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Helping Our Graduate Students SOAR: Promoting Scholarship and Populating Our Institutional Repository

Elaine Wells¹

ABSTRACT

The author describes how a requirement that our graduate students deposit theses and dissertations into our institutional repository (SOAR) helped to build our online scholarship, educate and strengthen graduate students' identities as scholars, and forge relationships with the library. Taking advantage of the synergy brought about by a new open access policy, a robust digital repository, and library staff committed to advancing accessible scholarly works, we developed ways to educate, encourage, and promote our newest scholars. Based upon our success thus far, we will develop workshops and tutorials that will be extended to junior faculty to advance their scholarly success.

Keywords: institutional repository, open access, graduate students, scholarly publishing, theses and dissertations

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HELPING OUR GRADUATE STUDENTS SOAR: PROMOTING SCHOLARSHIP AND POPULATING OUR INSTITUTIONAL REPOSITORY

The graduate students of the State University of New York (SUNY) College of Optometry, often referred to as SUNY Optometry, are a study in contrasts. The Doctor of Optometry (OD) degree is a competitive four-year professional program accepting students who for the most part hold bachelor's degrees in scientific fields. The OD program is not considered a graduate program in that its function is to prepare students for a specific career rather than to build upon an already acquired knowledge base. However, SUNY does provide a robust array of graduate study opportunities in advanced vision science research, clinical work, business management, and healthcare leadership. Upon completion of (or in tandem with) the professional degree program, SUNY Optometry students may pursue the following:

- Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) in Vision Science.
- OD/PhD, in which students complete their OD degree while also working toward a PhD in Vision Science.
- Master of Science (MS) in Vision Science taken in combination with the OD program (OD/MS).
- Standalone MS in Vision Science, if they have already completed an OD or another undergraduate science degree.
- Accreditation for advanced clinical competency, if they have already completed an OD. At our university, this accreditation is considered a graduate program.
- Advanced Graduate Certificate in Optometry Business Management, to be applied toward an MBA in business management or healthcare leadership through our joint program with SUNY Empire State College. This program is open to students enrolled in the OD program and to graduated ODs.

Our students arrive meticulously trained in the sciences and bound for careers in clinical work, research, or academia. They are prodigious users of our interlibrary loan program, often requesting journals that are outside of our highly specialized vision science collection as they research systemic disease or public health topics. Other than providing the students with reliable electronic resources, the library has traditionally had little interaction with them. The scholarly communication sector of our work had rarely intersected with the activities and priorities of our graduate students until a serendipitous initiative was launched that combined embracing the college's newly adopted open access policy, building our institutional repository (IR), saving library funds and labor, and perhaps most importantly, introducing our graduate students to the scholarly publishing ecosystem.

THE INCEPTION

In March of 2020 (mere days before the pandemic brought life as we knew it to a halt), SUNY Optometry's faculty approved our open access policy, an initiative driven by SUNY's Office of Library and Information Services.

SUNY had issued a mandate requiring each of its 64 campuses to create and approve its own version of a policy promoting open access publishing whenever possible. Loosely translated, SUNY Optometry's policy was a pledge to make as much of our scholarship as possible available to the general public without charge. The policy was readily approved at our annual faculty retreat meeting, probably because many of our faculty members, with research funded by government grants, were already depositing articles in National Institutes of Health (NIH) repositories. Much of their work was already available via PubMed Central, so they were familiar with open access requirements and were already in compliance because of the government funding supporting their research.

A New Repository

At about the same time, SUNY introduced a new digital repository, SUNY Open Access Repository (SOAR), a robust digital space designed for open access materials. SOAR replaced SUNY Digital Repository, a rudimentary DSpace IR introduced in 2003 that never got much traction at SUNY Optometry. Open access had not been a dominant priority in our library at that point; the resources in the SUNY Digital Repository were not widely discoverable, and information about its availability never adequately made its way from the library to the rest of the college community. A few graduate students were willing to deposit their material, but to be blunt, library staff uploaded the works and there they sat, pearls of digital scientific knowledge getting little or no attention.

