Mixed Media

*Assistant Editor: Danielle Nowak, the Morton Arboretum. Contact Danielle at dnowak@mortonarb.org
if you would like to guest author a column or have a good idea to share.*

Digitizing and Hosting on the Cheap: Merging Two University Archives into One

By Joseph Coates, Purdue University Northwest

In February 2016, Purdue University Calumet and Purdue University North Central merged together, creating a new entity called Purdue University Northwest. To support this new institution, we needed to create an archives that preserved the pasts of both institutions while also fulfilling the needs of our new institution. Purdue Calumet (PUC) was in Hammond, Indiana, which includes an urban, blue collar, and primarily Democratic demographic, whereas Purdue North Central (PNW), 40 miles away from PUC, serves a more rural and conservative population. The Purdue Calumet archives was established in 1976, while Purdue North Central never had a legitimate archives (everything was kept in filing cabinets and storage areas in boxes spread out over campus).

Exterior view of the Millard E. Gyte Science Building at Purdue University Calumet, circa 1963

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One of the key priorities when creating an archives that would support both campuses was to preserve our universities' pasts while stepping into the future as a unified unit, all on a limited budget, with limited personnel, and with limited experience. Because we did not have a culture of maintaining an archives, this process required some thought and purpose. In 2017, it was decided that we would create digital repositories to tell the stories of both institutions, before it was too late. The leadership of the university wanted digital assets online and gave us a small budget to make it so. We saw this as an opportunity to show off what we could do and did our best to fulfill this with our budget, time, and resources.

Decision-Making

We wanted to digitize items that would be worth the time and money, and could potentially be marketable to the university. We used a little common sense and a little data to make our decisions. Because we use LibGuides to record all of our reference requests, we created categories for materials requested. At the end of a two-year trial, we had found the most requested items, which included

- Student Newspapers
- Course Catalogs
- Faculty Senate Documents
- Curricula Documents
- Literary Journals
- Photographs

After some careful consideration, we decided to start with the student newspapers, then course catalogs, literary journals, self-studies, and finally a few miscellaneous items we deemed as valuable assets. We also knew starting with student newspapers would accomplish a few things. They were the most time-sensitive objects due to the deteriorating newsprint and more expensive due to size and quantity, and beginning with them demonstrated emphasis on our students. We felt this would not only satisfy the administration's desire for digital assets for marketing, but that it would gain the interest of the student newspaper, student government, and our student body as a whole.

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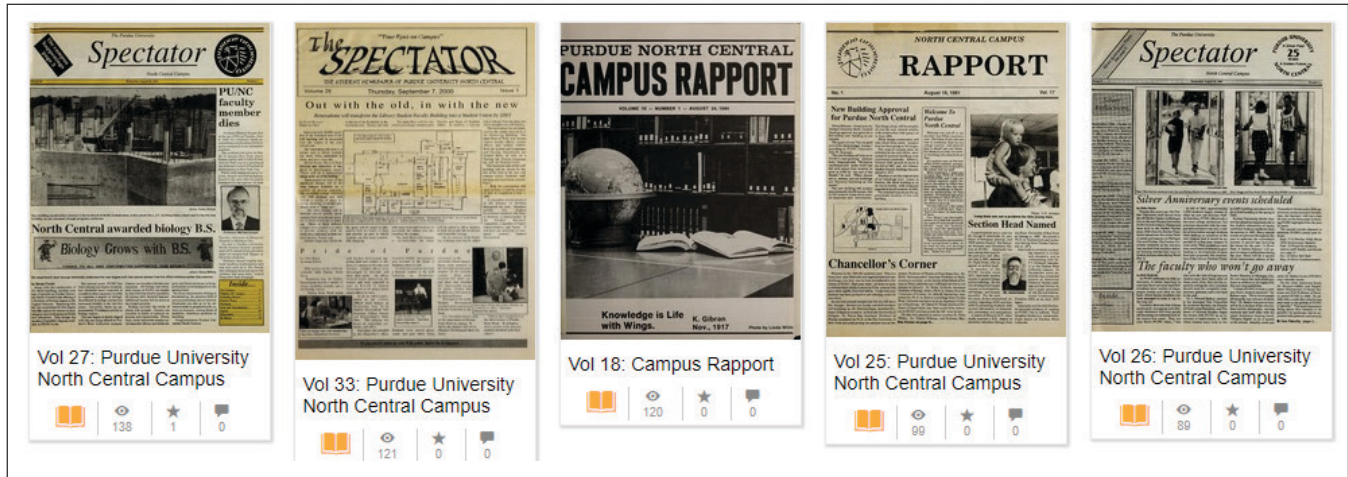
An example of the digitized student newspapers on the Internet Archive

Advancing with Technology

Neither university archives was on the cutting edge of technology. Most of our finding aids were in print and in binders. Other than subscribing to an old version of Archon and a defunct photo site, none of our collection materials were available online. We decided to stick with Archon for the time being, but were later informed that the IT person assigned as our Archon administrator was retiring, and no one would take her place. To handle this, we discovered LibraryHost, which would host both Archon and Omeka for us for approximately $1,000 annually. We also started using cloud storage as we had an institutional OneDrive account available to use. Because we now had a catalog, museum element, and storage, we needed to look for a repository. After we explored our options, we decided to use the Internet Archive.

