

Archives and the Management of Theses and Dissertations: An Exploratory Study

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Abstract: The management of theses and dissertations has been a matter of continuing discussion within the archives profession since the 1950s. With the establishment of electronic theses and dissertations (ETD) submission requirements in 1997, American universities have sought to provide researchers more equitable access to these materials. This shift in format appears to have raised additional questions about the status of theses and dissertations (TDs) as records, and their ongoing preservation requirements. This paper reports on an investigation of current practices for collaborating in the management of TDs by university archivists in the United States. This review focuses on the content of online publications related to TDs, such as university archives websites, institutional repository policies, and retention schedules. It also reports on a survey of archivists involved in the management of these materials. This exploration of existing practices focuses on procedural concerns, such as the maintenance of print copies, digital preservation, microfilming, and participation in external databases of TDs. It also explores the relationships between university archives programs and institutional repositories in ETD submission/management, and the status of theses/dissertations as student records.

Introduction

The Harold B. Lee Library is planning for the retrospective digitization of ~28,000 theses and dissertations (TD). The print collection has been managed by the University Archives since 1965. Electronic versions are also placed in our institutional repository (IR). To prepare for this project, the researchers sought to identify best practices related to the management and preservation of TDs and electronic theses and dissertations (ETDs) in other academic libraries in the Association of Research Libraries (ARL). This included a literature review and an analysis of online documents, followed by a survey sent to university archivists.

Problem Statement

Historically, the management of theses and dissertations (TDs) has been split between university libraries and university archives. For example, library texts such as Louis Wilson and Maurice Tauber's *The University Library* recommended the placement of TDs in the university archives,¹ while the earliest available publication in the archives literature was a case study by Andrew H. Horn at the University of California, Los Angeles in 1952.² In 1976 the Society of American Archivists attempted to clarify the position of TDs by passing a resolution declaring that they should be considered student records, but stating that they should be preserved "in the institution's archives or other location that has proper security."³ More recent guidelines to university archives management have also differed in guidance for

¹ Louis Round Wilson and Maurice F. Tauber, *The University Library: Its Organization, Administration, and Functions* (Chicago, Illinois: University of Chicago Press, 1945): 378.

² Andrew H. Horn, "The University Archivist and the Thesis Problem," *American Archivist* 15, no. 4 (October 1952): 321-331.

³ Society of American Archivists, "Resolution on Theses and Dissertations," *American Archivist* 40, no. 1 (January 1977): 148-149.

TDs, with William Maher declaring that they were best handled by university libraries while Helen Willa Samuels preferred the university archives.⁴

With the implementation of electronic theses and dissertations (ETDs) in the late 1990s, the maintenance and preservation of these born-digital documents has further complicated the issue. As libraries have taken the lead in developing IR systems' ETD management, archivists have sought to identify their role in administering records that they may hold—both ETDs and other university publications. Archivists such as Douglas Bicknese, Anne Sauer, Melissa Watterworth, and Amy Cooper Cary have called on archivists to be engaged in IR development and maintenance in part to preserve the role of archivists as managers of university records.⁵ This hearkens to Clifford Lynch's vision of IRs as a general repository for organizational output—both scholarly and archival.⁶ A survey by Elizabeth Yakel of archival content in IRs demonstrated that 70.6 percent of their content was archival, and that 45 percent of overall content was ETDs.⁷

As ETD submission has become standard, many universities are beginning to retrospectively digitize their print TDs collections for online access. Hillary Corbett and others have cited the desire for improved access to these materials, but also raised questions about preserving print copies in the general library stacks and in university archives.⁸

This project sought to identify best practices for collaborations with university archivists in the management of TDs in the United States. This review focused on the content of online publications related to TDs, such as university archives websites, institutional repository policies, and retention schedules. To supplement this research, we also conducted a survey of archivists involved in the management of these materials to explore the relationships between university archives programs and institutional repositories in ETD submission/management, and the status of theses/dissertations as student records.

⁴ William J. Maher, *The Management of College and University Archives* (Lanham, Md.: Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1992), 168; Helen Willa Samuels, *Varsity Letters: Documenting Modern Colleges and Universities* (Lanham, Maryland: Society of American Archivists and Scarecrow Press, 1998), 50.

