

[The Challenges of COVID-19 for Graduate Students](#)

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A post from [Feeding the Elephant: A Forum for Scholarly Communications](#).

The COVID-19 pandemic has forced us all to change the way we work and what we hoped to achieve in this very long year. In this post, history graduate student John Vsetecka talks about the short- and potential long-term impact of COVID-19 on early-career scholars. We'll follow up next week with a similar piece from an early-career librarian.

A guest post by [John Vsetecka](#), PhD Candidate, Department of History, Michigan State University

The last time I set foot in a library was in March. Just before that, in late February, I attended a conference in St. Louis and conducted archival work at the Ukrainian Museum-Archives in Cleveland, Ohio. "Normal" academic research seems like a faint memory after being isolated at home for months. The disruptions to historical research will have costly long-term effects.

Without regular access to books, maps, documents, files, films, and librarians' expert knowledge, it has become nearly impossible to conduct good research. Supported by a Fulbright grant, I was planning to spend the 2020/2021 academic year in Ukraine working on my dissertation. With the grant delayed until the end of January 2021 due to travel restrictions, my in-country research time has been cut in half. I spent years planning my year abroad; just applying for the Fulbright takes up to ten months. For graduate students, not getting into archives means we can't write our dissertations. Most student stipends barely cover rent, food, and very used copies of needed books. Often times, libraries are saviors, and they provide us with free resources necessary to do our work. Now access to these materials is infrequent or impossible. While some institutions have made a concerted effort to digitize collections, most materials are only available in hard-copy form. Graduate students face the possibility of having to switch their dissertation topics to ones that can be completed using only online sources. Some historians may be able to hire research assistants in countries where archives are open, but few graduate students have the funds to do so.

Money is a factor in COVID-19's disruption in other ways, too. From the time graduate students set foot on campus, their funding clocks begin to tick, and many struggle to complete their dissertations before that support runs out. Will graduate students see any extension of funding since the pandemic stripped away a year of research? The answer remains unclear. Many of us who were supposed to be away doing dissertation research during the 2020/2021 year are now forced to use money we were not planning on using this year. Without research time or money, they will have little choice but to take teaching and graduate assistantships instead of working full-time on their dissertations. Many may have to drop out without finishing. The loss of graduate students will also severely impact universities and their research agendas. Will those who manage to finish be able to find jobs and publishing opportunities in a higher education system undermined by the economic effects of the pandemic? The outlook seems grim, but there are ways that we can all help each other.

While the threats to research—and researchers' longevity—are real and disconcerting, not all hope is lost. Our academic ecosystem is capable of sustaining us in these tumultuous times. We can still reach out to each other, ask for help, and inquire about needed information. Small gestures of kindness and mutual respect will go a long way until we can get back to going about our daily routines of research and writing. I'm already incredibly thankful for the archivists who have been able to send me scanned documents from Ukraine. It's not a perfect system, but it's a start. The current circumstances might force us to rely on each other a little more, but doing so will allow us to come out stronger on the other side.

John Vsetecka is a PhD Candidate in the Department of History at Michigan State University where he is writing a dissertation on the aftermath of famine in Soviet Ukraine. He is the founder and current co-editor of [H-Ukraine](#). Currently, John is a Fulbright fellow to Ukraine during the 2020/2021 academic year.

Update: Fulbright Ukraine has officially deferred the 2020-2021 cohort to 2021-2022.

Have something to say on this topic? Reply to this post or [email the Elephant](#) about writing for us. We welcome submissions from stakeholders on all sides of scholarly publishing.