Improving Access to Special Collections & University Archives' Digital Collections

Providing access to digitized materials—such as historic photographs of 1920s America, oral history interviews with groundbreaking female athletes, or issues of the student newspaper documenting student activism on campus—offers opportunities for faculty to enhance research and learning opportunities for their students. With the common conception that everything is online, it is easy to overlook the amount of work that goes into ensuring the availability and accessibility of digital content like this over time.

Grand Valley State University Libraries' Special Collections and University Archives spent over a year moving its digital collections to two new platforms in order to increase the accessibility of its materials. Offering digital collections supports the teaching mission of Grand Valley State University as well as provides opportunities for research. The majority of the digital collections were transferred into an open-source platform called Omeka, allowing University Libraries' staff to easily modify and customize the design. The University Publications collections, however, were

moved into Grand Valley's institutional repository, ScholarWorks@GVSU.

"Growth in our digital collections outstripped the affordability of the system we had been using," explained Annie Benefiel. This financial bind spurred the creation of a team that began evaluating new platforms at the end of 2015.

Some materials were initially placed into an interim system; however, Benefiel notes that the experimental system struggled to handle some of the most common material formats, especially videos. Oral history videos added to the Veterans' History collections, for example, did not allow users to skip around to the parts most relevant for their research or instruction, making the resources difficult to use effectively. Matt Schultz and Kyle Felker documented several related issues including how slowly videos streamed, which led to frustration for users trying to access the materials; a slow upload process, which reduced the speed at which content could be made available; and an interface that was far from user-friendly.

In order to choose a better platform for University Libraries' users, the team created a set of criteria to test potential

systems. This included the speed of adding new materials, overall cost, intuitive user-interface, and sustainability.

Alicia Huber explained that the institutional repository emerged as a solution for Grand Valley-created materials, which fit thematically with existing ScholarWorks content. In fact, materials produced by the University were among the first items selected to populate the institutional repository when it was first introduced.

Publications such as *The Keystone*, Grand Valley's first student newspaper, and the *Lanthorn* can now be found alongside course catalogs, yearbooks, and press releases as well as current journals, theses, and dissertations. "It creates a one-stop shop," said Huber, making it easier for students, faculty, and staff to find related materials. Huber and Diana Page transferred over 2,800 items into the institutional repository over the course of 2017.

For the other digital collections, Schultz steered the group towards open-source solutions that allowed the University Libraries' greater control over the workflows. Omeka stood out for the "ease with which users can get to the actual items
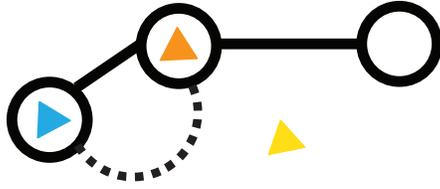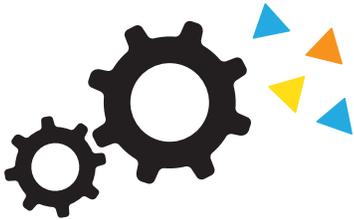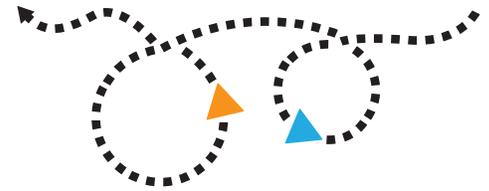
Matt Schultz
Metadata + Digital
Curation Librarian
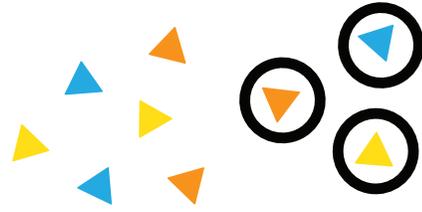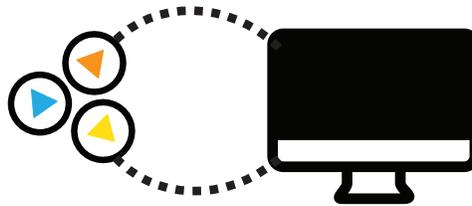
Annie Benefiel
Archivist for
Collection Management

Collaborating to Improve Access

Diana Page
Library Specialist for
Metadata + Digital Curation

Kyle Felker
Digital Initiatives Librarian
(former)

Alicia Huber
Collections + Scholarly
Communications Associate

themselves and interact with the content," said Schultz. It emphasizes user-friendliness with an intuitive interface, enhanced display of descriptive information, and robust support for streaming media.

Omeka also allows the collections visibility on a broader scale through interoperability with the Digital Public Library of America (DPLA). DPLA gathers digital materials from hundreds of libraries, higher education institutions, and cultural heritage sites across the nation into one easy-to-access online location, which increases the reach and overall impact of the digital collections.

Materials re-located to Omeka include oral histories, military correspondence and

history collections, decorative book bindings, American history photographs, records from Michigan nonprofit organizations, and many more. According to Page, who worked on adding materials to the new platform, over 15,600 items were migrated into the new platform by the end of 2017.

Faculty are already working to integrate these digital collections into their coursework. For example, several students in a research methods course engaged with oral histories of Vietnam veterans as part of an assignment on trauma in American history.

"Everyone who worked on [the project] was really knowledgeable in their areas and really committed to finding the best solutions for the users," said Felker. Though

the vast majority of materials have moved into the new platforms, the group's work continues as new materials are acquired and new digital collections are created to support Grand Valley's curriculum and faculty, staff, and student research.

To access Digital Collections visit:
https://digitalcollections.library.gvsu.edu/

To access the University Archives on ScholarWorks visit:
https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/archives/