⁵ Douglas Bicknese, "Institutional Repositories and the Institution's Repository: What Is the Role of University Archives with an Institution's On-line Digital Repository?" *Archival Issues* 28, no. 2 (2003): 81; Anne Sauer, "Why Archivists Should Be Leaders in Scholarly Communication." *Journal of Archival Organization* 7, no. 1-2 (2009): 54; Melissa Watterworth, "Planting Seeds for a Successful Institutional Repository: Role of the Archivist as Manager, Designer, and Policymaker." *Journal of Archival Organization* 7, no. 1-2 (2009): 27; Amy Cooper Cary et al. "Framing Collaboration: Archives, IRs, and General Collections," in *Collaborating for Impact: Special Collections and Liaison Librarian Partnerships*, Kristen Totleben and Lori Birrell, eds. Chicago: American Library Association, 2016: 27.

⁶ Clifford A. Lynch, "Institutional Repositories: Essential Infrastructure for Scholarship in the Digital Age," *ARL: A Bimonthly Report*, no. 226 (February 2003).

⁷ Elizabeth Yakel et al., "Institutional Repositories and the Institutional Repository: College and University Archives and Special Collections in an Era of Change," *American Archivist* 71, no. 2 (Fall/Winter 2008): 338.

⁸ Hillary Corbett, "Out of the Archives and Into the World: ETDs and the Consequences of Openness," in *Open Access and the Future of Scholarly Communication: Implementation*, Kevin L. Smith and Katherine A. Dickson, eds. (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), 19. See also Yuan Li, Sarah H. Theimer, and Suzanne M. Preate, "Campus Partnerships Advance both ETD Implementation and IR Development: A Win-win Strategy at Syracuse University," *Library Management* 35, no. 4/5 (2014): 398-404; Todd C. Peters, "Providing Broader Access: Texas State Retrospective ETD Digitization Project," Texas State University, <https://digital.library.txstate.edu/handle/10877/13648> (accessed December 19, 2022); Annie Wu, et al., "Here Be Dragons: Navigating the Uncharted Waters of Legacy Thesis and Dissertation Digitization," University of Houston. <https://uh-ir.tdl.org/handle/10657/8038> (accessed December 19, 2022); Rebecca Bakker, "Retrospective Theses and Dissertations Digitization Project: Digitization, Access, and Preservation," Florida International University, <https://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/glworks/69/> (accessed December 19, 2022).

Methodology

In order to gather information available on library websites in the spring of 2022, a list of ARL library websites was compiled, then narrowed to 100 sites, excluding both Canadian libraries and non-academic institutions. Both public and private institutions were included in the list. Information was collected from special collections and archives websites, IR websites, and from records retention schedules and collection development policies that were available online. Library catalogs were also searched to determine the location of physical TDs within libraries.

A Qualtrics survey instrument was developed to gather further information about the archives' role in relation to the IR, what UA content is hosted in the IR, what preservation methods are in place for TDs, and the status of any retrospective digitization efforts for print TDs. University archivists were also asked to rate their satisfaction level with the management of TDs and to suggest any change they would recommend for the process. The survey included 12 multiple choice questions, half of which also had an option to specify an alternative answer, and one fully open-ended question. Once the survey was approved and classified as exempt by BYU's Institutional Review Board, an invitation was emailed to the university archivist at the same 100 libraries identified in the website review. Responses were anonymous and were gathered over a three-week period in the summer of 2022.

The researchers reviewed the survey results and compiled the quantitative data. Responses to free-text questions were reviewed by each researcher separately and coded by theme; we then compared the code values to standardize the entries. The researchers also compiled and analyzed the data collected earlier from published web resources. Due to our method of subject selection, the survey data largely reflects the archives perspective.

Results

Retention schedule analysis

The review of institutional websites for retention schedules found that most ARL institutions (83 percent) make this information available to the public (see Fig. 1). It was more common for records retention schedules to be available for public institutions, with private institutions at times placing this behind a log-in page. However, there was only a weak linear correlation between a university's funding model and the availability of its retention schedule ($r=0.36$).

