

Readers Not Wanted: Student Writers Fight to Keep Their Work Off the Web

BY ANDREA L. FOSTER

MARK BRAZAITIS worries that his university may sabotage the literary careers of his students.

As director of the creative-writing program at West Virginia University, Mr. Brazaitis oversees the training of about 30 graduate students, who hope to become published authors. At the end of their three years in the program, they hand in their magnum opuses, master's theses that could one day appear in print in literary journals or books.

For now, creative-writing students can submit their theses on paper. But starting next fall, the coordinator of the campuswide electronic-thesis program wants to require those students, like others at West Virginia, to submit their writing projects electronically and make them publicly available after five years.

That policy could hurt students, says Mr. Brazaitis, an associate professor of English, because publishers will not accept poems, short stories, or novels that are already freely available for everyone to read online.

"Goodness knows," he says, "it's hard enough to get published without this sort of handicap."

Tension about how theses should be disseminated is brewing on other campuses, too. Open-access advocates, often scientists and librarians, are pressing for the scholarly works to be made publicly available online. Professors of writing and their students, however, argue that literary projects are fundamentally different from laboratory experiments. They say student authors should be the ones to control how their work is distributed.

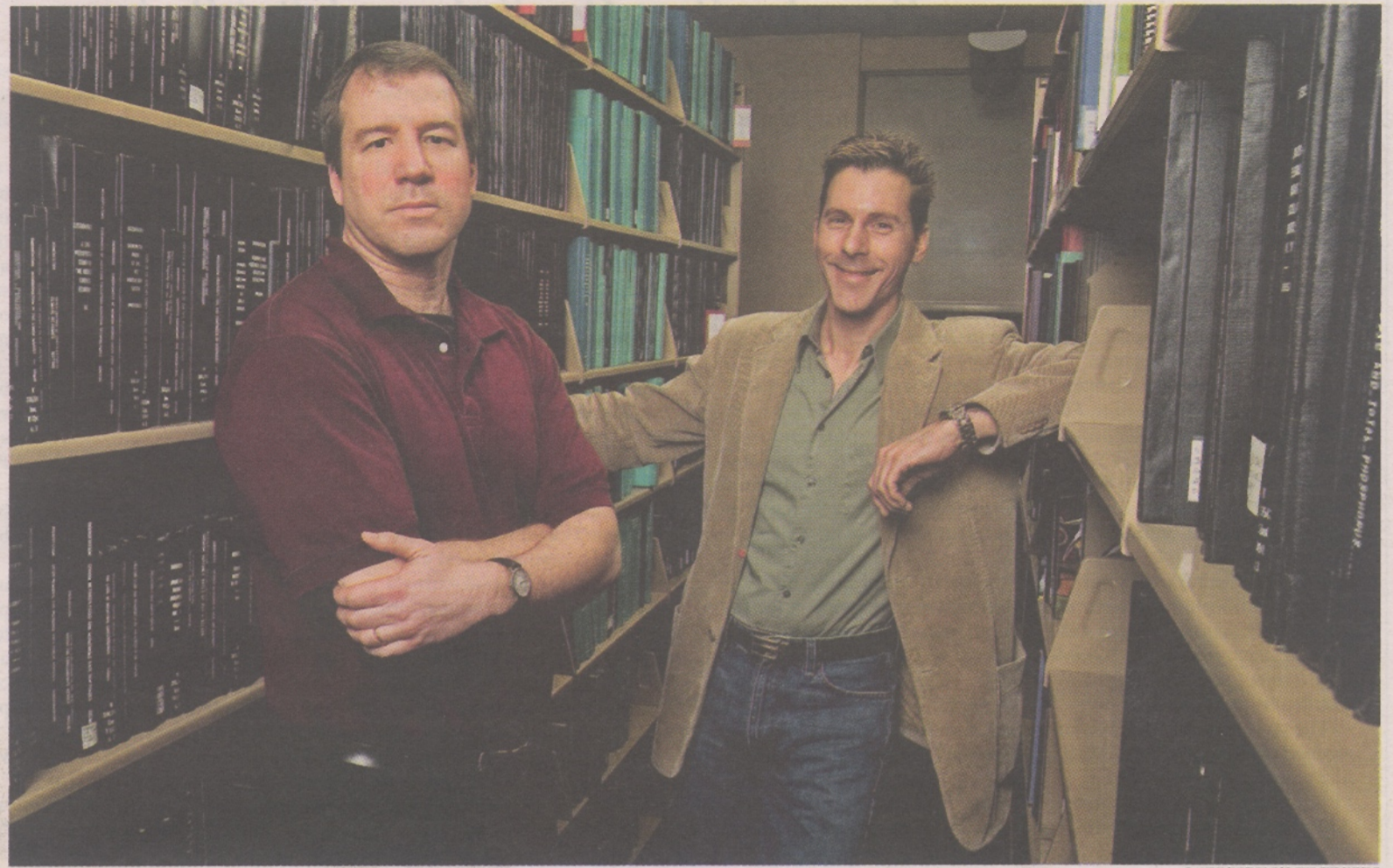
PUBLISHERS' 'DYING MARKET'

The squabble at West Virginia is unlikely to be resolved quickly.

