



## Popular topic makes WVU dissertation tops in downloads

If Nielson added academic research at West Virginia University to its focus, the ratings group would probably award top ranking to Shirley Stewart Burns for the interest her dissertation generated in 2007.

Last year, people downloaded Burns' online dissertation 37,501 times. That is nearly 4,000 more than any other document posted in WVU's Electronic Thesis and Dissertation program for that period.

"Burns' dissertation is about mountaintop removal. That's a hot topic, not only in West Virginia, but across the nation and around the globe," said John Hagen, ETD program coordinator.

The popularity of the dissertation – *Bringing Down the Mountains: the Impact of Mountaintop Removal Surface Coal Mining on Southern West Virginia Communities, 1970-2004* – is especially fulfilling for Burns. A Wyoming County native, she grew up in the West Virginia coalfields and witnessed the impact of mountaintop removal on her home community.



"I always felt I was doing this for a purpose. It was for other people to use and to increase their knowledge," said Burns. "So it was obvious to me that one way this could happen is if I made this available worldwide."

In 1998, WVU's Office of the Provost implemented a required ETD submission policy, making WVU only the second institution in the world to do so – Virginia Tech is the other. Today, the University Libraries continue to host the ETD program in support of graduate research. The program has grown to include WVU undergraduate and faculty research in a nationally recognized institutional repository.

About 75 percent of the people who submit an electronic thesis or dissertation at WVU choose open access. In turn, the work receives more attention from other resources. Hagen said published studies say open access documents are cited two to five times more often than those with restrictions.

Burns achieved another impressive goal in 2007 when the WVU Press published a revised version of her dissertation and the book became a bestseller for the Press. The success debunks the notion that providing open access to a thesis or dissertation hurts the possibility of publishing the material in a journal or book.

Pat Conner, director/editor of the WVU Press, believes much of the fear could be extinguished simply by understanding the distinction between a dissertation and a published book.

"A dissertation and a book are completely different animals," Conner said. "A dissertation proves to a small body of people that you have learned your stuff, but a book has to explain a subject a lot to readers who come to it to learn."

That means the road from dissertation to published book is lined with rewrites. Conner estimates that more than 90 percent of dissertations undergo an extensive revision process before being ready for print.

While Burns' book is based on her dissertation, she made a concerted effort to produce a readable and informative book for a general audience.

"I have no doubt that anyone interested in mountaintop removal, no matter where they come from in life, could pick up my book and understand it," Burns said.

Burns gives a lot of credit for her brisk book sales to her dissertation initially being easily available online.

Another benefit has been increased name recognition among those focused on mountaintop removal. She is now a frequent source for media and other groups seeking insight into the issues.

"Open access has been nothing but a good thing for me," Burns said. "I do understand why some people with specialized topics are hesitant; but, in the end, the more you can get your work out there and the more name recognition you get, the better it is."

Burns earned her PhD in American history with a focus on Appalachia. She praises WVU history professor Ronald Lewis, her adviser, for helping her transform her personal concerns and frustrations into an academic pursuit. She recalls him challenging her to take on the issue by posing: "If not you, who? If not now, when?"

Lewis said he encouraged Burns because of her connection to mountaintop removal, her commitment to her home community, and her ability to differentiate what she thinks and feels from what the evidence tells her.

"She's someone who understands the issue," Lewis said. "She's right there. Southern West Virginia is kind of the megacenter of mountaintop removal in the country."

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**Contacts:**

**Monte Maxwell**  
**WVU Libraries**