For institutions with publicly available retention schedules, we found that only 42 percent (or 35 percent of the total institutions) specifically listed TDs as records. Of these, the retention schedule called for TDs to be placed in a university archives unit in 10 cases. Other entries were non-specific, making the university library or the institution generally the responsible unit.

The institutional website review also found that collection development (CD) policies were found 17 percent of the time, with 35 percent ($n=6$) of those specifically mentioning theses and dissertations.

However, with the survey (see Fig. 2), 57 percent of respondents indicated that TDs were considered to be university records according to their institutional retention schedule. The record status of TDs did not appear to be statistically correlated to the institution's status as a private or public university ($r=0.05$). An additional six percent of respondents ($n=3$) indicated that TDs had previously been university records, but had been reclassified.

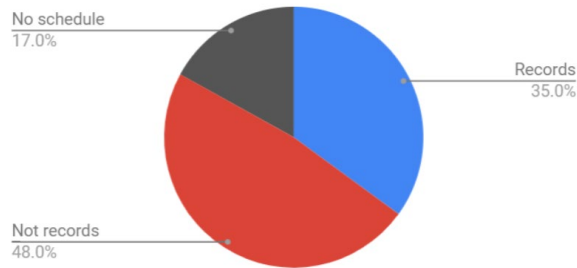


Figure 1. Theses/dissertations as records based on the website content review

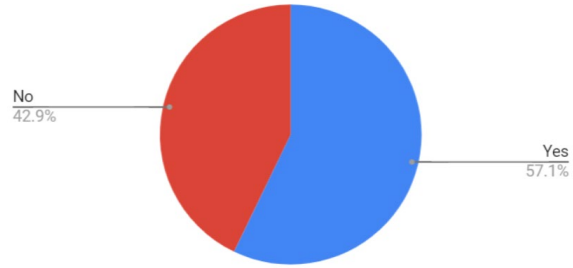


Figure 2. Theses/dissertations as records based on survey responses

Print theses maintenance

Reviewing the library catalogs for each institution, we found that most institutions (67 percent) had placed archival copies of their TDs under the care of their special collections or university archives department (see Fig. 3). As these copies are oftentimes not intended to be accessed, we found that 56 percent of institutions had placed them in either off-site or internal, high-density storage. However, it appears that most libraries (96 percent) had retained these archival copies in their original, print format rather than microfilm or another medium.

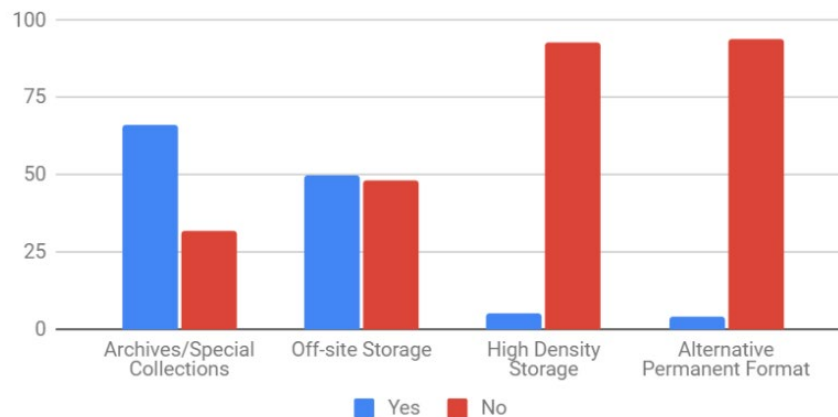


Figure 3. Theses/dissertations storage locations based on website content review

The responses to the follow-up survey confirmed the prevalence of maintaining print copies of TDs as a preservation measure (see Fig. 4). Among the respondents, 94 percent of institutions held print copies of TDs and 98 percent kept digital copies. Another 46 percent of respondents held microfilm copies as a preservation measure.

