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We Are All Teachers: A Collaborative Approach to Digital Collection Development

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We Are All Teachers: A Collaborative Approach to Digital Collection Development

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ABSTRACT

In libraries and archives, efforts to document underrepresented communities and diversify collections can be fraught with political tension. We explore an interdepartmental collaboration to create and preserve a digital collection documenting the Urban Native Relocation Program of the mid- to late-twentieth century in Grand Rapids, Michigan. Involving the Grand Valley State University Libraries, the Kutsche Office of Local History, and the university's Native American Advisory Board, the project serves as a model not just for collaborative collection development but also for community engagement and outreach. We find that process is as important as product in developing collaborative digital collections.

KEYWORDS

Academic libraries; collaboration; collection development; digital collections; Native Americans; oral histories

Introduction

The digital age is shifting the role of library special collections from passive stewards of unique resources to active participants in their creation. In academic institutions, where research carried out by students and faculty produces new resources of cultural and historical significance, the library has a wealth of collaborative opportunities to develop collections that directly support the teaching and research mission of the institution and add to the diversity of perspectives represented in their holdings. This article examines *Gi-gikinomaage-min*, one such collaboration among an academic library, interdisciplinary research center, and Division of Inclusion and Equity at Grand Valley State University (GVSU) to create a digital collection documenting the urban Native experience in West Michigan.

Gi-gikinomaage-min means “We are all teachers” when translated from Anishinaabemowin. The project's name reflects a key Anishinaabe teaching: that elders are our teachers and they carry what is needed for the next generation to be successful. The project aims to document the history of Native Americans in Grand Rapids, Michigan—the state's second largest city after Detroit—focusing particularly on the mid- to late-twentieth century Urban Relocation Period. To do this, we are creating an online digital collection containing new video and audio oral history

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interviews recorded by GVSU faculty and students, as well as relevant newsletters, flyers, and posters of local Native American organizations digitized from GVSU Special Collections. The project team is also pursuing partnerships with other local public archival repositories to preserve and facilitate access to kindred materials within their holdings.

We recognize that our work must be carried out in a way that supports Native American control over their stories, documents, and artifacts. Thus, this effort is intentionally structured in a way that supports Native American self-determination with regard to these resources within and across the university. We believe that this effort will succeed only if process remains as important as product. Recent scholarship and best practice guidelines for collaboration between tribal and non-tribal organizations informs how we carry out this work (Boles, George-Shongo, and Weideman 2008; First Archivist Circle 2007; Joffrion and Fernández 2015; Mathiesen 2012; Trimble, Sommer, and Quinlan 2008). This project also draws upon recent scholarship documenting the role that information and communication technologies can play in creating cultures of transparency (Bertot, Jaeger, and Grimes 2010; Star, Bowker, and Neumann 2003). Furthermore, our work is shaped by scholarship on the roles and responsibilities of libraries and archives in the digital age (Conway 2015; Daigle 2012; Landis and Chandler 2013; Lewis 2013; MacNeil and Mak 2007; Ziegenfuss and Furse 2016). By openly describing our project creation, institutional and cross-institutional challenges, leadership decisions, funding, and organizational and technological change, we hope this article will become part of a larger national conversation about how to frame more equitable and open collaborations among academic libraries, Native Americans, and tribal institutions.

In examining this collaborative, multiphase project even as it develops, we seek to explore the following questions: What role does the project-based advisory council play in guiding and shaping this digital collection in a manner that respects the needs of the communities being documented, the needs of the faculty and students engaged in collecting the oral histories, and the limitations of the university library in regard to processing, preserving, and providing access to the materials themselves? In pursuing the goal of diversifying the perspectives represented in our collections to more closely reflect the diversity of our community, to what extent should the library be involved in the creation of new primary source materials? And finally, what means of communication and documentation are most effective in ensuring the project's continued success through institutional, technological, and organizational change?

Institutional context

The *Gi-gikinomaage-min Project* was created in 2014 as a result of conversations taking place during a pivotal moment in university–Native American relations. Established in 1960, GVSU enrolls more than 25,000 students and has campuses at four locations in West Michigan and regional centers that span the state's lower peninsula—in Holland, Muskegan, Traverse City, and Detroit. A comprehensive

public institution, GVSU is the only public university in the state of Michigan to have a Native American Advisory Board (NAAB) or *Gchi Bookskamgaad*. Located within the Division of Inclusion and Equity, the NAAB is committed to “working to advocate and support Native American perspectives at GVSU ... [and] fostering strong relationships between the University and larger Native American communities” (“Grand Valley State University Native American Advisory Board ‘Gchi Bookskamgaad’ Charter” 2015). This is no small charge. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, slightly more than 139,000 Native Americans reside in Michigan today. Not only does Michigan have the largest Native American population in the Midwest, but it is also one of ten states nationally with the largest American Indian population (Norris, Vines, and Hoefel 2012). West Michigan’s Native American population is also very diverse, representing members of the twelve federally recognized tribes within the state of Michigan and members of more than fifty federally recognized tribes from outside the state, along with larger numbers of American Indians from tribes that are still advocating for federal recognition.

Native American students and staff have been an important presence on GVSU’s campus from its earliest days. And like many multicultural student and faculty/staff organizations at universities across the United States, GVSU’s Native American Student Association (NASA) and its NAAB were born in struggle. In the late 1960s and 1970s, Native American staff members volunteered their time teaching weekend classes for urban Native youth who had been raised without knowledge of their heritage and cultural traditions. Many of those staff instructors also worked with the Grand Rapids Inter-Tribal Council’s “Survival School” for K–12 students on the city’s West Side. These efforts aimed to increase Native American educational attainment by fostering an educational environment that was supportive of Native American students in the city’s public schools as well as at GVSU. In 1973, within weeks of the stand at Wounded Knee in South Dakota, Native American students founded GVSU’s NASA. That organization remains among the university’s longest-running student organizations.

