Enhanced Access to Special Collections in the Libraries of Florida's State Universities

Final Report

Summary

The libraries of the public universities in the state of Florida have made significant investments in special collections of primary source materials for research and scholarship in the form of archives and manuscript collections. However, it has been difficult for scholars and citizenry to learn about the existence of these collections and their contents. The project, “Enhanced Access to Special Collections in the Libraries of Florida’s State Universities” sought to remedy this situation in two ways: first, to make collection-level cataloging of a significant number of special collections available in library catalogs and OCLC, and second, to pilot a searchable union database of online finding aids for some of these collections. The communities potentially benefited by this project include the 200,000 students and 15,000 faculty of the state university system, the 756,000 members of the Florida community college system, and untold numbers of interested individuals with or without academic affiliation. The project ran from October 1, 2001 through September 30, 2002, and involved eight of the ten state universities of Florida.

Project description -- Collection Level Cataloging

To accomplish the first goal of the project, collection-level cataloging, a “roving cataloger” was hired on project funds. The cataloger was trained and supervised by the head of the Contributed Cataloging department at the University of Florida. Typically, the cataloger visited the Special Collections departments of the participating libraries, worked from finding aids and other documentation prepared by library staff, and created cataloging records in the libraries’ local catalogs. Library staff then reviewed the records and uploaded them to OCLC. In one case (University of North Florida) all of the work was done remotely from materials provided by the library. In a few cases, the roving cataloger also did the work of uploading the records to OCLC after review.

Because the roving cataloger was not hired until two months into the grant period, the amount allocated for his first two months’ salary was reallocated to pay two additional catalogers on an hourly basis. One cataloger created sixteen records for University of South Florida collections, while the second cataloged 170 University of Florida collections.

The number of collections to be cataloged projected in the grant application, and the number of collections actually cataloged, are shown in the table below. For two
institutions, the number of collection-level records created was actually larger than estimated in the grant proposal. Totals were not met only at the University of Florida and Florida Atlantic University. Where the number of records contributed to OCLC is lower than the number of collections cataloged, the remaining records will be uploaded to OCLC by cataloging department staff within a few weeks of the end of the grant period.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>University</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Collections to catalog</th>
<th>Collections cataloged</th>
<th>Records to OCLC</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Florida Atlantic</td>
<td>Boca Raton</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Florida International</td>
<td>Miami</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Florida State</td>
<td>Tallahassee</td>
<td>260</td>
<td>304</td>
<td>302</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Central Florida</td>
<td>Orlando</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Florida</td>
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<td>267</td>
<td>235</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of North Florida</td>
<td>Jacksonville</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of South Florida</td>
<td>Tampa</td>
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<td>110</td>
<td>109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of West Florida</td>
<td>Pensacola</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td></td>
<td>852</td>
<td>755</td>
<td>720</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For the most part, the collection-level cataloging part of the project went as planned. However, the grant proposal severely underestimated the amount of work it would be for special collections departments to prepare for the project catalogers. Although existing finding aids were used when possible, in many cases these were not accurate or not complete. Special Collections staff who were not initially written into the grant proposal ended up spending dozens or even hundreds of hours finding documentation, answering questions, and writing or revising biographies, collection summaries, and other sections of their finding aids. In addition, both Special Collections and cataloging staff reviewed the catalog records after they were created. It is to the credit of these departments that they absorbed this extra work in order to make the project succeed.

**Project Description -- Union Database of Finding Aids**

The second goal of the project was to create a union database of online finding aids as a pilot implementation of the Encoded Archival Description (EAD). Four institutions participated in this pilot: Florida International University, Florida State University, the University of Florida, and the University of South Florida. The University of Florida had one representative on the project team; the others each had two representatives. Each institution was to select three finding aids, convert them to EAD format, and contribute them to a union database implemented at FCLA.
The finding aids were deliberately chosen by each institution to represent a wide range of cases in order to raise the largest number of conversion issues in terms of content, format and conversion methodology. The University of Florida, for example, chose finding aids that varied greatly in format: the papers of a Florida politician, a set of literary papers and a set of faculty papers. Florida State chose one which had to be typed from scratch and two which were already in machine-readable form. Some finding aids were chosen because they were very old or very long.

FCLA arranged for the Society of American Archivists (SAA) to hold a class in EAD encoding at Florida State University in Tallahassee. Grant funds supported travel and registration for members of the project team to attend this training. All participants agreed that the training was both excellent and necessary to a successful implementation of EADs. Copies of XMetaL software, an SGML/XML editing tool used in the SAA training, were purchased on grant funds and distributed to project participants.