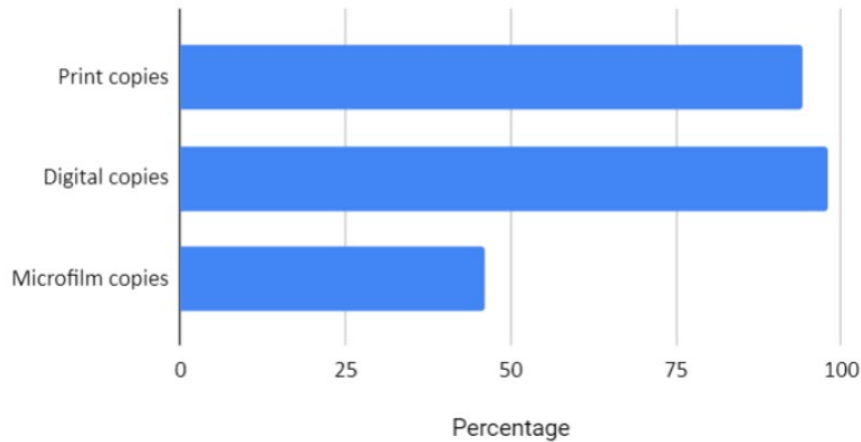


Figure 4. Theses/dissertations preservation methods based on survey responses

Theses/dissertations administration

In reviewing websites, we found that some archives have their own website while others are combined with a special collections website. Overall, 41 percent of the institutions made mention of TDs on their website (see Fig. 5). We also looked for references to the IR on university archives websites and found only 17 percent did so (see Fig. 6), although another 7 percent provided a link to the IR with no contextual information or reference to the presence of TDs in the IR.

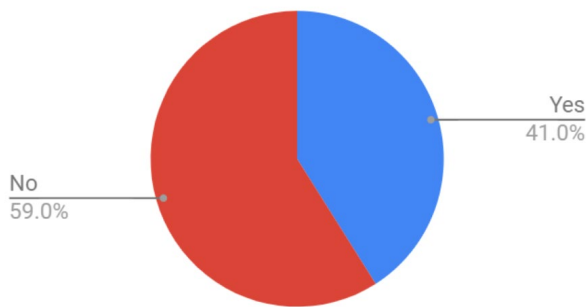


Figure 5. Archives websites mentioning theses/dissertations based on online content review

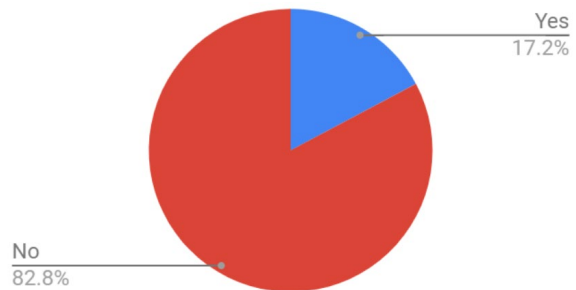


Figure 6. Archives websites mentioning Institutional Repositories based on online content review

With the survey, we sought to identify which unit was responsible for the preservation of TDs generally, and how that aligned with responsibility for publishing ETDs. Based on submitted responses, the most common response (40 percent) was for university archives to be responsible for the long-term preservation of the TD collection (see Fig. 7). Other responsible units included special collections (8 percent) and scholarly communication offices (8 percent), though many of the respondents indicated that this responsibility was shared between the university archives and either special collections or scholarly communication offices. For publishing functions, however, only 4 percent of university archives had responsibility for ETD publication (see Fig. 8). This task usually fell instead on scholarly communication offices, including the institutional repository (68 percent).