There was not a kindred organization for Native American staff and faculty until the NAAB was founded in 2009 amidst growing disagreements between Native American staff and students, on the one hand, and the university’s non-Native academic faculty, on the other, about expertise, curricular approaches, and repatriation of human remains and sacred/cultural objects—examples of what anthropologists have called the “increasing awareness ... of the social process of producing knowledges about Indians in America” (Biolosi and Zimmerman 1997). Although the NAAB’s formal charge was to advise the vice-president for inclusion and equity on outreach and retention strategies for Native American students, the NAAB’s goals were quite broad, including influencing curriculum to incorporate more Native American content across the university’s curriculum. One way that members of the NAAB hoped to do this was by documenting the growth of Grand Rapids’ urban Native American population, focusing especially on the mid-twentieth-century urban relocation period. But it was not initially clear whether there was faculty interest in spearheading such an endeavor or where and how such a project might be supported.

Disagreements between some GVSU faculty and tribal historic preservation officers over the repatriation of artifacts and human remains held by GVSU's Anthropology Department particularly strained relations between the NAAB and the academic disciplines. Tensions between at least one university administrator and community elders that grew out of these discussions broke down relationships with some key tribal representatives altogether, resulting in the resignation of at least one NAAB member. Without a charter or bylaws, the NAAB had no formal mechanisms for acting or advocating prior to 2015. As a Carnegie classification "Master's/Large" public institution, efforts focused on supporting undergraduates, applied learning opportunities for undergraduate and master's students, and professional development are more likely to be supported within the university as a whole than were primarily research/documentation endeavors.

Ultimately, it was advocacy by several members of the NAAB coupled with the support of GVSU's Brooks College of Interdisciplinary Studies and GVSU Libraries that proved a tipping point. In 2013, two founding members of the NAAB—the executive director of adult and continuing education studies at GVSU (Little River Band of Ottawa Indians) and the editor of *Native News Online* (Prairie Band of Potawatomi Indians)—worked closely with the director of the Kutsche Office of Local History on outreach and programming for the annual Local History Roundtable Meeting. The Kutsche Office director, an oral historian and associate professor of liberal studies, was a relative newcomer to GVSU and began her appointment that January. Guided by a mission of "using history to give voice to diverse communities," the Kutsche Office is located in GVSU's Brooks College of Interdisciplinary Studies. Focused on the theme "Natives, Settlers, and Founders: Our Shared Community History," the April 2013 roundtable featured a keynote address by Little Traverse Bay Band's (LTBB) director of repatriation and archives and also created opportunities for public and private dialogue about repatriation, debates about historical reenactments, and an active U.S. Department of Education civil rights investigation involving Native American families in local public schools.

The conference concluded with a great deal of enthusiasm about ways that the Kutsche Office and NAAB could partner on future projects. Still, it was ultimately because a nontraditional undergraduate student, who was also an LTBB citizen and NAAB member, chose to focus her senior thesis research on Native American Grand Rapids that the *Gi-gikinomaage-min Project* started to take shape. In 2014, the student approached the Kutsche Office director about her interest in documenting the history of urban Native American Grand Rapids in spring 2014. The office hired her to serve as an undergraduate research assistant, and later as a graduate assistant, to work on the project. The initial stages of project planning commenced after approval at a formal meeting between the Kutsche Office and the NAAB. Shortly thereafter, GVSU's Kutsche Office of Local History, NAAB, and Office of Multicultural Affairs received a six-month planning grant from the Michigan Humanities Council, an affiliate of the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH), to compile a survey of existing primary documentation, identify fifty to sixty community elders who would be willing to provide oral histories, and

encourage grassroots community support for this effort through public/community dialogue opportunities in connection with Native American Heritage Month.

Project history: Defining scope, roles, and values

It is worth noting that the earliest stages of the planning process did not formally include GVSU Libraries, even though the Kutsche Office and NAAB knew they wanted to create a publicly accessible archive of materials. There were several reasons for this. One was a provost's directive to the Kutsche Office at the time of its founding in 2008 that "the Office would do no collecting." This instruction made institutional sense at the time not only because of physical space constraints within GVSU Special Collections and Archives but also because GVSU did not want to compromise the office's ability to collaborate with community groups by competing with area archives, museums, or historical societies for collections. But six years and a leadership transition later, it left vague whether this was still the case and whether born-digital materials were ever a part of this directive. Second, although GVSU Special Collections housed several digital, multimedia oral history collections, it was unclear whether GVSU Libraries had an interest in, and capacity to, grow its digital collections or on what scale. The third reason concerned repatriation and human remains. At no point had GVSU Libraries housed Native American artifacts or human remains; those were held in the university's Anthropology Department Laboratory. Nonetheless, the struggles over repatriation fed some lingering concerns within the larger Native American community about whether GVSU could be trusted to hold Native American materials of any kind. Thus, the planning proposal left open the question of who would ultimately own and preserve the oral histories and digital ephemera (photos, scrapbooks, letters, newsletters, and related materials) collected by the *Gi-gikinomaage-min Project*.