John H. Hagen, the electronic-thesis coordinator, who is also a library administrator, insists that online distribution enhances students' publishing prospects rather than thwarts them. Publishers are spreading spurious claims about electronic dissemination of theses, he says, to preserve their "dying market." And he argues that once professors are educated about the issue, they will come around to his side.

"All theses and dissertations should become open access," says Mr. Hagen. "It's important in terms of being able to trace the cultural and historical aspects of academia."

Mr. Hagen, who is on the board of the Networked Digital Library of Theses and Dissertations, a nonprofit group that advocates electronic dissemination of theses, has data to back up his argument. He surveyed 34 West Virginia alumni who earned master-of-fine-arts degrees in creative writing, and he found that students who had allowed open access to their theses went on to have more-successful careers, in terms of material pub-



Mark Brazaitis (left), director of the creative-writing program at West Virginia U., says his students should be able to opt out of a program to put student theses, like those shown here in the library, online for public access. John H. Hagen (right), a library administrator, says online distribution will help, not harm, writers' professional prospects.

RANDY SNYDER FOR THE CHRONICLE

lished and further education, than those who didn't.

Professors of writing are skeptical. Publishers still operate by the rule of turning down manuscripts that are already freely available, says Mr. Brazaitis, who is a novelist. He and others at West Virginia will voice their concerns to administrators "again and again" until they understand, he adds.

Limiting access to theses for five years, as Mr. Hagen proposes, isn't good enough, Mr. Brazaitis says. Students' publishing aspirations could still be subverted. A part of his own creative-writing thesis was published in a literary magazine 15 years after he earned a graduate degree from Bowling Green State University, he notes.

He has support from the Association of Writers and Writing Programs, an advocacy group, which adopted guidelines in October 2006 advising colleges not to force students to broadly disseminate their theses.

If institutions require creative-writing students to file their theses electronically, the association says, then the students should be allowed to restrict access through a password system.

PUTTING WRITERS IN CHARGE

The writing group's statement helped persuade some institutions, Bowling Green State and Louisiana State University among them, to exclude creative-writing theses from open-access policies.

Jeanne M. Leiby, an associate

professor of English at Louisiana State, says it makes sense for students to limit access to their unpublished work because of the economics of the publishing world. As editor of the esteemed journal *The Southern Review*, Ms. Leiby says literary magazines cannot survive unless they secure exclusive use of manuscripts.

"If a work is made fully available online," she says, "I'm not accepting it."

Demanding that creative-writing students relinquish their theses to their colleges, she argues, is like forcing art students to turn over their paintings.

But some institutions are not ced-

think we would not be serving the public."

The university's policy—recently approved by the provost and Faculty Senate—will allow restricted online access to theses for no more than five years. After that they will be publicly available on the Web. Students previously could limit access to their theses for no more than one year.

Ms. Bishop says students haven't objected to the policy.

STUDENT REVOLTS

On at least two other campuses, however, writing students have beaten back open-access policies for their theses.

"Goodness knows, it's hard enough to get published without this sort of handicap."

ing ground to students and their professors.

Ms. Leiby previously taught at the University of Central Florida, where she and other writing professors lost the battle to restrict access to theses. She says that many faculty members supported limiting access, but some administrators did not.

Patricia J. Bishop, vice provost and dean of the University of Central Florida, says it has an obligation, as a taxpayer-supported institution, to make theses publicly available. "If we don't disseminate the work eventually," she says, "I

the pool of students who are excused from providing open access to their theses.

At Florida State University, all graduate students will be able to permanently limit online access to their theses to readers with a Florida State Internet address. The change will probably take effect in the fall. Now students can sequester their theses for two years. As alumni they can request limited access for another two years.

Mark Winegardner, a novelist and English professor who directs the university's creative-writing program, pushed for the recent change. He says professors and students who demand exceptions to such policies risk giving the writing discipline a bad name.

"It looks like the weird creative types are asking to be let out of gym class," he says.

Graduate students in other disciplines also need to worry about publishers' rejecting theses because they have been freely distributed online, says Mr. Winegardner.

He recommends that scholarly arts and humanities groups take a hard line in pressing colleges to change their thesis policies.

The groups could maintain a publicly available Web site, he suggests, listing institutions that demand open access. Prospective students could use it to determine which ones to cross off their lists.

"Everyone will change their policies in a minute and a half," he says.

Lola L. Lopes, interim provost at the University of Iowa, abruptly reversed course in March on a plan to make fine-arts theses freely available online, after vigorous complaints from students in the university's prestigious writing programs.

A similar uprising occurred at Bowling Green State in October 2006. Writing students, with the support of the Graduate Student Senate, demanded and got an exemption from electronic publication for creative-writing theses.

Some campuses have broadened