faculty research so that it is an enriching activity rather than exploitative one. Faculty affiliated with the IRIS Center have also noticed that although Master’s Comprehensive institutions have been first adopters of what is called the “teacher-scholar” model, their administrative structures and their promotion and tenure policies don’t always value or support hybrid projects wherein students learn outside the walls of the traditional classroom environment and engage directly with faculty research, a discrepancy that Harris also touches on in her contribution. Also, technical support is rarely available at the capacity or in the form required for digital humanities and social sciences projects to be sustained and maintained as covered in the Bergeron and Rouse contribution. As a consequence, faculty and students have frequently had to engage in innovative DIY project set-up, sometimes at extreme levels as dealt with by both the DeSpain and Hildebrandt and Hu contributions. These challenges have inspired the editors of this special issue to seek submissions and inspiration from other scholars in the field.

Katherine Harris provides an overview of pedagogical theory in the digital humanities and what it looks like in practice at her own institution. Harris is candid about her successes and failures with digital humanities pedagogy, and she writes her contribution with a purposefully in-process style that exemplifies the digital play she encourages in her students. Harris addresses the sometimes exclusionary practices of digital humanities scholarship that has had a tendency to ignore pedagogical applications of the field’s tenets. Harris explains that much of digital humanities pedagogy happens under the auspices of faculty-led research initiatives, but she believes strongly that her students at San Jose State University learn most effectively when they are encouraged to experiment with, build, and analyze technology in the classroom itself. Harris describes both bloom-and-fade exercises that can occur within more traditional
classroom settings and full-semester experiences with digital humanities pedagogy at both the undergraduate and graduate level. Harris’s article concludes that the most challenging aspects of digital humanities pedagogy are often the most rewarding facets for undergraduates. Her examples demonstrate that, when done well, digital humanities pedagogy can address enduring issues that faculty face in the classroom: these projects challenge students to work collaboratively, analyze their own process as being as valuable as their final product, and push them to take risks for the sake of their own learning outcomes. However, Harris emphasizes that significant changes must be made, sometimes at the institutional level, for this pedagogical method to truly succeed.

Whereas Harris discusses how digital pedagogy might reinvigorate the classroom, Jessica DeSpain’s article considers digital humanities opportunities occurring beyond the classroom as a result of faculty-student collaboration. In her discussion of the editorial collective of students and faculty that have formed around *The Wide, Wide World Digital Edition* project, DeSpain explains that the very limitations that this project has faced at a Master’s Comprehensive institution have necessitated an equal partnership with the student editors who meet to work on the project weekly. Because DeSpain’s project considers the multiple versions of a bestselling nineteenth-century novel written by a woman, women have been the primary student population contributing to the project. In her article, DeSpain discusses how digital humanities pedagogy may have feminist implications for women in the humanities just learning how to encode texts and even program. DeSpain argues that faculty/student collaboration in the digital humanities at institutions like Southern Illinois University Edwardsville might help increase student retention rates, involve students in an engaged pedagogy beyond the classroom, and increase the number of women interested in pursuing more advanced degrees in the computer sciences.

Like DeSpain, Jennifer Travis considers how digital humanities pedagogy might move toward feminist practice. Travis’s article explores the outcomes of a semester-long project in her Nineteenth-Century American Women Writers course in which students add pages to Wikipedia for the historically-under-represented writers they cover in the class. After citing statistics concerning both the over-representation of male editors on Wikipedia and the dearth of well-developed Wikipedia pages for women writers, Travis goes on to explain that students in the class became active technological participants as they critique and revise their public Wikipedia pages. Travis’s students began to understand the importance of their reading and writing for an audience beyond the classroom. As Travis’s experience with her students affirm, digital humanities pedagogy that engages students in the construction of public online environments helps them think of themselves as more than passive technological consumers.

Susan Bergeron and L. Jesse Rouse’s paper is one of two case-studies addressing how GIS-geography (which involves technological advances in geovisualization) can productively and creatively cross both discipline and instructor-student boundaries. This paper explores how custom-designed virtual landscape simulations can be used as a venue for experiential and applied teaching and learning. In their project, undergraduate students work alongside faculty to learn about and develop immersive and interactive virtual landscape platforms in geography classes. Bergeron and Rouse observe that in this environment students not only participate in the simulation design and construction, but they also play an active role in collecting and archiving activities. As their paper demonstrates, projects in immersive, virtual, multi-media landscapes provide an interactive way for conveying core disciplinary concepts in a dynamic experiential setting. Guided by faculty, students are able to play leading roles in product design and development, which provides them with valuable lessons in collaborative creative processes. Bergeron and Rouse’s paper also speaks to the ongoing challenges inherent to this type of instruction-lead research at a smaller Master’s Intensive university, including outdated classroom technology, lack of technical support, and a curriculum structure that may not guarantee the minimal amount of pre-requisite student proficiency needed to embark on such projects.

Kristine Hildebrandt and Shunfu Hu’s paper is also a case study of cross-disciplinary GIS-geography interfaces. It explores the ways in which two distinct disciplines—GIS-geography and linguistics—can mutually inform and benefit from each other. Their paper illustrates the potentials and challenges of this cross-disciplinarity in the Master’s Comprehensive venue through a case study of documentation and geovisualization of endangered languages in Nepal. Their project includes a multi-media atlas of language
practices and attitudes in a multilingual region of Nepal that provides users with a way to visualize and analyze the complex settlement patterns and histories of the region and the current socio-economic pressures on the survival of the languages spoken there. Their study also shows that their interactive atlas contributes to a community of practice at both the local level (interactions between linguists and local community members and leaders) and at regional, national, and international academic levels (e.g. the sharing of knowledge, skills, resources and innovative ideas or approaches amongst scholars and between faculty and students). Hildebrandt and Hu demonstrate that scholarship at a Master's Intensive institution does not necessarily need to exclude faculty-student partnerships or cross-departmental collaboration, as this project provides for funded assistantships and volunteer internship opportunities for both M.A. and undergraduate students to create and design the various digital outputs.

It is our hope that readers of this special issue will find the discussions, case studies, and commentaries contained within to be thought-provoking and inspirational in their own research and instructional design, and that this particular contextualization of informatics scholarship will motivate further dialogue on this movement as it exists and is evolving in the Master’s Comprehensive setting.

REFERENCES


