

## The Value of Open Access to Undergraduate Research

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### Abstract

Open access is one of the prime motivators in the transformation of scholarly communication in the twenty-first century academy. While most of the attention of the movement has been focused on the work of faculty and graduate students, undergraduate researchers also offer great potential to be catalysts for change. The UNT Libraries have taken on an active role in encouraging and educating the UNT community on Open Access issues, including implementation of their Open Access Policy, providing repository services that support Open Access, participation in International Open Access Week, and year-round seminars on the importance of Open Access initiatives. This paper describes the importance of Open Access, its impact on the academic community and scholars, and initiatives of the UNT Libraries and Honors College for Open Access outreach.

### I. Introduction

Open Access – “the free, immediate, availability on the public Internet of those works which scholars give the world without expectation of payment”<sup>1</sup> – is one of the prime motivators in the transformation of scholarly communication in the twenty-first century academy. While most of the attention of the movement has been focused on the work of faculty and graduate students, undergraduate researchers have the potential to be catalysts for revolutionary change. Today’s undergraduates will be the scholars, professors, researchers, and librarians of the future, and their understanding of the Open Access movement will transform the academy over the coming decades. It is vital that we as educators encourage and nourish their involvement in and knowledge of Open Access initiatives.

The University of North Texas (UNT) was the first public institution in the state of Texas to implement a policy in support of Open Access. After the UNT Faculty Senate voted

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<sup>1</sup> SPARC. “Why Open Access?” <http://www.sparc.arl.org/resources/open-access/why-oa> Accessed August 4, 2013.

overwhelmingly to support the policy on March 9, 2011, the policy, “Open Access, Self-Archiving, and Long-term Digital Stewardship for University of North Texas Scholarly Works“, was approved by the Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs on February 1, 2012.<sup>2</sup> The policy allows for the establishment of the UNT Scholarly Works repository (<http://digital.library.unt.edu/scholarlyworks>) as the archive of record for the products of research and scholarly endeavor at the University. It recognizes the University’s responsibility to the larger society and encourages faculty to make their work publicly available to ensure the public trust in the University’s activities, and to increase access and visibility for their work.

The UNT Libraries have taken on an active role in encouraging and educating the UNT community on Open Access issues. The annual Open Access Symposium is an internationally recognized event that brings together key stakeholders from business, non-profit, and academic sectors. Two initiatives, Open Access Week and UNT Scholars Day, included a partnership with the UNT Honors College to feature the work of faculty-mentored undergraduate researchers. These students reflected on the impact of Open Access on their scholarly output, and were able to benefit from placing their work in the Scholarly Works repository.

## II. Undergraduates and Open Access at UNT

International Open Access Week is a global event promoting Open Access as the new norm in scholarship and research, which was in its 6<sup>th</sup> year in 2012. This was the first time UNT participated in the event, with support from the UNT Libraries, the Digital Scholarship Co-Operative, the Honors College, and the College of Information. Educational programming included a workshop on academic poster design, and panels featuring faculty, and faculty-mentored student researchers.<sup>3</sup> The student panel featured young scholars from a range of academic disciplines, including Political Science, Biological Sciences, Teacher Education and Administration, and Art Education and Art History. The panel highlighted the work of four students and their faculty mentors, who discussed their research and their thoughts on the role Open Access plays in disseminating their work, and providing access to scholarly work from other researchers that informs their studies. The students articulated a clear understanding of the importance of Open Access for their future research and academic careers.

The panel also addressed some areas of debate around the value of Open Access. Not every discipline values Open Access equally, and many scholars – including students – articulate concerns about protecting intellectual property rights and preserving the opportunity to profit

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<sup>2</sup> UNT Policy Office. Chapter 6 Faculty Affairs, Policy 17.5 “Open Access, Self-Archiving, and Long-term Digital Stewardship for University of North Texas Scholarly Works“ [http://policy.unt.edu/sites/default/files/untpolicy/17.5\\_Open%20Access\\_Self-Archiving\\_and%20Long-Term%20Digital%20Stewardship%20for%20UNT%20Scholarly%20Works.pdf](http://policy.unt.edu/sites/default/files/untpolicy/17.5_Open%20Access_Self-Archiving_and%20Long-Term%20Digital%20Stewardship%20for%20UNT%20Scholarly%20Works.pdf) Accessed August 4, 2013.

<sup>3</sup> UNT Digital Scholarship Co-Operative. “International Open Access Week.” <http://disco.unt.edu/oaweeek12> Accessed August 4, 2013.

from their work, while still supporting the principles of Open Access. For example, in the humanities there is a general sentiment that making a doctoral dissertation available electronically as an Electronic Thesis or Dissertation (ETD) will compromise a scholar's ability to publish their work subsequent to graduation. A 2011 survey of academic publishers found that 82.8 percent of responding journal editors, and 53.7 percent of responding university press directors were willing to consider work derived from Open Access ETDs.<sup>4</sup> Despite this evidence, the culture of the humanities remains resistant to making dissertations public, as demonstrated by the recent memo from the American History Association (AHA) recommending a six-year embargo of doctoral dissertations in history.<sup>5</sup> The students who participated in the Open Access Week panel expressed their appreciation for the opportunity to present their research work, and to develop a greater understanding of the stakes of Open Access through informed debate.