The original proposal specified that at the end of the project, after each institution had created and submitted their EADs, participants would meet and work out SUS-wide guidelines for EAD encoding. However, the SAA training made it clear that guidelines would be needed from the start, and that we could build upon established best practice in developing these. John Nemmers, one of the participants from Florida State University, drafted a set of guidelines and FCLA made an XMetaL template for EAD creation conforming to the Guidelines. The Guidelines and the template were made available on the project’s Web page at http://palmm.fcla.edu/strucmeta/ead.html and were used by project participants in their EAD creation. A copy of the Guidelines are attached as Attachment A of this report.

As EADs were created, the XML files were sent to FCLA for loading into “DLXS Finding Aid Class,” a software application developed at the University of Michigan for Web-based search and display of finding aids. Finding Aid Class was installed by FCLA specifically for the project. As it turned out, the system expected SGML EADs with some characteristics that varied from the SUS guidelines, so the XML EAD files contributed by participants had to be changed significantly at FCLA before they could be loaded. FCLA programmers and analysts spent a great deal of time debugging the system to make search and display functions work properly.

The original grant proposal projected that two sets of usability tests would be performed on the union database of finding aids, the first involving five library staff and the second involving five student and faculty users. However, as it was not possible to fund gift incentives for student/faculty participation from the grant, only the first set of usability tests were undertaken.

The project plan included an end-of-project meeting at which the project team would draft guidelines for consistent encoding of EADs and prepare a report for SUS curators and administrators elaborating cost factors and findings from the project. This meeting was held, although, as the Guidelines had already been drafted, only a short time was
spent reviewing and revising them. The bulk of meeting time was focused on comparing experiences, outlining a final report, and discussing next steps. A copy of the “Report from the Pilot EAD Implementation Project” is attached as Attachment B.

The test version of Florida Archival Collections is available at http://purl.fcla.edu/fcla/findaid-test. Originally it had been projected that the system would go into production in September 2002. The pilot participants realized, however, that a database with only twelve finding aids would not have the critical mass to attract research use or to satisfy users who did try the system. The group therefore decided to delay public launch until critical mass was reached, realizing that this would likely be an institution-by-institution decision. We expect the first institution to go public with the system will be Florida International University, which is planning to load finding aids for a complete series of papers from the Office of the President. In anticipation of this, grant funds were used to print some general promotional materials, and some specifically designed for FIU in English and Spanish. A set of promotional bookmarks are included as Attachment D.

**Evaluation and results**

The evaluation plan included three measures for the cataloging part of the project and three measures for the EAD pilot.

**Cataloging #1:** Were all the collections inventoried for cataloging actually cataloged?

A table of inventoried vs. cataloged collections is shown in the “Project description -- Collection Level Cataloging” section above. At most institutions, targets were met or exceeded. At two universities targets were not met. Florida Atlantic University found that two of the collections they initially inventoried did not have adequate finding aids or descriptive information to allow them to be cataloged. At the University of Florida, only two-thirds of the projected 400 collections were cataloged, again because existing information was inadequate. Cataloging for many of the UF collections involved significant research and in many cases actual examination of the contents of boxes and folders. It should be noted that UF staff not initially included in the project plan contributed more than 300 hours supporting the work of the project catalogers.

**Cataloging #2:** The number of reference questions received by participating Special Collections departments will be taken as an indirect measure of the increase in awareness of these collections brought about by the availability of cataloging records in local catalogs and OCLC. Reference requests received from the nine months prior to the start of cataloging (March 2001 - October 2001) will be compared with requests received in the nine months following completion of cataloging (October 2002 - March 2003).

**Cataloging #3:** The number of visitors to the collections will also be taken as an indirect measure. In person visits for the fiscal years ending on June 30 in 2001, 2002, and 2003 will be compared.
Statistics have been gathered for the baselines of Cataloging measures #2 and #3, but the final comparisons cannot be made until the spring and fall of 2003, respectively.

EAD pilot #1: Were the 12 finding aids successfully created and loaded into the union database?

All twelve finding aids were created and loaded.

EAD pilot #2: Did the participants learn enough to report usefully on staffing, costs, issues and barriers to creating online finding aids?

The data gathered on costs may be less useful than anticipated, for two reasons. First, the artificial nature of the pilot resulted in several circumstances that inflated costs (for example, a higher level of staff doing the encoding). Second, the pilot involved only the retrospective conversion of existing finding aids to EAD and did not provide insight into the costs of integrating EAD creation into prospective processing of new collections. Nonetheless, across the board, participants found the pilot to be an invaluable learning experience. The report on the pilot to curators and administrators (attached) does contain valuable information on staffing, issues and barriers. The report proposes a successor project to build the infrastructure that would allow prospective EAD creation to take place in the context of archival processing workflow and more coordinated collection development.

