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When Drift becomes Current: Collaborating to Expand Beyond the Visual

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Abstract

In 2015, SUNY Purchase College art librarian Kim Detterbeck reimagined a long-standing part-time Visual Resources position into a full-time Digital Collections Curator position. After hiring Mēgan Oliver for this two-year term that started in January of 2016, they collaborated on several joint projects including the rebranding of the Visual Resources Center (VRC) into the Digital Collections Center (DCC), collections management, outreach and new services, developing instruction, and the creation of an institutional repository with learning management and systems staff. This instance of intentional and strategic scope drift demonstrates how expanding upon the traditional departmental mission of visual resources can benefit an institution looking to develop greater user engagement, better collections and services, and stronger professional ties among faculty, staff, and students.

Keywords

digital collections, archives, visual resources, scope drift, re-branding, ARTstor, Shared Shelf, institutional repository, audio, video, art, 35mm, slides, access, collaboration, curation, content management, systems

Author Bio & Acknowledgements

Mēgan Oliver is the Digital Collections Librarian at the University of South Carolina. Her work at the State University of New York (Purchase), Florida State University (The Ringling Museum), and the University of South Florida (St. Petersburg), has informed her career as a collections and content manager. She focuses on assessing, digitizing, cataloging, and publishing special collections and archives, regardless of format. She's especially passionate about professional inreach and outreach. Mēgan has presented at ARLIS three times and has been published in *Art Documentation*. She holds two Bachelors degrees in Anthropology and English Literature, and a Masters in Library and Information Science, all from the University of South Florida.

Kim Detterbeck is the Art Librarian at Purchase College, SUNY. In her work, she oversees collection development, reference, and library instruction for art history, art & design, new media, and arts management as well as participates in Library-wide projects such as digitization, assessment, outreach and communications, and e-learning across multiple disciplines. She is an active member of the Metropolitan New York Library Council (METRO) as a member of the Social Media Special Interest Group and as a myMETRO Researcher and of the Art Libraries Society of North America (ARLIS/NA) where she served as the chair of the Membership Committee and secretary of the New York Metropolitan Chapter of ARLIS/NA. Kim has been published in Art Documentation and The Global Librarian. She received an MLS from the University of Maryland, an MA in Art History from Syracuse University, and a BA in Art History from Rutgers University.

Collections, Visual & Otherwise

By late spring of 2015, the Visual Resources Center was fairly empty and unused. The previous part-time visual resources curator had found another, full-time job and resigned her post at Purchase. There were a couple of students diligently continuing her excellent Shared Shelf work until a new staff member was hired to helm the Center. However, the usage of the VRC by art history faculty had dwindled significantly since the mid-2000s, as faculty began to use ARTstor and Google to find their visual teaching resources. The visual resources in question were comprised of 35mm slides, covering Asian and Egyptian ancient art, medieval art, the Renaissance, some Baroque, and a great deal of twentieth-century Western Modernism and Postmodernism. The slide collection was compiled over twenty years of active purchasing, faculty donations, and listserv yard sales ("pay shipping and it's yours for free") and it was entirely unassessed. There was no paper or digital finding aid or inventory, nor a detailed sense of what the collection contained among staff at the Library, as drawer labels were often wrong and some drawers were found to be entirely empty. The slides used to circulate in their heyday, and it seems many of them never made it back. What the collection lacked the most in the digital age, however, was a targeted digitization plan.

In addition to the 35mm slides (estimated at around 80,000 items in 2016), there were several other collections largely untouched, unused, and un-digitized. For quite a while, the most requested items at the Library that fell into the "collections" category have been senior projects. The senior project is a college-wide requirement for both the B.A. and B.S. (Students majoring in liberal studies are required to complete a senior capstone course and an accompanying paper.) The senior project is the capstone of the Purchase educational experience and the signature of the curriculum. Students devote two semesters to an in-depth, original, and creative study. They are required to submit their senior projects to the Library before graduation. As a result, the library has vast physical and digital archives of student work that was not, at that time, and still is not, publicly accessible or easily discoverable. Printed and bound from 1973 to spring of 2010, all physical projects are stored in the basement of the Library in closed stacks.

Beginning in fall of 2010, project submissions were born-digital, but students were required to submit their projects on CD. By fall of 2012, projects were entirely born-digital and submitted to Moodle, Purchase College's learning management system (LMS). Naturally, these projects are routinely assigned to students as encouraged reading by faculty, and they are actively sought out by students for their own senior project research. In expanding visual resources to digital collections, it was a fervent wish that an institutional repository could be constructed to serve as a much-needed access point for this archive.