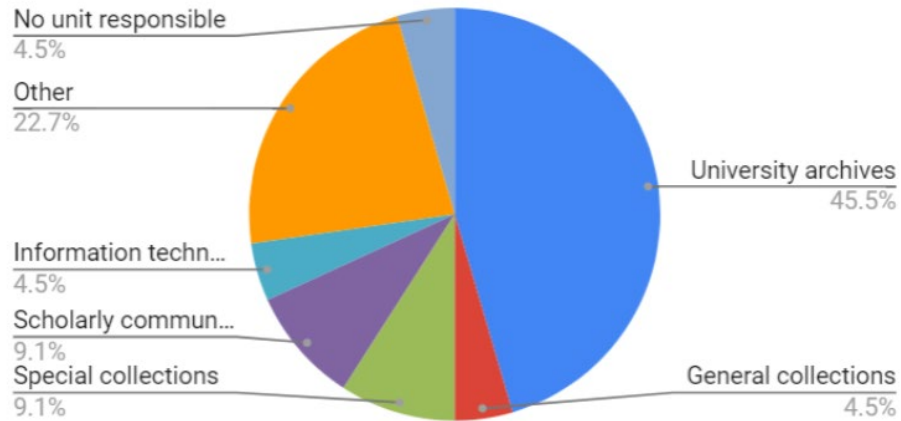


Figure 7. Unit responsible for theses/dissertations based on survey responses

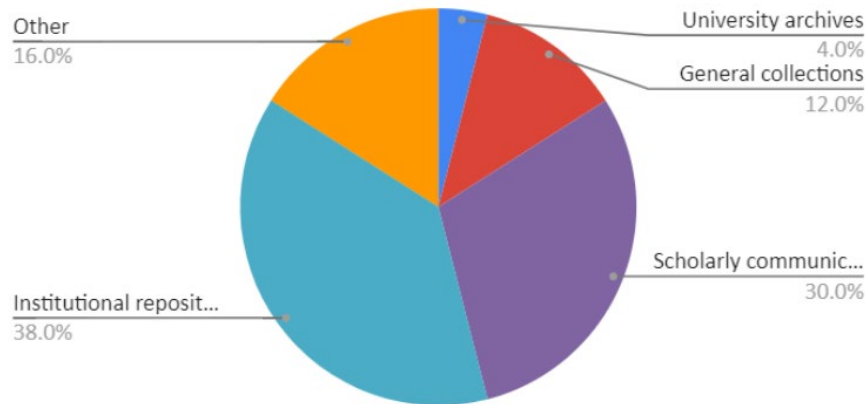


Figure 8. Unit responsible for ETD publication based on survey responses

Institutional Repository analysis

Examining the content of IRs at these institutions, we found from their websites that in most cases the platforms were focused on scholarly communication rather than acting as the general repository for university production imagined by Lynch. Of the IRs reviewed (see Fig. 9), TDs and faculty publications were found in most instances. Only 31 percent of the IRs held university publications (i.e., yearbooks, catalogs, newsletters, etc.), though we were able to locate digitized or born-digital copies of these publications for 88 percent of the sample. In cases where these publications were not available in the IR, they were found in the institution's digital library collections. We also found that 92 percent of universities did not include any reference to their archives program in their IR policy or support documentation.

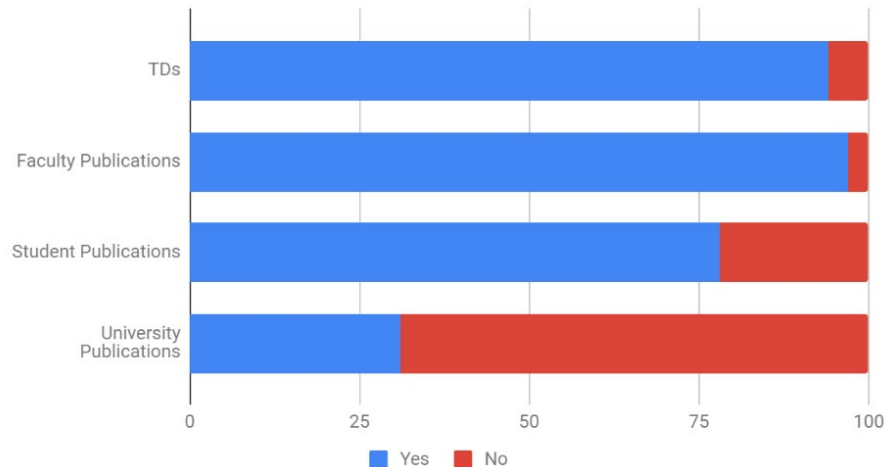


Figure 9. Institutional Repository content based on website content review

The survey responses also suggested that university archives' involvement with the IR was limited. Archivists' most common role with IRs (see Fig. 10) was as a contributor (44 percent of respondents), followed by administrator (24 percent) and advisor (22 percent). Another 28 percent of respondents did not indicate any role for the university archives in relation to the IR. At the same time, the survey respondents indicated that it was common for university archives' content to be made available through IR (see Fig. 11). Faculty publications and TDs were the most common content types at 82 percent and 76 percent, respectively. University publications were also reported as being available by 68 percent of respondents, and student publications by 64 percent.