EAD pilot #3: How usable and useful is the shared database of online finding aids?

Use was to be measured by statistics kept on homepage hits. The mechanism to measure this use is in place in the test system and will be replicated in the production system. However, use statistics will only be meaningful when Florida Archival Collections is promoted as a production service on the campuses. As noted above, this will be done on an institution-by-institution basis, as each Special Collections department decides that the database contains a critical mass of materials of interest to their user.

User reaction was to be gauged through usability testing conducted before the public launch and a user survey implemented after the system is moved into production. The user survey will be implemented for FIU when that institution promotes the public launch of Florida Archival Collections. Usability testing was conducted in September 2002. The testing was designed in accordance with Jakob Nielsen’s “Ten Usability Heuristics” (http://www.useit.com/papers/heuristics/heuristic_list.html) and “How to Conduct a Heuristic Evaluation” (http://www.useit.com/papers/heuristic_evaluation.html). Each participant received a page of instructions that included a set of tasks to perform designed to cause them to exercise different functions of the system, and a set of questions to answer about the heuristics of the system. A copy of their instructions is attached as Attachment C. Results of the usability testing were very positive. All of the testers were able to use the system easily and had mostly positive things to say about it. Their comments, and observation of their use of the system, resulted in a list of changes and
enhancements that FCLA programmers will make to the system before its public launch. User reaction also caused us to rename the online system, from “Florida Finding Aids Collection” to “Florida Archival Collections.”

Conclusions and future plans

The planning for this project, as reflected in the original grant proposal, overestimated the time it would take for EAD pilot participants to encode their three finding aids, while vastly underestimating the time and effort it would take cataloging department and Special Collections department staff to prepare collections for cataloging and support the work of the roving cataloger. One curator commented that if she had realized the amount of work the cataloging project was going to require, she probably would not have signed on to participate. She went on to say that she’s glad she didn’t know, because having the collections cataloged and visible to the public was well worth all the effort. Another curator sent in the comment, “Thanks so much! This grant has been a godsend for us.” There is no question but that all of the participants are satisfied with the quality of the collection-level cataloging and appreciate the significance of having these collections cataloged. Several participants mentioned that it was a positive experience to work with the roving project cataloger.

The EAD pilot was also considered successful, although in a slightly different and more far-reaching way than originally envisioned. The original project plan called for the union database of online finding aids, now called “Florida Archival Collections,” to be launched publicly in production at the end of the project period. As the participants realized that a very small database without critical mass might disappoint rather than satisfy researchers, plans for public launch have been delayed and will now be realized on an institution-by-institution. In this respect the project outcome is less immediate than envisioned. However, the experience of the Special Collections curators working together on the finding aid project was more positive than expected, and has led to serious consideration of what it might mean to the university system to have a true union database of finding aids. This implies several needs: the need to look beyond the local institution’s research priorities when evaluating collections, a need for some SUS-wide infrastructure to support collaborative collection development, and a need for stronger resourcing and staff development across the board in Special Collections departments. One participant put it: “This work has a broader agenda that includes the development of special collections programs at individual repositories, the widening of customer service options for more developed programs, and consistent technical service support for underutilized and unrecognized special collections. A union catalog of archival finding aids levels the playing field highlighting our shared characteristics, mission and resources.”

Florida International University and Florida State University have concrete plans to continue contributing EADs to Florida Archival Collections. The University of South Florida and the University of Florida may be unable to continue due to lack of staff resources. However, the online system itself and the Guidelines for EAD encoding are
now available for use by the libraries of any of the public universities and other institutions are considering experimenting with EADs.

Future steps were discussed at an end-of-project meeting held in Gainesville in September, where the group outlined the main points of a grant proposal for possible submission to NHRPC to continue and extend the collaborative development begun in the EAD pilot project. The primary goals would be developing an in-state training program for staff involved in archival processing, integrating EAD creation with prospective processing of new collections, and establishing the institutional infrastructure to support the joint development of a documentary strategy for Florida. Participants also drafted a request to the SUS library directors to constitute a Special Collections Task Force with authority to move ahead with this project. This plan will be further elaborated at a meeting of the libraries’ Digitization Services Planning Committee scheduled for November 2002.

Attachments:

A: Best Practice Guidelines for the Implementation of EAD Finding Aids in Florida Institutions

B: Report from the Pilot EAD Implementation Project

C: Usability testing: Finding Aids

D: Promotional bookmarks produced for Florida Archival Collections