The partners were clear that the guidance of a trained archivist would be essential to the effort. Several members of the newly formed project team already had a strong working relationship with the university archivist, who came to GVSU with decades of experience working with diverse communities in Boston and elsewhere to preserve their histories. She also worked as a collections curator at the Grand Rapids Public Museum. While at GVSU, the archivist worked closely with faculty spearheading GVSU's participation in the Library of Congress Veteran's History Project, incorporating these important video oral histories into the Libraries' Digital Collections. Very soon after the Michigan Council for the Humanities Planning Grant had been received, she began attending biweekly project team meetings and actively advising on the project. Team members then included the six members of the NAAB (including an assistant director from the Office of Multicultural Affairs, one full-time GVSU faculty member, one full-time administrative professional staff member, one student, and two community members), the director of the Kutsche Office, and the university archivist. Four out of the eight project team members were Native Americans, citizens of three different tribes (LTBB, Prairie Band Potawatomi, and Little River Band Ottawa).

Over the next six months, members of the project team carried out the planning work outlined in the grant. Funding provided by the Michigan Humanities Council and the Brooks College Dean's Office was used to hire a graduate student to coordinate the project through the Kutsche Office. The grant also paid small consulting fees for the two non-GVSU staff/faculty NAAB members on the project team. Additional funding from the university's Office of Multicultural Affairs provided food and supported a drumming group for a community dialogue held in November 2014 to discuss planning for the oral history project at the Nottawaseppi Huron Band of the Potawatomi Northern Health Center in downtown Grand Rapids. Thanks to the leadership of a GVSU Social Work professor and NAAB member, the community elders who had left the NAAB as community–university relations broke down provided the welcome and prayer at the dialogue, marking a step toward healing. By the end of the grant period, the survey of existing resources and list of fifty to sixty interviewees was completed. Partners also reached out to the United Tribes of Michigan, describing the project, soliciting guidance, and requesting letters of support.

Using feedback from community and tribal organizations, in December 2014 the partners completed a five-year strategic plan to guide their work as the effort moved forward. The goals of the *Gi-gikinomaage-min Project* were thus formally outlined. The overarching goal of the project was to empower Native Americans of Grand Rapids to better know who they are, where they have been, and where they are going. To do this, the project would preserve oral histories, archival materials, project records, and other documents, making the resources accessible to the communities that generated them as well as to educators, students, and future generations; seek to educate non-Natives about Native experience in Michigan, contemporary as well as historical; and foster community between the university and the urban Native American population (Jonaitis et al. 2014).

The project team also filed protocols with the GVSU's Human Research Review Committee (HRRC), the university's institutional review board. Procedures for informed consent were carefully reviewed by both the HRRC and university legal counsel. Key decisions were made about interview format (audio and video). Recording levels were established that would meet Library of Congress standards for preservation. The Kutsche Office and GVSU Libraries crafted and signed a memorandum of understanding outlining a framework for collaborating on the development of digital collections going forward. As part of those conversations, which included the GVSU provost and deans of both Brooks College and GVSU Libraries, the project team and GVSU Libraries agreed that the new oral histories collected as part of the *Gi-gikinomaage-min Project* would be owned and housed in GVSU Special Collections and University Archives and made available online through the GVSU Libraries' Digital Collections.

During this period, GVSU Libraries also developed their five-year strategic plan. Within it, the libraries delineated the following objectives: to develop unique collections that highlight aspects of diversity and inclusion; to “increase capacity and support for the creation, use, management[,] and preservation of digital content”; and to “pursue collaborative opportunities and increase participation in university and

community-based efforts that advance digital scholarship and research initiatives” (GVSU Libraries 2016). In many ways, their participation in the *Gi-gikinomaage-min Project* allowed the GVSU Libraries’ staff to frame their strategic goals and objectives around a newly established model for collaborative special collection development. The project provided not only opportunities to diversify the university’s uniquely held collections but also grounds on which to clarify the library’s own commitment to digital access and preservation support. GVSU Libraries defined its role in the project in the following ways: (a) providing data management consultation for the duration of the project; (b) establishing metadata creation guidelines and templates for use by the project’s oral historians, interns, and students; (c) digitizing and creating item-level metadata for selected documents (newsletters, flyers, and event posters) and from its collections; (d) determining and documenting copyright status for digitized materials; (e) ingesting the digital collection materials into its online access and digital preservation systems; and (f) providing long-term stewardship of the digital collection. Because it had partnered with trusted experts in oral history and Native American culture and limited its role to a primarily technical one, the library felt assured of maintaining a position of neutrality concerning the contents of the collection itself.

As the planning process concluded, several other points became central for project team members as they looked forward. Most important, the team recognized that process—how they worked—would be every bit as important as the products of their work. Team members drew upon their experiences in tribal and non-tribal contexts to identify the following values:

- Giving Native American voices priority with regard to decision making.
- Maintaining transparency in communications.
- Keeping good records of all aspects of project work.
- Demonstrating sensitivity to different understandings of time frames, deadlines, working culture, and community commitments of team members.
- Exercising patience and prioritizing the well-being of team members and tribal communities.
- Ensuring mutual benefit for all partners and their representative units.
- Exercising a willingness to go slowly, adjust timetables, and revise goals in response to community needs.
- Showing abiding respect for different fields and different types of expertise.

These values were informed by the Protocols for Native American Archival Materials (PNAAM), developed by the First Archivists Circle (2007). Meetings of project partners included open conversations about the different types of vulnerability represented in team members’ roles. Tenured and even untenured faculty, for example, felt they were among the most privileged because they enjoyed the promise of academic freedom. Because the faculty members on the team were non-Native, they acknowledged that no matter how deep their commitment to the community may be, the stakes associated with maintaining good community relations were lower than for tribal community members, whatever their professional positions. Library staff and faculty also benefit from a great deal of privilege in that they have

control over the access and preservation mechanisms for the resulting digital collection. And the library's procedures, policies, technologies, and organization will affect how the collection is managed and made available online in the future. By openly acknowledging these privileges and the vulnerabilities exposed by collaboration, the team could directly discuss how to frame their roles not only to assure mutual benefit but also to more equally distribute risks.