 Requested with some regularity, archives and special collections information was scarce, mostly due to a lack of funding for full-time employees in both areas, to process collections, produce inventories, and actively acquire items. Finally, born-digital collections across campus had no central digital asset management system, and no standard methodology for offices and departments to follow. The need for a new department at the Library, one that would be digitally inclusive across multiple academic disciplines and campus needs, was paramount.

New Mission, New Workflow

In January of 2016, the art librarian (who supervised the part-time VRC Assistant position) expanded that title into a full-time Digital Collections Curator position. Appropriately, the mission of the department was rewritten to incorporate the Library's repository of senior projects graduate theses, in addition to visual resources. This new mission did not forsake the

traditional directive of the visual resources center, which included the ongoing digitization of 35mm slides started in 2014, but instead adjusted for new campus needs with a broad-based approach. In fact, the goal in keeping visual resources as a service offered by the Digital Collections Center (DCC) was to re-engage faculty members by digitizing and creating specific digital collections for teaching and research. The DCC mission as it currently stands on Purchase College Library's website is:

Our mission is to create unique digital collections used for teaching and research. We digitize Library archives and curate born-digital materials that enhance faculty coursework and student scholarship. We provide access to multidisciplinary campus archives as well, connecting faculty, staff, and students to Purchase-produced research. Finally, we seek to help Purchase affiliates properly archive important digital content, so future generations can access many years of well-preserved pedagogy.

In order to serve a variety of campus constituents, the curator hired and maintained multiple staff assistants (up to five a semester). To adjust for the new workflow, staff assignments included one part-time assistant dedicated to scanning and remastering 35mm selections for upload to ARTstor's Shared Shelf; one M.A. graduate assistant assigned to catalog art history collections; one or two volunteers per semester that scanned projects and helped with condition reports; and one intern per semester that scanned and processed an average of 20-30 projects per semester, in addition to their other assignments. The curator selected collections to be digitized, trained all of the staff, created assignments and directed readings for interns, quality-checked scans and metadata entries, and published selections to Shared Shelf, Omeka, and ARTstor (when appropriate).

Teaming up with the art librarian and assistant director of the Teaching, Learning, and Technology Center, the curator mapped out a strategy for digitizing the print senior projects and digitally preserving the two years of CD-submitted projects. The art librarian and assistant director also caught the curator up to speed on the ongoing discussions for migrating and preserving born-digital projects submitted to the LMS. Potential content management systems were assessed by the team and developers were contracted for the purposes of creating a custom CMS that would become the basis for an institutional repository. (Purchase College faculty do not yet submit their works for preservation and research.)

The new collection workflow for the DCC curator looked like a 50/50 split between ongoing digitization of the art history slides and other visual resources, and creating the senior project repository. In practice, however, the majority of digitization work was split about 70/30 (slides 70, projects 30), with senior projects taking longer to scan and process compared with small slides that could be processed in batches rather quickly. While the slides converted were subjected to a strict criteria (user requests were always considered first and all damaged, duplicated, or already-made-digital slides were deaccessioned), the senior projects required continued meetings to discuss how campus users were meant to interact with the institutional repository, including user retrieval methods, possible embargoes, and metadata requirements.

Over the two-year time span the first DCC curator was in place, over 313 senior projects were digitized from print and 902 born-digital senior projects were pulled from their storage CDs and preserved. While the senior project repository stalled in development during these two years due to variety of factors like funding, vendor development fatigue, and a lack of in-house systems expertise, preparation work for the repository continues. When a solution is found that fits the needs of the Library, over nine years of senior projects will be searchable.

Simultaneously, a little over 5,000 items were added to Shared Shelf. With an ongoing cataloging project still extant, about 2,500 items have been fully cataloged and published on Shared Shelf and ARTstor. These items were primarily derived from a five-volume history of costume slide collection, visual archives found in the Library (mid-century movie press kits, silent film isinglass slides, and illustrated song lantern slides), oral histories and faculty music, and archives of videoed lectures. Occasionally, requests would come in for digitization of works by certain artists or small collections, but faculty requests did not originate from the art history faculty. Students and staff became more invested in how the DCC was shaping up in its first couple of years, and their feedback greatly contributed to the direction of content created and managed.

Outreach & New Services

In addition to mission changes and collection management, the DCC curator began adjusting for campus needs by informally surveying non-library faculty and staff, and requesting meetings with potential (and new) stakeholders. The Art+Design department, administrators on the Purchase College Curatorial and Museum Studies Taskforce, and the staff at the Neuberger Museum of Art (also located on campus, next to the Library) all responded well to this outreach. The curator actively communicated with the campus by scheduling workshops (over 35 held in two years) and pop-up stations at faculty events; writing regular campus-wide emails, blurbs, and stories published to the college website; holding annual open houses; and widely advertising internships and staff positions at campus job fairs. This approach ensured that a variety of possible campus users became engaged in digital collections as a department, across faculty, staff, and student boundaries.