Internet Archive

The Internet Archive appealed to us as a small repository for numerous reasons. Having them digitize our materials was less expensive than purchasing the digitization equipment and acquiring the space necessary to support its large size. However, the free storage and ADA compliance were the biggest selling points for us, fitting our mission of being accessible and open to everyone. We felt that the shared platform may lead to more views overall.

Phase One: Student Newspapers

The Internet Archive broke down the digitization cost for us by item and page, so we knew exactly, other than shipping, what it would cost to have the work done. Furthermore, we no longer needed to worry about continually funding and maintaining a repository. To calculate pricing, we enlisted the help of the student newspaper staff and archival student workers to create a spreadsheet of each newspaper date, issue, and number of pages. After three weeks of work, we were ready to start phase one. This first phase of the project resulted in just over 1,100 student newspapers at around 9,800 pages of material digitized and available within a month of shipping.

Phase Two: Everything Else

The second phase of this project included digitizing all the historic course catalogs, literary journals, and institutional self-studies. This step took a little longer due to the continuous flow of course catalog requests, however, it did reinforce the fact that these were great candidates for digitization. In the end, we had nearly 1,280 items digitized and close to 35,000 pages of historical text digitized, accessible online, ADA compliant, hosted, and with built-in analytics for a cost of around $12,000. Between August 2018 and March 2019, we have had over 5,600 views by both bots and humans. We are hoping to have around 7,000 to 8,000 views per year. Because we considered this a success, we moved on to the A/V collection.
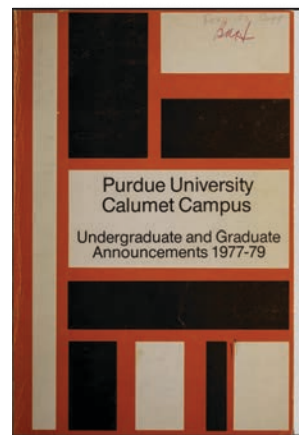
Digitized Purdue University Calumet undergraduate and graduate announcements

Sound Library

Our cassette collection runs the gamut from student events to faculty meetings to political debates to oral histories. Using a dedicated computer with Adobe Suite, an inexpensive cassette player, a Zoom recorder, and a fantastic graduate student, we were able to capture and edit quite a few of our historical cassette recordings. We wanted to put our archival collections on a platform not usually used for archives. We decided to try SoundCloud due to its popularity and cost. SoundCloud allows the download of unlimited minutes or recordings for $120 a year. This was one of the least expensive options available, so we decided to see what would happen.

Purdue University Northwest graduate student examining media

Oral History

In 1977, history professor Richard Van Orman conducted an oral history project with some of the faculty and administrators who had started working at the university in the mid-1940s. Telling the story of the university from the very beginning, when classes were held at a civic center, an old bank, and borrowed local high school classrooms right after World War II, seemed like a great place to start this project. Many of the interviewees spoke rather candidly about the first days of founding the university, which was both interesting and refreshing.

Other recordings are of various visitors to the university, which could appeal not only people with an interest in the college, but also those with a general interest in history. These audio recordings include the voices of Jean Shepherd of *A Christmas Story* fame; Jerry Rubin, one of the "Chicago 7"; Eugene McCarthy; and various local

AM radio shows. We also found a long-forgotten Senate debate between Birch Bayh and Dan Quayle. We hope that hosting these on both Omeka and SoundCloud will give us the opportunity to reach a wider audience.

Conclusion

While we can't make any broad statements on how this project has affected the university as a whole, we do have some real-world numbers to work with. The cost of purchasing Omeka, Archon, and SoundCloud has come out to less than $1,100 annually. Our digitization project, which seems to be getting 400 to 500 views per month, had an initial cost of about $11,000. We do not have to pay for storage, maintenance, labor, or equipment, all while having our materials on a large platform and ADA compliant.

While these may not be the most cohesive or traditional options, they do fill a need for small repositories like ours. Quality digital assets can be found online and made viewable for a reasonable amount of time, effort, and cost if you are willing to seek alternative vendors and think outside traditional, in-house archival platforms. These digital assets can also benefit new archives starting out and in need of marketing strategies.