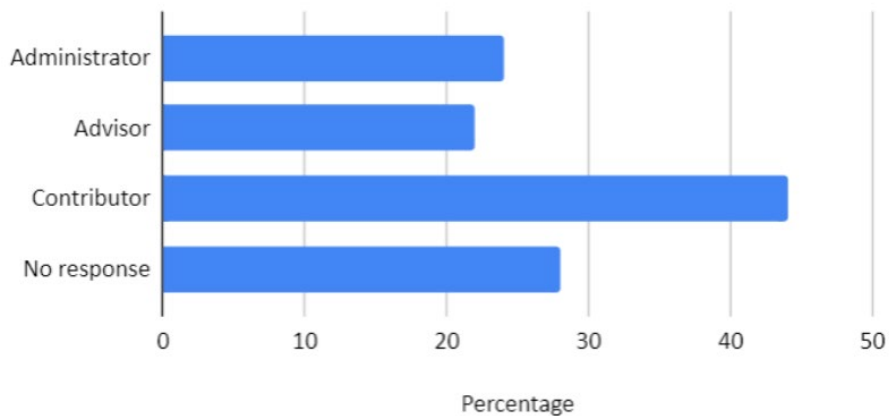


Figure 10. Role of university archives in Institutional Repository based on survey responses

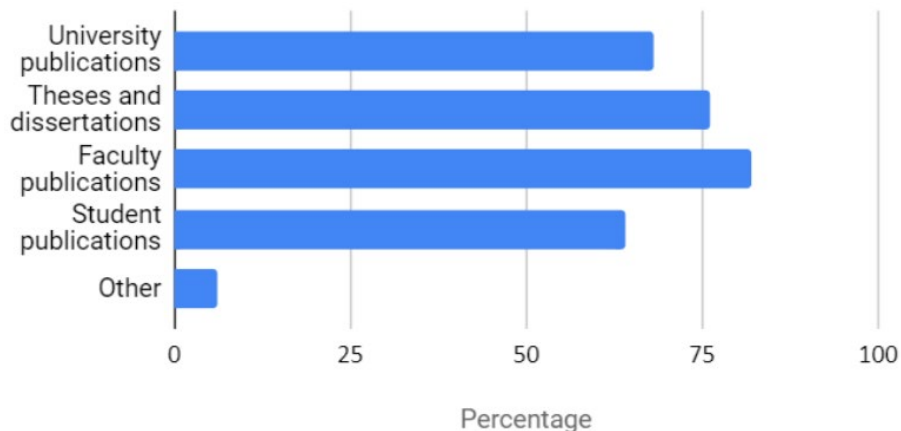


Figure 11. Types of university archives content in Institutional Repository based on survey results

Retrospective digitization

The survey also examined the prevalence of retrospective digitization projects for print TD collections, finding that such work has been limited to this point. Only 10 percent of survey participants reported completely digitizing their print TD collections, with an additional 35 percent currently working on digitization. Another 12 percent of respondents were planning for a future retrospective digitization project for TDs.

Only a small minority of survey respondents (6 percent) indicated that print or microfilm copies were removed from the university archive following their digitization. One individual said print copies will be moved off-site at a later date. There does not appear to be a strong correlation between retrospective digitization of TDs and removal of print copies from the archive.