With the introduction of SOAR in 2020, we began to see the possibilities for a much more robust scholarly communication community. SOAR's platform is a more advanced and sophisticated version of DSpace; it integrates with PubMed and Crossref for importing metadata and connects with ORCID. SOAR makes our electronic deposits discoverable in Google Scholar and other search engines. The system also provides statistics on usage, a valuable new way of measuring the reach of our graduate students' scholarship and a potential selling point to budding authors.

Baby Steps

In light of our recently forged commitment to open access and our new and more powerful IR, it seemed like the perfect time to consider how we could merge the two concepts. The work-from-home situation necessitated by Covid gave me as the library director time to think creatively about how to do just that. Since faculty were already in compliance with open access requirements because of their government grants, and therefore were already enjoying the discoverability and citations that came from broad distribution of their work, our small and elusive cadre of graduate students sprung to mind as a good place to start. We had tried to promote IR deposit among our graduate students since 2003 but had not been very successful.

All of our MS and PhD students are required to produce theses and dissertations.¹ Historically, these works had ended up in unbound print volumes that, after committee approval, moved slowly from the department of graduate programs (which is under the auspices of the Graduate Center for Vision Research) to the library, where they were processed, bound, cataloged, shelved, and remained largely untouched, as shown by our circulation statistics. A study by Bennett and Flanagan (2016) revealed the positive impact and benefits of online dissemination of theses and dissertations, including enhanced discoverability by Google's strong indexing capabilities, significant increase in the usage of the works, and an overall enhancement of the reputation of an institution.

In rethinking the process, I incorrectly assumed that since many of these graduate students were looking toward careers in academia, they would be interested in knowing what ultimately happened to the first scholarly work they ever produced, and thus would be eager to deposit their work in SOAR. My hope was that, as novice scholars, they would be interested in finding out how often their work was downloaded, where the downloads were coming from, and ultimately where throughout the world their work was traveling. I surmised I had found the perfect cohort to build our repository. My enthusiasm sprung from these assumptions:

- Graduate students (and their faculty advisors) might be glad to give their work more visibility than it would receive in print.

¹ Students in SUNY Optometry's other graduate programs (residency and Business Management Certificate training) have terminal requirements that do not fit the definition of thesis or dissertation. For that reason, they are not required to submit their work for deposit, although their contributions are welcome and we will look to encourage them in the near future.

- This endeavor would give the library staff the opportunity to practice uploading items and creating metadata.
- Discussions with other librarians had revealed that depositing student works often resulted in concerns about quality. But because our graduate students' work had been accepted by their advisory committees, the high quality of their work was assured.
- We would no longer have to bind the dissertations and keep them in the library, saving us money, labor, and space.
- We would avoid the inevitable backlog caused by the slow movement of dissertations and theses from the graduate programs department, which resulted in a large number of manuscripts arriving for binding and processing at once and creating labor and budgetary logjams.

THE PROCESS

From the solitude of my home computer, I decided to reach out to graduate students from previous years. In hindsight, it was probably not the best time to ask our alumni to dig through their files to find their dissertations or theses. They had moved on, to further graduate work, to careers, or to just trying to stay safe from the pandemic. From any perspective, they were evidently not thinking of the thesis they had written over a year before. Here were the (relatively unsuccessful) first steps:

- From our graduate programs department, I obtained the names of the 11 individuals who had received graduate degrees in the previous academic year. I didn't know where they were, or whether they were even checking their former SUNY email addresses.
- The email I drafted was long and used "librarian-like" lingo, such as "discoverable," "metrics," and "embargo."
- I created a separate form for the alumni to fill out, forgetting that people hate forms and rarely fill them out voluntarily. Although the Google form could be submitted with a click of the mouse, I chose to request a digital copy of the dissertation first, then followed it up with a request to fill out the form. Adding the form as an afterthought was likely the "one more task" that became a deterrent to its completion.

From my target audience of 11 individuals, I received two documents, an underwhelming return on investment.

