

ArchivesSpace at W&L: Why We Didn't Wait

Mackenzie Brooks, Assistant Professor and Metadata Librarian

Alston Cobourn, Assistant Professor and Digital Scholarship Librarian

Washington and Lee University

Since the official release of ArchivesSpace last year, many institutions have been closely watching its development and adoption rate. Implementing a new archival management system is a huge project, especially for smaller institutions that may not have the technical and personnel resources available for maintaining and customizing open source software.

Unlike in libraries, where MARC is the backbone of the integrated library system (at least for now), in archives the intellectual control and management of collections occurs in more forms than just EAD finding aids. Data migration is imposing, even if you believe your data to be relatively clean, so it is understandable that institutions might wait for ArchivesSpace to work out the bugs. However, at Washington & Lee University, we decided not to wait. Implementing ArchivesSpace has been transformative for our institution, not only as a vehicle for data cleanup and improved intellectual control, but as a way to reevaluate policies and procedures, expand access, and foster internal and external collaboration.

Washington & Lee University is a small, private liberal arts university in Lexington, Virginia. Both the undergraduate library and the law library house their own special collections and archives. In the undergraduate library, turnover in the last several years resulted in a new director and two staff members in Special Collections and Archives, as well as a new metadata librarian and digital scholarship librarian in the Collection Services Department, both with a background in archives. The new staff faced the challenge of learning the content of the collections while also comprehending the existing organizational schemes.

The collections at W&L are well-used and extremely rich in content, but their online presence has not made it to the 21st century. While more than half of our 500 manuscript collections have records in our online catalog, only a handful of EAD finding aids are available in the Virginia Heritage Project, rendering the rest of the collections virtually hidden. Active digitization projects populate our digital repository (DSpace), although we want to improve the usability of its user interface. Additionally, the library website is undergoing a redesign, so we are currently assessing the entire web presence of Special Collections and Archives.

Our original objective for moving forward with ArchivesSpace was to develop a platform and associated workflows for creating accession records and EAD finding aids since we did not already have one in place. Such a system would serve as the foundation for processing our backlog and publishing our finding aids online. As we evaluated the application and our own data, we discovered several problem areas that could be remedied through the legacy data migration process. Moving to ArchivesSpace gave us the opportunity not only to find these problems, but to solve them with future uses in mind. Importing the MARC records for our manuscript collections was a useful survey of our holdings and helped us identify which connected collections should have their records merged. Miscellaneous

collections have been split apart and properly described, and an inventory of a major deposit collection is currently underway. The faculty card file has found a new home in the name authority records in ArchivesSpace where each person can be properly linked to the relevant collections and their biographical information can be accessed more easily by members of the collection services and special collections departments.

The increased intellectual control has many secondary benefits. First, the review of collections helps staff more efficiently answer researcher requests through their own increased knowledge and also through the searching and linking capabilities in ArchivesSpace. We have been able to identify materials that will complement the curriculum and interest professors conducting their own research. Second, the comprehensive look at our collections informs our digitization priorities. It gives us the opportunity to systematically identify and resolve intellectual property rights questions related to our materials, which has been a major roadblock during previous digitization projects. Third, the location fields in ArchivesSpace allow us to separate intellectual control from physical control. We have added barcodes and reorganized parts of the collection to gain space and improve security. Finally, moving to ArchivesSpace facilitates “More Product, Less Process” and ultimately increases access. It is easy for Special Collections staff to publish information on a collection without it being fully described or cataloged. We batch-loaded subject and name authority records into ArchivesSpace so that staff would be able to quickly choose subjects and names from a controlled vocabulary.

Perhaps the most gratifying aspect of this project has been the collaboration within and outside of the library. ArchivesSpace could not have been implemented without equal contribution from Special Collections and Archives and the Collection Services departments, as well as the Director of Library Technology. Both departments were able to learn about and better appreciate the other’s work and each individual’s skills. We have also strengthened our relationship with the law library archivist, who shares our instance of ArchivesSpace. We often called upon our neighbors at the Virginia Military Institute to assist with troubleshooting and best practice decisions. Overall, we have found the greater ArchivesSpace community to be very helpful and active.

Implementing ArchivesSpace took time and effort, but the results far outweigh any challenges. Yes, ArchivesSpace has bugs, but the application continues to improve and will only get better as more people contribute. The plug-in architecture means that various features can be developed, shared, and implemented to create an application right for each institution. When we launch our ArchivesSpace public interface later in 2014, all of our collections will be represented and accessible. We will have revamped many policies and procedures, strengthened working connections, and brought our collections into the 21st century.