Satisfaction with process

Through the survey, we also sought to determine how satisfied university archivists were with the administration of their institutional TD program. When asked to indicate their satisfaction on a scale of 1 to 5, the average (mean) among all respondents was 3.375 with a median and mode value of 4. However, many archivists also indicated that improvements were needed (see Fig. 12). Of those submitting comments, 28 percent recommended better coordination between campus units involved in the TD process, while 24 percent felt that there was no one unit with curatorial responsibility for the TDs. Other areas of improvement reported in the survey included changes in digitization, access, preservation, description, and documentation.

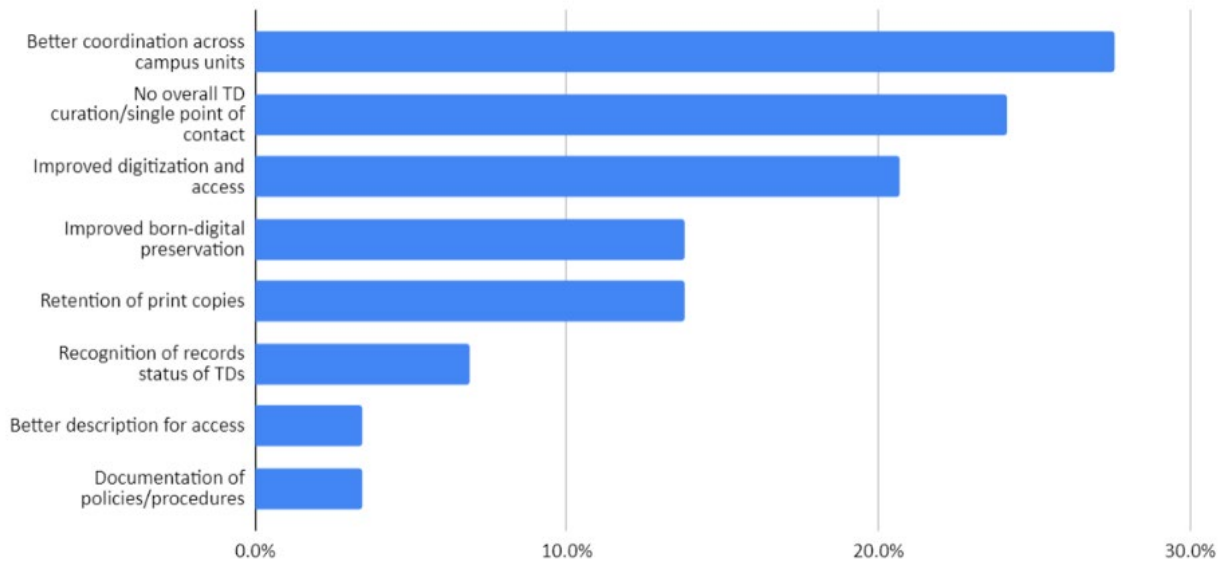


Figure 12. Recommendations for improvements based on survey results (multiple responses permitted)

Findings

Our initial research confirmed that the management of physical copies of TDs remains split between university archives and libraries. Few ARL libraries have engaged in retrospective conversion of "archival" collections of TDs, and most appear to rely on print copies for preservation purposes. With the introduction of ETDs, however, responsibility for the research output of university programs has shifted to IRs that are largely the domain of university libraries. This change may lead to a greater focus on digitization of legacy print collections to improve scholarly access to their content. As such transfers take place, it remains to be seen what role university archives will have in managing and preserving these materials.

At the same time, the results suggested that there was a lack of coordination between many archives and institutional repository programs. In most cases neither the university archives nor the IR provides links to the other's services, although most institutional repositories hold university-produced materials that might traditionally fall under an archival program. Based on the survey results, archivists also had a limited voice in IR management decisions with only 40 percent of respondents indicating roles as administrators or advisors to these programs.

Conclusion

Recognizing that the data collected from this study is focused on the archives perspective, future research might investigate issues of TD management and preservation from a library administration perspective. Working with library administrators, we might explore what overarching strategic objectives ARL institutions have in common that are driving current practices relative to TD preservation, access models, and future planning for TD and ETD collections. As part of the study, we might look at how library participation in organizations such as the National Digital Library of Theses and Dissertations (NDLTD) or ETD conferences might impact institutional decision-making.

Resources

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