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From the Ground Up: Collaborative Efforts on the Development of a New IR and Growth of an Existing Archive

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From the Ground Up:

Collaborative Efforts on the Development of a New IR and Growth of an Existing Archive

Christopher Deems and Matt Francis

During the summer of 2018, recently hired Systems Librarian Christopher Deems and Archivist Matt Francis began a long-term collaboration project focused on using their newly developed institutional repository (IR) to increase the visibility and access of the Ohio Northern University Archives (ONU Archives). As the sole leads on their respective projects, they worked together to develop common goals during the initial planning stages of their potential collaboration. During this process, they found commonality in their vision for the ONU Archives engaging more visibly with the larger university community and the role that the new IR could play in supporting that vision. After starting with simple projects to assess how archival objects could be represented in the IR, they began to expand the type of materials that were being deposited into the repository, including unique manuscripts, photographs, and audio-visual materials.

While encountering a number of challenges along the way, the initial successes of these projects allowed them to expand their efforts in support of larger strategic

goals, most notably including working to amplify diverse voices from the Ohio Northern University (University) community and to increase preservation and accessibility of student voices. Over time, archival collections in the IR were frequently viewed by members of the University community and the general public, resulting in expanded awareness of the archives and the institutional repository, and increased interest in the University's history during the institution's sesquicentennial year. This collaboration between the ONU Archives and the IR is part of a larger collaborative ecosystem found within academic libraries and has been documented in other works. Raym Crow acknowledged the role of collaboration (or lack thereof) between university archives and institutional repository services as he noted that "depending on the university, an institutional repository may complement or compete with the role served by university archives."[1] Likewise, Elizabeth Yakel et. al. analyzed three prominent connections they found between institutional repositories and academic archives, including the development of IRs, the potential for archival and manuscript collections to help build collections in IRs, and the bringing of archival expertise to the table in regard to digital preservation within IR systems.[2]

INSTITUTIONAL BACKGROUND

Ohio Northern University is a private, United Methodist Church-affiliated university located in Ada, Ohio. Founded in 1871, the university is currently composed of five academic colleges (Arts & Sciences, Business Administration, Engineering, Pharmacy, and Law), and as of 2021 had approximately 2,900 FTE students.[3] The University is a predominately white institution, with approximately 12 percent of students reporting a racial or ethnic background as something other than non-Hispanic white.[4]

The ONU Archives and the IR are both organizationally aligned under the University's undergraduate library, Heterick Memorial Library. The ONU Archives was founded in 1968, and while never officially designated as the University Archives, it has served as ONU's main repository for institutional records and other related historical materials that document the history of the campus community and surrounding local areas. Through most of its fifty-plus years of operations, the ONU Archives operated in a largely passive manner. This approach led to the development of relatively small overall holdings (a little over 500 linear feet of archival materials by 2020) and limited resources in support of discoverability and access to archival holdings. By 2018, the Heterick Library director and the University administration decided to further develop the University's archival operations, and, consequently, ONU's first professionally trained archivist, Francis, was hired that summer. With the support of the Heterick Library director, the ONU Archives began to pivot to a more public role on campus, notably including the introduction of archival public hours, a

dedicated archival reading room space, and the start of the publication of finding aids via the library's new instance of ArchivesSpace. Additionally, Francis began to seek new opportunities for the publishing of archival digital collections. With the library no longer supporting an instance of CONTENTdm, which previously hosted digital copies of the ONU yearbooks and historic alumni magazines, the University's soon-to-be-launched institutional repository emerged as the most likely destination for hosting archival digital collections moving forward.

The creation of the University's Digital Commons IR began in 2017 with an initiative from the University Libraries to create and manage a space for materials generated by the University and to make them accessible to all users. At the time, no system existed on campus that could fully support this endeavor, and so a new one needed to be established. This led to the formation of a committee of faculty members whose mission was to lay the groundwork for this system. The committee included representatives from each of ONU's five colleges, alongside representatives from the University's libraries, and was spearheaded by the systems librarian. The committee began their work with a focus on foundational issues, including researching and developing local system requirements, vendor and product selection, establishing policies and processes for the repository, and creating a general collection strategy for ingesting materials developed and created by members of the University. During the drafting of the collection strategy, an intentional decision was made that it would include both modern scholarly outputs and historical works.

With the departure of the previous systems librarian in February 2018, the committee continued to meet in preparation for the hiring of the current systems librarian, Deems, and to provide a seamless transition of the project. Upon his arrival at the University in June of that year, Deems began collaborating with the repository vendor, the committee, and the libraries to complete the design of the system, implement the established policies, and provide any necessary training to members of the library who would be serving as repository administrators. The repository officially launched as DigitalCommons@ ONU in October 2018.

As the IR only contained a few collections that had been provided by select departments on campus prior to launch, the next major step for the system to succeed was to begin seeking additional materials while concurrently developing new collections whenever possible. As the committee had opted for submissions to DigitalCommons@ONU to be an entirely voluntary process, this meant that many of these materials would need to be actively sought out by the University's librarians. Therefore, the IR team decided to begin by ingesting works created by the librarians and materials housed within the libraries' purview, such as those within the ONU Archives.