Cross-institutional collaboration: Seeking funding and external partners for preservation

In 2015, team members began collecting oral histories while also pursuing three different opportunities, each of which addressed goals within the project's strategic plan. Each opportunity engaged partnering units in different measure, as appropriate to their interests and expertise. These included (a) a pipeline-to-college initiative that would engage Native American youth in helping to document their community history; (b) a documentary film, directed by WGUV's inclusion and equity journalist Mariano Avila; and (c) a collaborative initiative to digitally preserve and facilitate access to primary materials that tell the history of the urban Native American experience in Michigan. This article focuses on the third of these initiatives.

Through the planning survey, team members identified several large repositories of primary materials focusing on Native Americans in Grand Rapids. One was an oral history project undertaken by the Grand Rapids Public Library (GRPL) and Grand Rapids Inter-Tribal Council between 1973 and 1976 with support from the National Endowment for the Humanities, Dyer-Ives Foundation, and Grand Rapids Community Foundation. Researchers working with the project collected more than 160 oral histories with Native American elders, including a significant number in Native languages. The Native American Oral History Project Records (Coll. No. 65) also include several linear feet of field notes, project meetings, and recordings made at a reunion of Mount Pleasant Indian Boarding School students.

Initially, the GRPL aimed to create five educational booklets from this research. Those booklets were to be available through the GRPL and distributed to Native American families and tribal entities across West Michigan. To fund that effort, the partners again applied to the NEH—this time to the Division of Education Programs—to produce the booklets. Disagreements about use, copyright, and control over the project grew over this period. These struggles also provide important insights into Anglo–Native American relations at the time. In 1977, several Native American interviewees filed a request for an injunction to prevent the GRPL from publishing the booklets unless the GRPL filed for independent copyright on behalf of the interviewees. The NEH denied GRPL's request for additional funding. The civil case wound its way through the Kent County Circuit Court for well over a year. Ultimately, in 1979, the court ruled in favor of the GRPL, denying the injunction (Kent County Circuit Court 1979). The GRPL published a single booklet, *The Tree That Never Dies*, from these materials (Dobson 1978). (That work has been out of print for nearly two decades.) Since that time, the materials in that collection have

largely been closed to use. A significant number of the original oral histories were also either destroyed or returned to interviewees. The roughly seventy reel-to-reel and cassette tapes containing the oral histories are at dire risk of decay.

A few years later, the Grand Rapids Public Museum (GRPM) launched a similar project. Museum staff, working with Native American community members, collected videotaped oral histories from sixty-six Anishinaabek people, more than one hundred historic photos, newsletters, language instruction materials for teaching Anishinaabek and English languages, translated hymnals and bibles, as well as physical ephemera such as tools and beadwork, among others. A subset of these materials created the exhibit, “Anishinaabek: The People of This Place,” which is on permanent display in the museum. The edited videos that are a part of the exhibition were most recently updated in March 2014. The full oral histories are preserved only on VHS tape. Thus, they too are at risk for decay. Access to the full collection of materials remains limited. Preservation concerns make viewing the full oral histories impossible at the present time.

During this time, private collector Edward Gillis amassed a collection of magazines, posters, maps, and other published and unpublished materials focusing on Native Americans. The collection was donated to GVSU Libraries’ Special Collections and University Archives in 1994. Researchers only used these materials once prior to the launch of the *Gi-gikinomaage-min Project*. Material in this collection has a national scope but is strongest in the Great Lakes Region and spans the period between 1872 and 1994. It is a large collection—54.0 linear feet in all—and, together with the materials contained in the GRPL and GRPM collections, adds further dimension to the historic experiences and political, social, and cultural life of Native Americans in the Grand Rapids Metropolitan Area and beyond. Together, these collections provide an unprecedented firsthand glimpse into diverse aspects of Native American life from 1882 to the present day. This is more than a century of history that not only is at risk of being forever lost but now remains largely inaccessible and underused.

To address this need, two of the project team members—the director of the Kutsche Office and the university archivist—discussed the possibility of approaching the GRPL and GRPM about pursuing collaborative funding opportunities to digitally reformat and facilitate access to these materials, along with the newly collected oral histories. After seeking approval from the project team in early 2015, they approached the director of Special Collections at GRPL and the collections curator at GRPM about the potential for collaboration. In the meantime, the university archivist gathered information about an opportunity for funding through the National Historical Publications and Records Commission’s (NHPRC) Access to Historical Records Program.

The grant opportunity was attractive to the project team because it would support digital reformatting, description, and cataloging and provide funds to collect new oral histories. Team members also saw the opportunity to work closely with the state and national archives as an opportunity to connect the local effort to larger

conversations and standards for preserving and accessing Native American materials. But the team also faced some challenges. The most obvious was that GVSU had never before submitted or received a major federal grant to support archival preservation. Nor was there much of a track record of submitting collaborative grant applications to external funders in either GVSU Libraries or Brooks College. However, team members had grant-writing experience from their work at previous institutions, and GVSU's Office of Sponsored Programs and the deans of Brooks College and GVSU Libraries were very supportive of the endeavor.

