

Historical Research during COVID-19

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COVID-19 is not just altering historians' everyday life; it has also upended historical research. Although most university and college administrators have issued FAQs, guidelines, and resources that relate to the continuance of laboratory and human subjects research, they have not always addressed the conditions under which historians work or considered how to make accommodations for historical research during the pandemic. Moreover, in assessing productivity at this moment, it is imperative that university administrations recognize the distinctions among disciplines in types of research and to take into account the unusually burdensome tasks of teaching now affecting all instructors.

Historical research generally involves identifying and analyzing primary documents, which can include written, visual, aural, or material resources. Archives, special collections at historical societies and libraries, museums, historic sites, and other repositories typically hold these materials. In many cases, scholars must travel to a particular archive to consult materials that are not available for external loan or in digital form. University departments and divisions, government sources of funding, and private sources such as foundations frequently support such research. Presently, however, domestic and international travel is prohibited or limited by many institutions, and many of these entities are suspending or postponing distribution of research money and cancelling fellowship competitions. Such actions are delaying or inhibiting historical research for an indefinite period. In addition, students and non-tenure-track and contingent faculty are in many cases experiencing restrictions to onsite-only library privileges. For graduate students, limited access to research is extending time to graduation. For early career scholars, limited research access is already slowing the publication of articles and books on which employment and tenure decisions are largely based. Lack of access to research materials also potentially disadvantages mid-level scholars in the promotion process.

At the same time, repositories that safeguard and allow access to researchers have suffered staff layoffs, lost revenue, and in many cases the closing of their doors. The tasks of librarians, archivists, and curators have multiplied; they have taken on new public health training duties while continuing to try to answer reference questions in the absence of shelf access. Future conservation and digitization projects have been put on hold. Libraries are instead engaging in many cases in rapid-response collecting initiatives to capture peoples' experiences during the pandemic. Serving researchers under such conditions is difficult at best.

The AHA recognizes that sustaining historical research during the COVID-19 crisis requires flexible and innovative approaches to the conduct of research itself as well as to how we gauge productivity. To that end, the AHA makes the following observations and recommendations.

Because PhD students and early career scholars are especially disadvantaged right now, we suggest the following:

- Under the current circumstances, advisors and departments should assist PhD students in exploring dissertation topics that can, at least in the early phases, be accomplished using currently accessible source materials. Experienced scholars should also assist graduate students and early career scholars in crafting research proposals and methodologies to take account of what sources are and are not available at this time.
- When possible, graduate programs should work to achieve extended funding for students in order to facilitate the successful and timely completion of dissertations.

Evaluators of scholarship and dissertation and thesis advisors should keep in mind current limitations on research access when evaluating scholarly work. Now is the time to acknowledge a wider range of scholarly productivity. Under the current circumstances, several ways exist to facilitate historical research:

- Departments, universities, libraries, archives, museums, and funding agencies should encourage collaborative projects across fields, ranks, and institutions.
- Departments, universities, and funding agencies should extend existing research funding, allow scholars to adjust budgets, and, in some cases, redirect funds to domestic and/or foreign research assistants for the digitization of sources.
- Research libraries should permit research fellows to defer on-site visits when possible and in accordance with public health and safety guidelines.

Departments, universities, and employers of historians should consider ways to document how the crisis is affecting research, writing, and the ability to disseminate research by introducing appropriate accommodations to the rate of productivity while preserving existing standards of quality. Advisors, chairs, directors of programs, and administrators should work to ensure conditions that allow scholars to progress toward their goals and advance their careers. These include:

- Cancelled conference presentations and talks, and postponed fellowships, grants, and other funding should be included on *curricula vitae*.
- Departments, universities, and historical organizations should encourage alternative ways for scholars to network and to receive feedback on their work, such as participating in virtual conference sessions and workshops.
- Departments, colleges, universities, and other employers of historians should review existing frameworks of assessment to ensure that they are evaluating a broad range of work that may fall outside the normal scholarly parameters.
- Universities and historical organizations should consider finding ways for contingent faculty and independent scholars to have access to online databases and special collections. The AHA is committed to supporting these scholars; see the [AHA's Statement on Research Access \(2020\)](#).