INITIAL COLLABORATION

As new faculty members of the University, Deems and Francis briefly met during initial orientation and onboarding events. However, discussions on including materials from the ONU Archives in the new IR marked the first occasion where they began collaborating in their respective roles. During these initial conversations, they found commonality in their vision for the archives and the repository. While the variety of materials housed in the archives had been historically closed, Francis sought to make them more available to patrons, which fit in line with Deems's vision to not only fill the new repository with various types of materials but to also make them discoverable to a wider audience beyond the campus.

At the time, the ONU Archives did not have a public system in place where users could discover and access digital archival materials, and due to a limited budget, it was not feasible to implement a traditional digital repository system. As such, the initial collaboration with the IR served as a test to see if the system could serve as an appropriate stand-in. In considering the options for initial archival collections, Deems and Francis began leveraging existing digital assets that would also seem to fit well with the architecture of the new IR. With those parameters in mind, they chose to begin with digital materials that were previously hosted in the library's CONTENTdm instance, namely the ONU yearbooks and the historic Alumni Magazines collections. In addition to already having digital surrogates to work with, both collections consisted entirely of published materials that were fairly straightforward to deposit into Digital Commons.

While the ingest process was uncomplicated, they were not fully satisfied with the initial access set-up for the digital yearbooks. Due to existing evidence on the high use of the previous digital yearbooks collection and the large size of some yearbook files, it was decided that, if practical, the collection should provide access to the digital scans without requiring users to download the full file. In considering increased access, the initial focus was on exploring the feasibility of incorporating an embedded reader into the IR pages for the respective yearbooks. Ultimately, they selected Internet Archives' BookReader, which required the yearbooks files to be deposited into the Internet Archive. While this created a redundancy to the IR digital collection, the increased access, support of the Internet Archives mission, and the opportunity to reach a larger audience made the effort a worthwhile experiment.

After these initial successful ingests, Deems and Francis pivoted to another existing digital asset for the next archival materials upload: historic university catalogs. Until 2019, the Office of the Registrar had provided access to digitized copies of historic university catalogs through their office webspace. However, a shift in the University's website strategy led to these pages being converted to internal use webpages, which required two-factor authentication to access. This change significantly reduced the overall access to the materials; consequently,

Deems and Francis decided to begin depositing the registrar-converted scans into Digital Commons. One challenge with the catalogs was that a significant number of the existing digital files were incomplete, with less than half of the physical catalog represented in the corresponding digital file. While this limitation was frustrating, they continued working with the existing files since they had already been publicly accessible through the old website, with the understanding that the partial scans could be revisited in the future as labor resources allow.

While working with the catalogs, the team decided that for the next digital collection, they wanted to move beyond campus publications and attempt to work with a small manuscript collection. After assessing possible collections, they selected the Grace E. Ingledue papers, a recently acquired manuscript collection documenting the life of an early twentieth-century ONU student. The Ingledue papers were selected primarily due to a small gift provided by the donor to support preservation and access, along with interest in improving discovery and access for a one-hundred-year-old student diary that was in fragile condition. When evaluating the collection, Deems and Francis decided to limit the digitization efforts to the aforementioned diary as well as a small number of visual items such as photographs and promotional lobby cards. These items were selected due to potential impact, ease of digitization with our available resources, and the ability to successfully represent the digital surrogates in the IR. One interesting challenge for the diary was the unique nature of the pages, as all of the entries were written by Ingledue on the back of papers that were originally used for another purpose, such as class notes, letters received, or, most prominently, a wall calendar for the previous year. Due to the unique nature of these pages, along with the other visual digitized materials, the team chose to feature each of the diary pages individually within an image gallery structure of Digital Commons. While this approach helped with presenting a uniform format for the digitized materials, it could complicate how users navigate the materials. Consequently, this is a digital collection that would ideally be a part of user testing in the future.

NEW INITIATIVES

Having successfully deposited digitized campus publications and historic manuscripts, Deems and Francis adjusted their selection process to weigh campus priorities more heavily. Specifically, they focused on creating digital collections that would increase discoverability and access to student voices and additional diverse voices from the ONU community. For student voices, the first selection was the Clara Sherick Correspondence collection, which included late nineteenth-century letters to Sherick from fellow ONU students. For the collection, the pages of each letter were digitized as a compound object and then uploaded to the IR.

While the Sherick Correspondence collection was being created, a small project opportunity was presented to the library to document current student voices. Collaborating with the editorial board and the faculty advisor of the *Polaris* student-led literary magazine, Deems and Francis were able to produce digital files for handcrafted "Quarantine Zines" that were created by the literary magazine's students. These zines documented the students' experiences during the spring and summer, providing insights into how they navigated the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic. Of interest, the team reached an agreement with the creators that led to the students keeping physical possession of the zines, while allowing the ONU Archives to preserve and make accessible digital surrogates, a process that would not have been reasonably possible without the establishment of the IR.