Recent personnel transitions within two of the partnering units—the Division of Inclusion and Equity (NAAB) and GVSU Libraries—raised additional questions. From the time the *Gi-gikinomaage-min Project* was launched, an interim vice-president, who was also the founding dean of Brooks College, headed the Division of Inclusion and Equity. The new vice-president began his tenure at GVSU just a few short weeks earlier, in late February 2015. Although the project team had no reason to think that the new vice-president would not support the partnership, with the grant draft due in mid-April, they did wonder whether it would be possible to get his approval quickly while he was still transitioning to campus. Key GVSU Libraries staff positions were also in transition. Although the library was growing its digital collections faculty and staff, they had not yet hired a new metadata and curation librarian. This meant that team members would need to draft an initial budget, specifications, and work process without the input of the librarian who would ultimately oversee a significant portion of the prospective work. And while GVSU Libraries were not new to providing access to digital materials, they were still fairly new to managing and preserving digital objects (Eckard 2013; Rodríguez and Eckard 2013).

The greatest amount of discussion was devoted to the provenance of the GRPL materials, which were historically the most valuable, the most at risk physically, and the most complicated. Project team members also found the collection to be of particular interest because of the striking similarities between the stated intent and collaborative structures established by that effort and how the *Gi-gikinomaage-min Project* team described and structured their own work. Team members viewed the GRPL initiative as a cautionary example and sought to learn from it.

Although most of the transcriptions, notes, and papers within the collection were open to researchers and a finding aid was available online, the GRPL required anyone who accessed the collection to sign an agreement certifying that they would not cite or publish any materials from the collection without review and approval by the director of Special Collections. This restriction had been in place since the collection was first processed in 1988. Hearing the tapes was impossible due to their fragile condition. Quoting any of the oral history transcripts or identifying anyone who was interviewed by name was strictly forbidden. Research notes were also subject to review by the director before they could be taken out of the Local History Department. These restrictions had been voluntarily put in place shortly after the 1979 Circuit Court ruling, out of sensitivity to the community's wishes.

The Kutsche Office director spent several months reviewing materials in the GRPL Collection in consultation with the GRPL director of Special Collections, who

was also a member of the Kutsche Office Advisory Council. With the consent of the GRPL director, the Kutsche Office director contacted all of the living principles who had conducted those interviews as well as others, Native and non-Native, who advised on the project, to ask about the circumstances surrounding the lawsuits and to solicit memories and impressions of the project itself. She explained her purpose in making the inquiries and the desire of GVSU and GRPL to preserve the fragile tapes while exploring possibilities for access. She also sought guidance from GVSU legal counsel, who reviewed the Circuit Court materials and the court's finding.

All of these individuals believed that it would be permissible and in keeping with the intent of the original project to increase access to the collection, perhaps even to the extent of making significant portions available online. But there were also ethical, cultural, and community relations to consider. Although the researchers conducting the interviews in the 1970s worked within the bounds of accepted research practice at that time, the informed consent practices they used would not meet contemporary standards. Interviewees knew they were being recorded, but transcriptions made clear that some elders had never before seen a tape recorder or understood what "being recorded" meant. Research diaries maintained by interviewers describe reassuring interviewees that they would have full access to reviewing and editing their interviews before they were placed in the archives or opened to research even though this was not part of the formal process. The only clear proof of consent were copyright applications that had been submitted in the names of a majority of interviewees.

Members of the *Gi-gikinomaage-min Project* team were among those whose family members had been interviewed as part of the GRPL project. Although few details were discussed even within families, there was a clear sense among many Native Americans that this effort had been damaging to the Native American community. At least one community member described a Native American library staffer being threatened with violence and having to leave West Michigan altogether as the project unraveled in the late 1970s. Several of the non-Natives who worked on the project described their own emotional wounds—and in some cases, physical threats—at the time they completed this work. For all of these reasons, there was consensus among the *Gi-gikinomaage-min Project* team members and the director of GRPL's Special Collections that while it was critically important to digitally reformat the fragile collections, it would be irresponsible to promise broad online access to the collections. This decision was further informed by the PNAAM's guidance regarding Native American intellectual property issues. Those protocols identify several guidelines for action, including "recognizing that the 'right of possession' may be held by communities of origins" and the need to expand "the idea of moral rights (*droit moral*) to protect Native American cultural and intellectual property" (First Archivists Circle 2007). The project team engaged in a practice of ethnographic refusal in their consideration of the rights of the participants (Ortner 1995; Simpson 2007). In other words, project team members worked with participants to decide together whether particular information should be kept out of the public domain or closed for use by researchers. This practice has been advocated by Indigenous

theorists as a way to decolonize research about marginalized groups because it gives members of those groups greater control over how they are studied, when, and by whom.

Gi-gikinomaage-min Project team members discussed whether to go forward including the GRPL materials as part of the grant application. On the one hand, there was little doubt that the historical value and fragility of these materials made preserving them especially important. But because team members did not feel comfortable pressing for full, open access to the materials, they also did not want the GRPL collections to compromise their application. Nor did they want funding, or the potential for funding, to drive their decision making about efforts that were fundamentally about community relations, Native and non-Native. Ultimately it was the desire for preservation that tipped the scales. The team decided unanimously to go forward with including these materials in the application, partnering with both the GRPM and GRPL.

The Kutsche Office director and university archivist took the lead drafting the grant, with significant input from GVSU's assistant archivist, the director of Special Collections at GRPL, and the collections curator at GRPM. Drafts were shared and approved by the project team, deans, as well as directors and boards within GRPL and GRPM before being submitted to the Michigan State Archives Board for feedback in mid-April. Because the project now involved partners from outside GVSU, they also drafted a joint Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) to frame the collaboration. It was here, however, that some of the other tensions surrounding creating digital collections became clear.

The digital collections management systems of GRPL and GRPM included large collections of publicly accessible primary materials. Only GVSU Libraries, however, were investing significant resources in developing long-term digital preservation infrastructure. This included a recent exploration into using Preservica Cloud Edition for digital preservation management and online access.