After a year of sustained and systematic outreach by the Digital Collections Center, new campus users slowly began to show up, requesting specialty collections assistance. Some asked for methodology to digitally archive their department's content, and some arrived with questions about audio and video preservation, giving the staff at the DCC the opportunity to work with Latin American Studies' oral history project and Art+Design's highly-requested videoed lecture series, respectively. Art history professors inquired about how their students could partake in other aspects of DCC work, specifically the internships and graduate cataloging position. By performing consistent outreach and listening to needs, the staff at the DCC was able to deliver diverse content utilized in teaching collections across academic disciplines at Purchase College. Collaborations can be found here.

New services sprang up because of these meetings and communications. Along with posting an online form for requests, the DCC also created a services webpage. Consultation, training, and content management are now all a part of DCC services, for individuals and offices on campus that wish to collaborate, or to operate on their own with a starter kit of digital tools. Workshops on how one can digitally archive their work were held often in 2016 and 2017, and assistance with accessing senior projects was incorporated during a great deal of these sessions. While offering these services to the entire campus, the DCC incorporated best practices in metadata entries, copyright and publishing, asset management, and digital preservation.

Adding Instruction

In collaboration with the art librarian, the DCC curator created several regular internships featuring digital humanities, archives, and special collections, to serve as professional opportunities for students interested in training in archives and libraries, and to adjust for new

workflows. Both the amount of digital production and the collection assessment rate dramatically increased by fall of 2016 with the addition of the first digital humanities internship. All of the interns hired expressed a strong professional interest in training at the library, as their desired careers would either involve information and collections management, or would have a great deal of crossover.

The digital humanities internship was based on statistical collection analysis, digitization, digital collections management, data visualization, targeted topical categorization, and current humanities pedagogy. Three consecutive internships (fall 2016, spring 2017, and fall 2017) were designed and supervised by the curator, and all were guided, supported, and sponsored by the art librarian, who has faculty status. Two major collections were assessed for a data-mining project that would end up producing visualizations and some raw data. Neither collection (the 35mm slides and the senior projects) had been assessed in such a way before these internships. The collection assessment found to be the most valuable to both the library and campus administration was the senior project repository. Assessments and analysis of both collections yielded a great deal of data for future projects, while also providing significant context for long-term library holdings.

The archives internship focused on inventories, condition reports, collection appraisals, some digitization, special collections handling, and grant research. Collaborating with the reference and special collections librarian Joseph Swatski as the faculty sponsor, the DCC curator supervised digitization and reports, and both trained the interns on handling, inventories, and appraisals. Two summer archives internships were held in 2016 and 2017, and one volunteer internship (no college credit) was designed in the fall of 2017 for a special project involving the history of a cemetery on campus. Assignments and readings reflected current best practices in both fields, to allow students a comparative analysis of these closely related professions.

Conclusion & Future Work

The scope drift in this instance, a swift, intentional expansion from serving only the art history department with visual resources to serving multiple disciplines with digital collections, has created myriad opportunities for the department itself, the Library, and on a larger scale, the campus. The goal in re-routing the VRC was to create a more diverse, inclusive, and robust digital collections department, as various campus constituents at Purchase clearly needed content management support. Visual collections management and dissemination appears to lend itself well to digital collections work.

One of the key aspects of this scope drift turned rapid current is collaboration. The drift originated with the art librarian, expanded to include the assistant director of the Teaching, Learning, and Technology Center, and was fully established with the hiring of a new full time curator. Additional involvement from administrators and librarians was crucial for the success of this endeavor. Without collaboration, this kind of departmental evolution would be exceedingly difficult and could stall entirely.

Current and future work is publicly listed on the [Library's webpages](#), as well as regularly communicated through the variety of campus channels discussed here. This spring sees the opening of the Digital Collections Center curator position, for which Purchase is currently in the hiring process, and the future of the DCC is bright. Working through the challenges of collection management, constituent needs, staffing, and technological support will be ongoing, as they are

everywhere. With a great team of invested faculty and staff, scope drift can revolutionize a department and make collections work relevant and vibrant once more.

Collaboration & Acknowledgements

Without the support of colleagues, former and current, this foray into scope drift would not have been an overall success. Xiaoli Ma offered her help *after* resigning the Visual Resources Center post, giving Mēgan Oliver context and guidance for the new Digital Collections Curator position. Art librarian Kim Detterbeck developed and oversaw the expansion of those positions, as well as the re-branding of the department. Together with the assistant director of the Teaching, Learning, and Technology Center, Marie Sciangula, both contributed expertise and direction regarding the development of an institutional repository for student works. Finally, Joseph Swatski happily collaborated on archives and special collections projects that made the Digital Collections Center a more well-rounded department.

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