In addition to using the IR to help increase discovery and access to student voices in general, Deems and Francis also began to examine how the tool could support the Archives' efforts to amplify diverse voices from the ONU community. More specifically, they used the features present in the IR to efficiently build on work that had previously taken place as part of the successful ONU Diverse Voices project. Utilizing the IR, they were able to provide access to a wide range of materials documenting diverse voices from the community, including the student literary publication, *Never Again Silence*, which was created by an Afro-American Literature Class from a local high school in 1971; a recently donated biographical manuscript by Chun C. Lee, a 1927 Chinese graduate of ONU; and a series of videos documenting events and concerts from the 1990s through the early 2000s created by ONU's Black Student Union and Gospel Ensemble student groups.

CHALLENGES

Though this collaboration has been extremely successful, it has not been without accompanying challenges. Unlike scholarly or creative works developed by members of the University that can be ingested into the repository fairly easily after their publication, the ONU Archives does not generate its own content, instead relying on new materials to be donated or transferred to it. This creates a natural pause between when a new archival collection can be added to the repository, which may extend for an unknown period of time. Other factors may increase this timespan as well, such as the accessioning and processing of physical materials in order to support informed potential digitization appraisal.

Another challenge has been the uniqueness of some collections requiring additional troubleshooting of DigitalCommons@ONU's capabilities. These types of collections vary in their needs, and oftentimes it is not immediately apparent what adjustments are needed in order to properly display and store the materials until the process of ingesting them into the repository has begun. This was most

commonly the case with descriptive metadata, where incomplete names, anonymous creators, uncertain creation dates, and date ranges for materials all presented challenges for how the IR was intended to express these and other descriptive fields.

Finally, when considering the potential impact of digitizing materials created by individuals who could not have envisioned what the online world of 2022 would look like at the time of record creation, there were sometimes ethical concerns related to the right to privacy. This concern was further heightened when working to amplify diverse voices from the University's past due to the sensitivity of issues raised and power imbalances that remain in society. To appropriately address these concerns, the team drafted a takedown request process for digitized archival materials and locked down a small number of materials to local access only.

As a small team, it was important to tackle these and similar challenges through conversation, including making time to review recently ingested collections and to discuss the core details and metadata of the materials. This also involved discussing any potential unforeseen issues that could potentially arise during the process of ingesting the archival collections. During the process of uploading the collection or individual materials, constant feedback was provided to ensure that both parties were aware of any developments as they occurred. The open communications not only helped guarantee that the archival collections were properly added to and displayed in DigitalCommons@ONU but also helped prevent individual frustrations from unintentionally stalling, or abandoning, a digital project.

CONCLUSIONS

To build collections that best serve their patrons, archives and institutional repositories need to develop meaningful partnerships with others in order to gather and house materials. These partnerships are often founded on the idea that those materials have value, whether it be scholarly or historic, and that they should be made more widely available and accessible whenever possible. At Ohio Northern University, this type of collaboration directly led to increasing archival visibility and access to historical holdings. As of May 2022, approximately 28 percent of the nearly 50,000 total downloads from the IR are digitized materials from the ONU Archives, indicating a significant community interest in materials that previously had been largely invisible or siloed from other library holdings.

It is also worth noting that this collaboration at the University led to more than just the digitization and sharing of previously held archival holdings. Importantly, the use of the IR as a repository for digitized historical materials helped directly lead to the acquisition of new materials and strengthened important campus relationships with units like the Office of Multicultural Development and the Office of Student Affairs.

It stands to reason that archives and institutional repositories throughout academia would find similar shared visions and potential benefits and, consequently, that they should seek to support one another. While the Ohio Northern University collaboration initially formed due to changes to the existing archive and the implementation of a new repository system, it remains successful due to the values and goals shared between the two leads. Rather than being a simple transactional relationship where materials are sent from the ONU Archives to DigitalCommons@ONU, both individuals wanted to work alongside one another to ensure that the materials were handled and displayed properly, to support university strategic goals, and, most importantly, to engage with the campus community in meaningful ways.

NOTES

1. Raym Crow, *The Case for Institutional Repositories*, SPEC Kit 292 (Washington DC: Association of Research Libraries, 2006), 17, available at https://ils.unc.edu/courses/2014_fall/inls690_109/Readings/Crow2002-CaseforInstitutionalRepositoriesSPARCPaper.pdf.
2. Elizabeth Yakel, Soo Young Rieh, Beth St. Jean, Karen Markey, and Jihyun Kim, "Institutional Repositories and the Institutional Repository: College and University Archives and Special Collections in an Era of Change," *American Archivist* 71, no. 2 (Fall/Winter 2008): 324.
3. ONU Fact Book, 2021, https://my.onu.edu/sites/default/files/fact_book_2021-2022_complete_0.pdf.
4. ONU Fact Book.

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