Although all three partnering organizations are large public institutions, the overall resources and staffing support for long-term digital preservation enjoyed at GVSU Libraries was far greater than either GRPM or GRPL. For GRPM and GRPL, entering this collaboration offered potential support for digital reformatting and preservation of their collections that was beyond their existing means. For GVSU, this offered an opportunity for community collaboration—an extension of the university's strategic plan—that would also grow pedagogical resources, support research and teaching by staff and faculty, and create professional training opportunities for students. But it also meant that GVSU was committing significant staffing and materials resources, not just as a part of the matching funds but well beyond the term of the grant. This included annual costs for digital preservation storage along with processing and cataloguing by GVSU Libraries' staff.

The community partners also raised concerns about losing control over their collections in the process. Thus, the MOU contained specific clauses promising not only that “[o]wnership will remain with the originating institutions” but also that

“[p]artners will be able to use digitized materials from their own collections in any way, including making them publicly accessible on their own websites” (“Memorandum of Understanding Among the Grand Rapids Public Library, Grand Rapids Public Museum, and Grand Valley State University” 2015). Digital objects in the new, common online resource site created by the project would “link back” to the corresponding records in the GRPL and GRPM databases. Partners were prohibited from using or granting permission to use the files of any institution other than their own without permission from the donor institution. The community partners also requested that three comprehensive sets of preservation copies of materials from all three of the project sites (GRPL, GRPM, and GVSU) be placed onto physical drives. Those drives were to be held at each of the institutions. When the MOU was formally signed in a small ceremony on May 17, 2015, it marked the first time that the three institutions had formally partnered together. “We are extremely proud to have a role in the vital work of preserving the voices of Native Americans in this region,” Lee VanOrsdel, dean of GVSU Libraries, said in a press release issued by GVSU, calling it a “collaboration of the public good” (Coffill 2015).

Team members received detailed feedback from the state’s review board, incorporating those edits into the final proposal. Not one reviewer raised a concern about the need to restrict access to the GRPL materials. The library’s new metadata and curation librarian (Nottawaseppi Huron Band of the Potawatomi) started work at GVSU just a few days before the grant needed to start routing through the university’s electronic grant system. He generously contributed clarifying language to the final grant while also raising questions about the volume of digital storage space that would ultimately be required as well as the application’s specification of Preservica as the preservation and access repository for the collection. The final grant was submitted in early June.

The project team received a response concerning their grant in early September 2015, just as they were completing work on a traveling exhibition, “Walking Beyond Our Ancestors’ Footsteps: An Urban Native American Experience.” The exhibition was designed to feature key questions addressed by the *Gi-gikinomaage-min Project*, using materials from GVSU, GRPM, and GRPL. Overall the reviews were positive, with several reviewers praising the careful planning that had gone into the effort and its leadership. Although one reviewer asked about the need for the physical drives—requested by leadership of the partner institutions but not the primary means of long-term digital preservation, which was to be managed within Preservica—the overarching concern in this round of reviews concentrated on access and the GRPL’s materials from the 1970s. One reviewer also drew attention to the stated use restrictions, requiring the GRPL’s director of Special Collections to review researchers’ notes.

The project team leaders composed and submitted a clarification response in mid-September. GRPL’s director of Special Collections explained that the GRPL had been carefully reviewing the collection’s history, copyright, and terms of use, in no small part because of their work with the *Gi-gikinomaage-min Project*. They removed the review clause from the use restrictions but explained why it would be

impossible to commit to providing unfettered access to the full collections. They wrote:

The original intent of the Native American Oral History project was to allow the children and grandchildren of those interviewed to be able to hear the stories firsthand, long after the elders had passed into the spirit world. The GRPL wants to fulfill this goal. At the same time, because of the questions about informed consent and anonymity that were raised by the project staff after these oral histories were completed in 1974, the GRPL is mindful that opening up this collection to full use must take place in dialogue with the Native American communities that generated these stories. To do otherwise, even where it is legally permissible, risks violating the larger trust GRPL has worked to build with the Grand Rapids community it serves. (Timothy Gleisner, letter to Alex Lorch, September 12, 2015)

In late 2015, the project team learned that their funding request was denied. In their final determination letter, the commission said they were concerned that the total number of expected interviews may be “overly ambitious” and that they “had concerns about the murky rights issues involved with the 1970s interviews,” requesting that a future application “provide assurance that the institution had free and clear rights to reproduce and make these available to the public, preferably online” (Kathleen Williams, email message to Melanie Shell-Weiss, November 9, 2015). Although legally it may have been possible for the partners to make this promise, doing so at this time would have compromised their core values and potentially the trust of local Native American community. The *Gi-gikinomaage-min Project* team decided not to reapply for funding through the NHPRC to support the work. Instead, through the remainder of 2015 and winter of 2016, the team focused on sustaining community dialogue in connection with the traveling exhibition “Walking Beyond Our Ancestors’ Footsteps” and exploring alternative funding options.

Moving forward together through change: Governance and project management

Compared to private industry, public universities are often thought of as being especially slow moving and bureaucratic. While this may be true in some respects, it is not necessarily the case with regard to academic leadership positions or staffing. Now two years old, the *Gi-gikinomaage-min Project* experienced its first major set of leadership transitions in spring/summer 2016. Although all of the changes were positive in that they represented promotions or other positive career steps, they increased awareness within the project team about the need for strong structures and careful planning if the project were to survive.

