Archival Resources on the Web

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Nebraska Archives Online

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From discussions over coffee to migrating thousands of descriptions, archivists and university colleagues in Nebraska have been busy trying to make access to archival collections just a bit more comprehensive. A single instance of ArchivesSpace, hosted by LYRASIS, connects archival repositories in Kearney, Lincoln, and Omaha and provides access to our resources. Four University of Nebraska archival repositories recently collaborated to create Nebraska Archives Online (NAO; http://archives.nebraska .edu). With support from the University of Nebraska Consortium of Libraries (UNCL, comprised of libraries at the University of Nebraska Kearney, the University of Nebraska–Lincoln, the University of Nebraska Medical Center, and the University of Nebraska Omaha), the new tool launched in spring 2019 and is available for patrons of all kinds to seek and to find primary source materials. While it is meant to benefit patrons, the shared instance also assists in collection management work within the repositories. NAO also provided a project that brought together the many archivists who manage and provide access to university archival and special collections.

For years, the prospect of a union catalog for archival collections in Nebraska generated many ideas: essentially, wouldn't sharing collection information be cool? Discussions came round again each time new tools were developed specifically for collection management. Early ideas developed at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln with colleagues in Lincoln, particularly where collections were interconnected. Since 2016, greater focus on collaboration and archives at the four University of Nebraska campuses gave the idea of Nebraska Archives Online traction.

The option of consortium funding and support from the University of Nebraska system president became a foundation that led to the development of NAO. UNCL reformalized activities with an updated memorandum of understanding in December 2015. UNCL sought opportunities for collaboration, and the union catalog for four archival repositories fit the bill.

The timing proved right. In 2016, the University of Nebraska Omaha (UNO) Archives and Special Collections and the University of Nebraska Kearney actively used separate LYRASIS-hosted ArchivesSpace instances. At the same time, Archives and Special Collections at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln focused on plans to self-host ArchivesSpace and migrate from Archon. The University of Nebraska Medical Center Special Collections began to investigate ArchivesSpace through a trial using UNO's instance. Would combining the work of each repository be possible? The first "yes" may have been a cautious one, but as the archivists learned more about their shared goals, the challenges relating to funding, and the possibilities of the project, each subsequent "yes" became stronger.

By 2017, an ArchivesSpace subcommittee of nine members formed within the UNCL Archives and Special Collections working group. This initial group included archivists as well as a business manager and a director of technology. The staff at reach repository ranges from one to ten employees, from the lone arranger who also has responsibilities beyond archives to those who can focus more closely on a collection management tool. The variety in staff illustrates a similar variety in resources. The committee's work included reviewing and considering the pros and cons of hosting ArchivesSpace locally (by UNL) or using a library and archives hosting provider, as well as whether to maintain separate instances of ArchivesSpace and create a union catalog front-end for users. The subcommittee reviewed current repository processes and needs and reached out to other multi-institution groups and consortia. Querying and talking to others involved in group projects provided insight into how best to work toward the goal. The committee sent questions to providers and followed up on specific questions. After much discussion, including considering current and anticipated future staffing and resources as well as cost, the subcommittee agreed to recommend the implementation of a single ArchivesSpace instance hosted by LYRASIS. We wanted to understand the possibilities and challenges and consider new partners.

We had multiple goals for the combined instance of ArchivesSpace, our NAO. The archivist planners sought a tool to support collection management, to improve reference and discovery through one-stop searching, to increase standardization and options to share information such as agents (creators), and an opportunity to dovetail professional standards with local best practices. Funding

Collage of resources from each of the University of Nebraska repositories

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and resources were considerations with questions relating to whether a combined instance would mean a cost savings. A hosted instance would provide opportunities for migration, automatic updates, and training.

Cons were fewer in number. The combined instance means that we must manage patrons who may be confused by too many search results in the ArchivesSpace public interface. Challenges related to shared locations in the instance and the possibilities of duplicate agent and subject records and data cleanup were added. Additionally, the con list included security concerns relating to institutional records. Some of these were easily resolved, such as restricting the ability of each repository's staff to access only administrative information from their specific repository.

In 2018, the UNCL ArchivesSpace subcommittee reconstituted to include 10 members who were all archivists from the four campuses that would be directly working on the migration and launch of NAO. The four repositories migrated their records into a single ArchivesSpace instance resulting in over 3,500 records. With LYRASIS managing the migration, it proved relatively seamless. Each repository had an opportunity to review its records, to do some minor cleanup, and to see what may be needed to support the next round of activities. Additionally during this time, the committee began work on the development of best practices, governance documents, and guidelines for access levels in the staff interface. This activity is still in progress with multiple task forces working to address their individual charges, such as systematically going through all ArchivesSpace fields to make recommendations about required and preferred fields. This work includes looking at standards such as DACS, required fields, and existing finding aids, agent records, and subject headings. In the shared instance, agents and subjects records are shared across all repositories and so garnered particular attention. As locations records are also shared, work on locations data will address the need to uniquely identify each repository.

We have learned to manage online meetings and shared documents. We have seen the advantages and challenges of project management. We have seen the accomplishments of small staffs focused on activities, roles, and responsibilities and the impact of decisions. We have also seen the value of flexibility and establishing common ground, which was guided by the maxim "let's keep it simple." Truly, we understand that not all time and staff resources are equal, and we need to support the needs of each distinctive repository.

The University of Nebraska's four archival repositories share a mission of long-term access and preservation of the historical record by maintaining millions of pages of documents, photographs, letters, policies, and materials in all formats that answer questions, tell a story, and celebrate something unique about our university, our communities, the state of Nebraska, and the world.

This is truly apparent through NOA, and examples are many. Mari Sandoz is a significant Nebraska author, both in regard to her books and her research and the focus on her legacy. A search in NOA will provide a resource in Lincoln and online interviews about her in Omaha. The results will show all resources or collections associated with Sandoz. The possibilities increase for an author such as Willa Cather. The same interconnections between resources may also be shown for administrative records, for genealogical research, and possibly for the questions we have not yet received.

Our next steps are to finalize our first round of best practices; to add to the existing finding aids, agent, and subject fields; and to work on outlining steps for best use of location information. We will also provide tools to guide patrons in the use of NOA. More important, as we continue to develop and refine the tool, we seek opportunities to expand our partnerships with other institutions. As a community, we have expanded collaboration to include exhibit opportunities and refining concepts that we all share, such as online access and copyright language. We have started to plan our annual "community of practice" event that brings together all repository staff, beyond those in the working groups. We also hope to hear from other consortia or informal groups of archival repositories using ArchivesSpace. Finally, as with any new endeavor, we will need to access, and to refine, our work as we continue to develop NAO.