



Information Technology

Tuesday, January 4, 2000

U. of Texas Says It May Require Digital Dissertations

By [WENDY R. LEIBOWITZ](#)

One more new subject for Ph.D. candidates to master: digital technology.

A growing number of university graduate programs are requiring students to submit their dissertations electronically. Now the University of Texas at Austin, which annually awards more Ph.D.'s than any other university in the country, is considering following suit.

In the spring, the university will begin ironing out wrinkles in its digital-dissertation policy. As early as May 2001, the university could require all dissertations to be submitted digitally, says Timothy Brace, senior systems analyst for the university's office of graduate studies. "This doesn't mean that people can't turn them in on paper," says Mr. Brace, "but everyone must turn in a digital copy that will be archived at the University of Texas."

The multimedia formats used for electronic submission allow films, sound recordings, and images to be integrated into the text of a dissertation, and the final product can be made far more accessible than most dissertations are currently.

Mr. Brace notes that he wrote his own dissertation on Chinese music -- and submitted it on paper only. "It would have been exciting to think about including audio and video of any of the folk-music performances that I saw in China," he says. But he was too early.

He says the Graduate Assembly at the university first considered the issue in 1995, when a doctoral student in the department of speech communication asked for permission to submit her dissertation, which dealt with nonverbal communication, on CD-ROM. Her request was approved, and the graduate school began studying the question of digital submission and publication.

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In January 1997, Virginia Tech became the first university to require submission of electronic theses and dissertations. As of September 29, 1999, 2,070 electronic theses and dissertations had been submitted and approved by the graduate school, and 1,652 were available online, according to [a Web site](#) devoted to electronic theses and dissertations. Because some students worry that online distribution of their work might cause print publishers to reject their manuscripts, the university permits students to limit access to their materials.

Virginia Tech was followed by West Virginia University. But now the trend is no longer limited to the United States. "This has now become an international movement, with well over 70 members," says Edward Fox, a professor of computer science at Virginia Tech who directs the [Networked Digital Library of Theses and Dissertations](#). There are also national projects in Australia and Germany, as well as plans to create similar projects in Latin America.

Still to be worked out are many technical issues involving preservation and access, says Mr. Fox. Digital media change frequently, and what was written five years ago might not be accessible today. At Virginia Tech, says Mr. Fox, steps are taken to ensure that everything submitted is online and on disk -- rather than on tape -- so that it can be automatically copied every few years to a new disk as formats change.

The Digital Library is now supported by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization and the Organization of American States, notes Mr. Fox. The international organizations' goal is to spotlight the literary and scientific work of scholars outside the United States.

Background stories from *The Chronicle*:

- [West Virginia U., Following Virginia Tech, Now Requires Digital Dissertations](#) (10/2/98)
- [Requiring Theses in Digital Form: the First Year at Virginia Tech](#) (2/13/98)
- [Virginia Tech Graduate Students Balk at On-Line Dissertations](#) (5/19/97)
- [Electronic Theses and Dissertations in the](#)

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