The director of the Kutsche Office of Local History announced her decision to step down in order to chair the Liberal Studies Department. A new director was appointed to begin in August—the same month that the university archivist retired from GVSU. The dean of GVSU Libraries, a major supporter of the project, announced her decision to retire at the end of the 2016 calendar year. Another supporter of the collaboration, GVSU’s provost, announced her decision to retire at the end of the 2016–2017 academic year as well. In the meantime, the libraries

restructured the management of digital projects and collections. The digital initiatives librarian joined the project team, as his responsibilities now included digital project management and coordination for the libraries, and the archivist for collection management (formerly assistant archivist) and metadata and digital curation librarian would play even more active roles in the project going forward.

Personnel change was not unique to GVSU during this period. Among community partners, the director of GRPL's Special Collections resigned to become assistant director of another library system in Michigan. Within the NAAB, the student project coordinator began graduate studies in public administration. Other members also expanded their professional pursuits or were promoted from former positions, with new members brought into the ranks. Tribal elections produced significant leadership changes within several key area tribes.

Even as personnel changes reshaped the project team, shifts within the GVSU institutional organization reshaped the nature of the collaboration itself. In fall 2015, it was announced that the Office of Multicultural Affairs would move from Student Services to the Division of Inclusion and Equity, putting it within the same reporting structure as the NAAB. The NAAB also drafted, and the university approved, a charter, which gave the NAAB the ability to vote and formalized their ability to make policy suggestions, develop programs, and create guidelines within the university.

Technological change, as is inevitable, also crept into the reenvisioning of the project, as GVSU Libraries completed its trial of Preservica Cloud Edition and concluded that it and CONTENTdm were not meeting their needs for sustaining their projected growth in digital collections. In fall 2016, library staff drafted a Digital Preservation Policy, refining and articulating the library's commitment to digital preservation, open source solutions, and open access. They also began evaluating alternative options for digital preservation and the delivery of digital objects online. Due to the rapid growth of its digital audiovisual collections, the library determined that any new digital library access mechanism must effectively stream audio and video and conform to web content accessibility guidelines. At the time of writing of this article, that evaluation process is still underway—and the prospect of another major data migration is on the horizon—further complicating timelines for project milestones.

Due to these personnel, organizational, and technological changes, in addition to the disappointment of not getting the much-needed grant support, the *Gi-gikinomaage-min* Project team members have recognized how important documents like the strategic plan, project protocols, letters of support, and MOUs had been to their effort so far. They also saw the NAAB's charter as a landmark in building trust between the university and Native Americans. Several members felt that the model established by *Gi-gikinomaage-min* had empowered the NAAB charter process and they wanted to ensure that the project was able to act in similar ways, exercising Native American self-determination. Others worried that as new members joined the project team and the leadership transitioned, core values shaping how the project worked would be lost, compromising partnerships in the process. In March 2016, the team began discussing the need to create formal bylaws as a means of ensuring

that the project's core values, process, and aims would remain intact even as personnel and roles changed. In the meantime, as jobs transitioned within the university, questions about the MOUs, project governance, and future plans proliferated. The most significant of these questions focused on size of the resultant digital collection, commitments made between GVSU and the community partners, timelines for the work of creating the collection materials, and who had the ultimate decision-making authority within the *Gi-gikinomaage-min Project* itself.

Ultimately two documents resulted from these discussions: (a) bylaws that created a project Advisory Council and (b) a work plan signed between GVSU Libraries and the *Gi-gikinomaage-min Project*. The bylaws, which were approved in September 2016, created a maximum fifteen-member Advisory Council with a Native American majority. Recognizing the challenges of tribal sovereignty and recognition, the document defines "Native Americans" as anyone who is a tribal citizen or community-recognized member of a tribe, including members of tribes that are not formally recognized by federal or state governments. Two founding members of the project team and NAAB—the GVSU's executive director of Adult and Continuing Education Studies (Little River Band of Ottawa Indians) and the editor of *Native News Online* (Prairie Band of the Potawatomi)—were elected to serve as chair and vice-chair, respectively. Seeking to balance the key role of the NAAB with the full scope of the project's goals and expertise brought by the partnering units, the bylaws also named the Kutsche Office as a managing partner, giving the Kutsche Office director an ex officio (non-voting) seat on the council. Key members of the GVSU Libraries' staff are voting members of the Advisory Council, serving as technical advisors and collection managers. A project coordinator position was also created and given a voting role on the council. Of the eleven founding councilors, six are Native American, representing five different tribes.

Drafted by the digital initiatives librarian, with significant input from the university archivist, assistant archivist, and metadata and curation librarian, the work plan clarified the timeline, activities, and commitments governing processing, cataloging, preserving, and making accessible the fifty to sixty new oral histories and documents digitized from GVSU's Gillis Collection. It also specified that "[m]aterials from GRPL and GRPM may be digitized and ingested to expand the collection as part of a separate project, contingent upon a revised MOU and funding," but it did not include those materials as part of this work plan. The document clarified limitations of access mechanisms currently employed by GVSU Libraries, specifying areas where GVSU Libraries would not provide labor, and made it clear that "any materials outside the identified scope" of the plan "will require additional negotiation and, possibly, a new project plan." Most significant for the project team, the work plan—written as an agreement between GVSU Libraries and the *Gi-gikinomaage-min Project*, signed by the dean of libraries and the newly elected *Gi-gikinomaage-min* chair and vice-chair later in fall 2016—marked the first document recognizing the authority of the *Gi-gikinomaage-min* Advisory Council.