The Gentle Requirement

When I shared my dismay over the low rate of return with the dean of academic affairs, he responded, “Well, then, we’ll make it a requirement!” (Rank really does have its privileges.) The requirement was introduced without much fanfare and with little disgruntlement on the part of soon-to-be graduates, and it quickly became a part of the official graduate student handbook with the addition of this paragraph:

SUNY Open Access Repository (SOAR) and Dissertation

SOAR is a digital repository tool used by the College to collect, preserve, and distribute completed Master’s Theses and Doctoral Dissertations. It facilitates digital preservation and scholarly communication while promoting open access. Upon receiving approval for graduation, students complete the Thesis/Dissertation Submission Form. (Graduate Center for Vision Research, 2022, p. 7)

Working with the administrator in the graduate programs department, we created an easy-to-fill-out form, with links to simple explanations of any publishing lingo that might be challenging, such as “Creative Commons licensing” and “embargo.” Then our new scholars simply had to attach the digital copy of their work, and it was sent to the library for assignment of metadata and uploading.

The Permission Form as Educational Tool

Our graduate students are, for the most part, publishing newbies. As science students, they are comfortable with facts, figures, and formulas. As has been documented, while many participate in the research process, they may lack experience in the full range of research activities, including grant and publication writing (Grote et al., 2023). They have seasoned faculty mentors and advisors who guide them through the writing process, but they have little exposure to the language, rules, and regulations of publishing, and this seemed a painless way to introduce them to these issues.

Open access publishing introduces a variety of terms and concepts to graduate students unfamiliar with the terrain. Among the concepts that may seem foreign to neophyte scholars are copyright and how it is granted, as well as Creative Commons licenses and how they differ from copyright and from each other. Graduate students may also be concerned

(or worse, unconcerned) about the legality of using digital images and how to handle a digital deposit mandate if they have coauthors who may not want the work distributed. Without time to formally educate our budding authors to the new language and landscape, we carefully crafted our permission form to introduce the concepts they needed to understand to fulfill their requirement, making the initial learning process relatively painless. We created links to high quality, vetted sources that explained tricky concepts in a straightforward manner (e.g., Creative Commons, n.d.). We hoped this would ease the concerns of our graduate students before they could even form, letting them know that their work could not be copied without attribution, could not be sold, and could not be adapted or changed. Did they check out the site? We don't really know, but it's our goal to provide more grounding in these issues in the future.

While plans are still in the embryonic stage, library staff are considering several training and educational opportunities. It seems advisable to introduce ourselves into the process at the moment when graduate students and their advisors identify the topic to be pursued, thereby making the introduction of scholarly publishing concepts a seamless part of the thesis or dissertation endeavor. We are also considering the possibility of setting up individual consultations for each graduate student (since they are few in number) with one of the two librarians in order to develop a consultant-like relationship that would continue throughout the process from inception to completion.

The consent form also requires our graduate authors to answer a question about whether or not an embargo would be required. To help them with that question, we searched for a simple, straightforward, well-worded description of the concept of an embargo. Happily, we found just the straightforward resource we needed already prepared by Georgia Southern University (n.d.). It provided the general overview our graduate students needed to understand the concept without being confusing or intimidating. Our form took an average of 13 minutes to fill out (not bad as forms go), and we ended up with six embargoes among the year's deposits.

SMALL BUT SIGNIFICANT SUCCESSES

As Table 1 indicates, the number of deposited theses and dissertations has increased significantly over the years, with our most significant jump this past semester. Out of 44 total documents in SOAR at the time of this writing, 23 were uploaded in the most recent four years, while 21 were deposited during the first 16 years of our institutional repository's existence.

Table 1*Documents Deposited Into the Institutional Repository*

2003–2009	4	7
2010–2019	4	6
2020–2024	7	16

A quick glance at our SOAR statistics indicates that our holdings have had a total of 2,460 downloads and 3,953 item views. While the majority of our readers are from the United States, statistics show that our graduate students' scholarship has traveled as far as Mongolia. We are able to track which theses and dissertations have been viewed in which parts of the world, opening a new window into the reach of our students', and our institution's, scholarship. Perhaps most notably, in the past year SOAR saw 887 downloads, while the previous year there were only 374, a 137% increase. Our repository has grown not only in holdings but also in the public's awareness of the valuable scholarship it contains.

STRETCHING THEIR SCHOLARLY PUBLISHING WINGS—WHAT'S NEXT?