At the end of the spring semester 2013, the same panel of student and faculty participants reprised their presentations as part of UNT's University Scholars Day, a celebration of the work of undergraduate researchers that includes panels and a poster exhibition.<sup>6</sup> Academic posters from University Scholars Day and other student research materials are made available in the UNT Scholarly Works repository. Works in the repository are all provided with a permanent unique resource link (URL) that makes use of archival resource keys (ARKs) for global and persistent identification. Using this identifier allows students to link to their professional websites, academic profiles, or other media, and create an online portfolio of their work. A few of the panelists were graduating seniors who were able to reflect upon how having work published in *The Eagle Feather*, and visible in an Open Access repository contributed to their applications for graduate school.

In addition to this benefit, these students' participation in the panels, and the support of the UNT Honors College for sharing student work in *The Eagle Feather* and the Scholarly Works repository will make these students better equipped to make knowledgeable decisions about Open Access for their future work, and in turn help their future students or colleagues understand the value and impact of Open Access.

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<sup>4</sup> Ramirez, Marisa L., Joan T. Dalton, Gail McMillan, Max Read, and Nancy H. Seamans. "Do Open Access Electronic Theses and Dissertations Diminish Publishing Opportunities in the Social Sciences and Humanities? Findings from a 2011 Survey of Academic Publishers." *College & Research Libraries*. July 2013, 74 (4) pp 368-380. <http://crl.acrl.org/content/74/4/368.abstract> Accessed August 14, 2013.

Note: When placed in the UNT Scholarly Works open access repository, University Scholars Day papers are put under a 2-year embargo starting from their creation date.

<sup>5</sup> AHA Today. "American Historical Association Statement on Policies Regarding the Embargoing of Completed History PhD Dissertations." <http://blog.historians.org/2013/07/american-historical-association-statement-on-policies-regarding-the-embargoing-of-completed-history-phd-dissertations/> Accessed August 10, 2013.

<sup>6</sup> UNT Honors College. "University Scholars Day." <http://honors.unt.edu/university-scholars-day> Accessed August 10, 2013.

### III. Importance of Open Access Resources for Undergraduate Research

The Right to Research Coalition (RRC) is an organization of students founded in the summer of 2009 to promote “an open scholarly publishing system based on the belief that no student should be denied access to the articles they need because their institution cannot afford the often high cost of access.”<sup>7</sup> The realities of the twenty-first century academy, in which library funding cannot keep pace with the annual inflation in subscription costs, make Open Access crucial for students and scholars alike who need access to the latest research in order to remain competitive in both the academic and private sector job markets.

According to the RRC, students stand to gain significantly from Open Access because the current system limits both faculty and student access to cutting edge research publications and data, and puts students from smaller schools at a disadvantage in terms of access to scholarly publications. If scholars do not have access to current research, they cannot teach it in the classroom. Likewise, students cannot conduct adequate research for course work if they do not have access to supporting materials, which their libraries often cannot afford to provide. And one of the greatest benefits of Open Access materials is that research does not have to end with the degree, or at the boundaries of the university. Materials placed in Open Access repositories and publications become part of the public trust and are available openly for the public good.

Beyond the classroom, empowering students to share their work in Open Access repositories or to publish their research in Open Access publications allows them to take control of their intellectual property and provides them with greater exposure. Students with online Open Access portfolios have the ability to share their work widely and to participate in a culture of collaboration and sharing.

It is this last aspect of Open Access that has perhaps the greatest potential to catalyze change in contemporary scholarly communication. Open Access has the potential to break down walls within the academy, fostering collaboration and communication among scholars from across disciplinary divides. Broadening access to scholarly publications and research data can only help instill the culture of interdisciplinary practice that has been a popular buzzword in universities for a generation but that so far has failed to effectively materialize.

Outside of the university, we live in anti-intellectual times. Students, particularly those who want to go on to careers in the academy, must be better equipped to demonstrate the value of their research, and willing to share the products of their research with the general public. Students with a solid understanding of the issues of Open Access are better able to advocate for themselves, for their disciplines, and on behalf of the academy in the culture at large. Through events like Open Access Week and University Scholars Day, and publications like *The Eagle*

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<sup>7</sup> The Right to Research Coalition. “About Our Coalition” <http://www.righttoresearch.org/about/index.shtml>

*Feather* that provide students with opportunities to speak for themselves and share the product of their intellectual labor, the UNT Libraries and the Honors College are equipping this generation of students to transform the academy, and the culture they will inherit.