Conclusions

As this project evolves, the collaborators strive to carefully document decisions that will shape not just the contents of the collection but also its management now and into the future. MOUs, project Advisory Council bylaws, and meeting minutes record commitments and decision making throughout the project. Planning documents such as the work plan and timeline and online project management tools provide structure and flexibility to the faculty, staff, and students of different GVSU departments engaged in creating and processing collection materials. Finally, the Advisory Council itself—with its majority Native American members, several of whom are also GVSU affiliates—connects the project to the wider Native American community, directs the selection of documents to be digitized, and identifies individuals to interview, ensuring that the collection meets the project's goals while also adhering to its values of Native American self-determination and self-documentation.

In our university context, we believe that creating an Advisory Council was essential, as it has provided one of the few structures on campus that bridge academic and non-academic units while enabling us to maintain majority Native American control over Native American resources. The bylaws and work plan also define who bears primary management responsibility for these resources, locating those responsibilities within multiple sites, depending upon the task, goal, and “product.” This multipronged, modular approach allows us flexibility by creating more prescriptive structures where needed to support the needs of partnering units—such as research ethics and protocols or processing and technical structures within the GVSU Libraries, to give but two examples—while also supporting opportunities for growth and revision.

In addition, by documenting the urban Native experience in West Michigan, the project contributes to a growing movement toward creating online, open-access digital resources for scholars, students, and community members. The project site (<http://www.gvsu.edu/nativeamericangr>) currently features links to materials from GRPM, GRPL, and GVSU as well as copies of the bylaws and work plan established with GVSU Libraries. As the project continues to develop and additional materials are developed and disseminated via the project site, it is our intention to contribute to the growth of primary source materials for Native Studies curricula. This project is also aligned with scholars across the United States generating conversations concerning digitized cultural heritage materials and digital pedagogy (Grant-Costa 2016). At the same time, our desire to create an avenue for materials to be accessed digitally reflects a commitment to ensuring that access is provided to those who may not be able to travel to specific archives or museums. While we recognize that not everyone has online access, digitization provides wider access to materials once relegated to a select few. We see this project as part of a broader movement that centers the voices of Native Americans and critiques settler colonial policies that contributed to pushing these communities to the margins through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. By engaging in ethnographic refusal and the PNAAM,

our digital collections underscore our intercultural investment in honoring Native American self-determination.

Repositories that wish to develop similar collaborations may also want to consider the following questions:

- *Why do you want to carry out this work?* This question helps to define core values among the partners and set priorities (Sinek 2009). It also provides a basis for setting limits as the project moves forward and may be helpful in identifying areas where advocacy may be needed at higher administrative levels in order to make the project sustainable.
- *Who will this effort serve?* Our approach, which draws loosely on a “design thinking” model, is rooted in empathy by seeking to understand the needs of users and partners first. It also embraces divergent approaches by way of developing an action plan (Brown and Wyatt 2010; Kim and Ryu 2014).
- *Who will gain from this effort? And who is the most vulnerable?* When evaluating their own circumstances, other repositories should carefully consider their own infrastructure to identify who may share similar interests and values as well as where vulnerabilities or more intractable challenges may lie. Talking openly about risk and costs as well as career paths and recognition structures at the beginning of an effort helps build trust among partners. It also helps to identify structural features that may inform how resources are allocated, where formal work plans or MOUs are necessary, and where it is essential to secure the support of institutional leaders/administrators on behalf of an effort.
- *How will we know whether this effort is successful?* Discussing how collaborators will measure success should not be assumed. Identifying early what measures partners may need to provide to administrators to secure resources or justify expenditures can be a big assist with project planning. Examples could be usage statistics or size of a collection, to name just two possibilities. The extent to which such efforts may contribute positively to a repository’s local or national reputation, strengths of partnerships with external institutions or organizations, and work that serves the institution’s core mission should also be considered, with appropriate benchmarks established for describing and/or evaluating those benefits. Project teams may also decide what they will not measure or identify key areas where they commit to not letting numbers drive their decision making. These decisions, whether implicit or explicit, are often central to the success of collaborative efforts as well.

When evaluating their own circumstances, repositories should also carefully consider their own infrastructure to identify who may share similar interests and values as well as where vulnerabilities or more intractable challenges may lie.

In terms of funding, we recognize that the challenges we have faced with regard to rights management and open access are not unique to our project alone. Such challenges highlight what could be described as a fundamental cultural difference between more liberal-minded understandings of “rights” and the value of open inquiry, on the one hand, with recognition of the sovereignty of tribal nations and the long history of colonialism on the other. As Kimberly Christen, a co-developer

of the Mukurtu Content Management System notes, “The colonial collecting project was a destructive mechanism by which Indigenous cultural materials were removed from communities and detached from local knowledge systems. Much of this material remains today not only physically distant from local communities, but also lodged within a legal system that steadfastly refuses local claims to stewardship of these materials” (Christen 2015). Addressing this challenge with respect to older as well as newer, born-digital materials requires advocacy. Joining our discussions of archival rights and responsibilities to conversations about the need to uphold Native sovereignty and the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples is a critical first step (Dalgleish 2011; Genovese 2016). In the meantime, repositories may want to think first about local, rather than national, funding sources and build partnerships between tribal and non-tribal institutions as a basis for sustaining collaborations even in the face of cuts to federal funding across the arts and humanities.

Gi-gikinomaage-min collaborators continue to work through challenges together with transparency and open communication, learning from and strengthening their relationships with one another as well as those between the university and the Native American community. The resources created, digitized, and disseminated as part of this project will provide an important window into the memories and experiences of Native Americans in the Grand Rapids area who lived through urban relocation and the communities they have built. They will add to the body of primary materials documenting urban Native relocation in North America, enabling research that will educate Natives and non-Natives alike about this important piece of history. The collection will also empower, and give voice to, the West Michigan Native American population so that they may know themselves, where they have been, and where they are going.

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