Our graduate students go on to accomplish great things. Some become faculty members here at the college, while others continue with research, teaching, or clinical work elsewhere. Those who join SUNY Optometry's ranks are offered faculty development workshops that explain what is expected of them, including expectations regarding scholarly publishing. Those who pursue careers elsewhere may not have the benefit of such workshops. With some creative thinking, we can develop some scholarly publishing services that can be provided before these students graduate. We believe that these "value-added" services would strengthen the library's relationship with our graduate students and bring the library to the forefront of their development as scholarly authors.

Publishing Workshops for Graduate Students

By the time the dissertations get to the library for uploading, they are well written and readable (albeit sometimes a bit technical). Since other than providing the intellectual resources (journals, books, etc.) for the learning experience, librarians are not involved in the dissertation- or thesis-writing process, we wonder to what extent (if any) our graduate students are educated about copyright and intellectual property. What do they know about

open access? How do they seek out publishing opportunities and appropriate journals? How much do they know about “predatory” journals and how to avoid them?

Building upon the work of Shirazi and Cirasella (2020, p. 134), we are hoping to move from “product to process,” using the thesis/dissertation deposit process to painlessly build a foundation for scholarly publishing knowledge. Our small, two-librarian library doesn’t have a scholarly communication librarian, but both of us are well-schooled in scholarly publishing and the art of training. As our SOAR deposit mandate has moved open access scholarly publishing to a more prominent position, Optometry’s two librarians will design workshop content and online materials to support our graduate student scholars. The workshop content, currently under development, will be a one-afternoon workshop that will illustrate the main points of scholarly publishing and untangle any confusion. The workshop will feature the ABCs of publishing (learning the terminology); the process (how to get started); finding the right journal for your article; avoiding the wrong ones (i.e., predatory journals); the ins and outs of open access; and how to make your work discoverable and boost citations. We will work with our graduate programs department to determine the optimal time in the graduate curriculum cycle to provide formal training. We also plan to extend a similar training opportunity to faculty. Since that cohort will start out with more knowledge of the basics of scholarly publishing, the faculty workshop will focus on more advanced topics such as identifying predatory journals; the risks and benefits of publishing preprints; and the various “routes” to open access publication (i.e., gold or green) and what they mean for article processing fees. This will optimally be included in the New Faculty Development Program, and then rolled out to existing faculty who have an interest.

Keeping in Touch With SOAR

SOAR has robust and easy-to-interpret statistics that can be used not only to promote the library’s role in the scholarly publishing success of graduate students but also to inform our statistical reporting and help us to map the impact of our institution’s work as it extends beyond the walls of our college. SOAR makes available statistics that are easy to retrieve and meaningful to our repository authors. Since we work with a small population, the library can, with minimal assistance from a work-study student, monitor the reach of each thesis and dissertation deposited and provide authors with the number of views and downloads per month and the countries and cities with the highest numbers of visits to a document, thereby mapping the global impact of the work done by our students. Since Google Scholar picks up resources from SOAR quickly, work-study students can do quick scans to see when our graduate students’ work begins to be cited.

Based on the success of this program, we're now wondering whether we should retrospectively digitize our theses and dissertations. Those who have gone before us tell us the process is large, costly, and labor intensive (Bergin & Roh, 2016). As we gain more time and experience in the scholarly publishing arena, there are factors we can measure that may help us to determine the feasibility and advisability of retrospective digitization. For example, we could examine download statistics and their geographic distribution to determine which subjects seem to be in the greatest demand, and identify older theses and dissertations with the same or similar keywords. A deep dive into statistical patterns and citation analysis may inform our decision-making.

Celebrating Progress

Our graduate students are on the cusp of doing great things. Their training in vision science is unparalleled, and many will go on to prestigious faculty and research positions. As fledgling authors who produce theses and dissertations, they are building the skills to prepare for bright academic careers where scholarly publishing is often an expected and required skill. With this project, our graduate students have helped us to make great strides in growing our institutional repository, increasing library visibility in the scholarly life of the college, disseminating the college's pivotal contributions to the vision sciences, and preparing our graduate students to soar as scholars and authors.

The graduate student deposit mandate has planted seeds of new opportunities for teaching, learning, resource sharing, and dissemination of scholarship. One small change in a requirement enabled us to draw the circle of learning wider—enriching our students, our library, our college, and the vision science community, and sharing our intellectual wisdom widely and equitably through the simplest of steps.

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