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Institutional Repository and Archives Partnerships and Futures

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INSTITUTIONAL REPOSITORY AND ARCHIVES PARTNERSHIPS AND FUTURES

By Elizabeth James, Lindsey M. Harper, Lori Thompson, Gretchen R. Beach, University Libraries at Marshall University

A reality of dwindling resources in archives, as well as in higher education more broadly, is that the ability to purchase and maintain a specialized archives management and content management software is often out of reach. For Marshall University Special Collections, the solution to make finding aids and other digital archival materials accessible online required evaluating software already available at the university. Marshall Digital Scholar (MDS), an instance of the bepress institutional repository software, was chosen for its immediate availability, robust discovery services within the repository and through outside search engines, statistic tracking capability, metadata flexibility, support for multiple file types, and its availability to researchers on and off campus.

Created in 1970, Marshall University Special Collections was charged with the task to collect manuscript and archival materials that document the rich history of the surrounding geographic areas as well as the institution's records. For much of this time, the collections were in the care of one librarian who knew exactly where everything was located. Most of these collections were cataloged in a rudimentary physical card catalog system and very few had proper finding aids. This project was initiated after a period of faculty turnover that resulted in significant loss of institutional memory. Previously, finding aids that did exist were stored in multiple locations in both print and digital formats. Digital finding aids were stored on a web server and linked to the archives record in the department's PastPerfect implementation, which primarily served as a content management system for digitized images from manuscript collections. However, PastPerfect's search and container listing functionalities did not allow for hierarchical display of information or full-text searching within the linked PDF, limiting the software's capabilities as a repository for discovery and access to our finding aids.

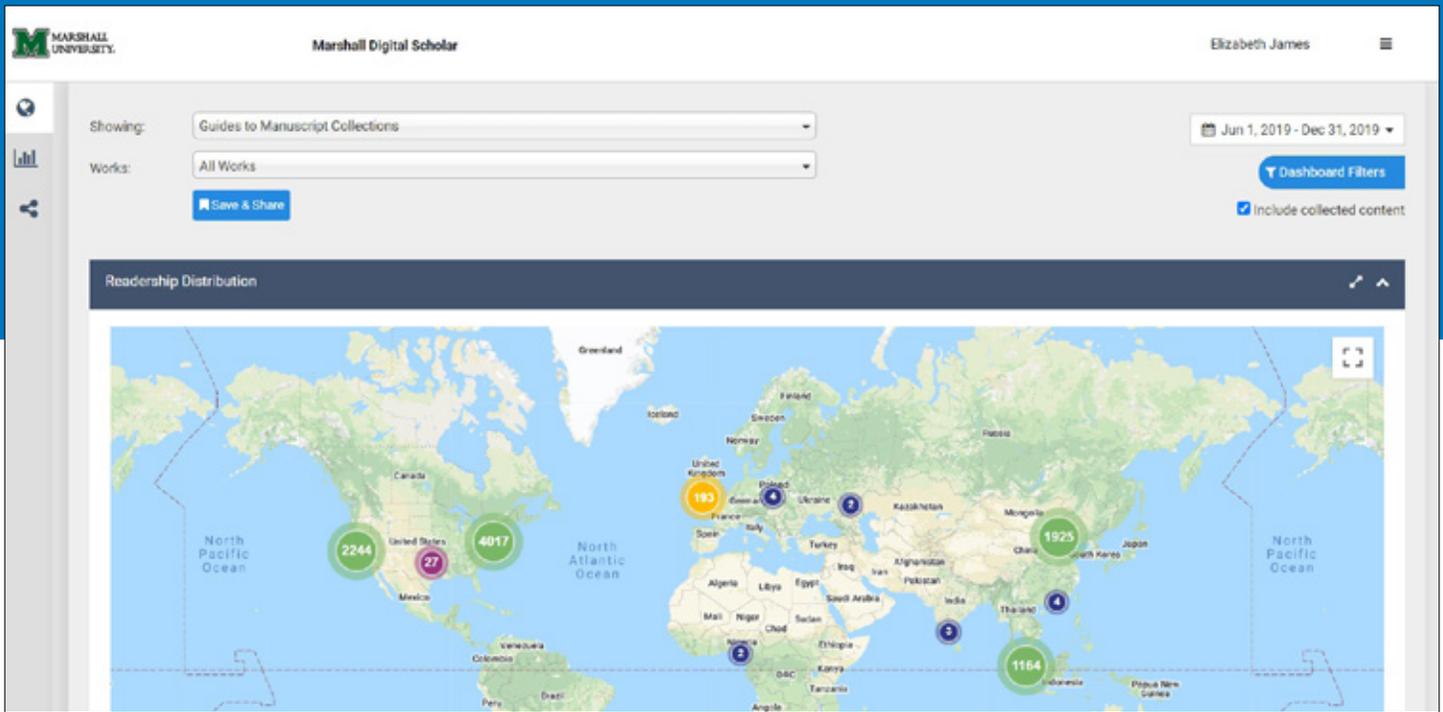
Lori Thompson, head of Special Collections, sought to improve access to existing and future finding aids by establishing a central repository where finding aids could be more easily searched. As the university's institutional repository, the primary goals of Marshall Digital Scholar (MDS) are to facilitate the collection, preservation, and dissemination of the intellectual output of the faculty, staff, students, and administrative offices of the university. In 2011, the first archival materials were added after evaluating



This is the finding aid home page on Marshall Digital Scholar.

and prioritizing the highly historic and relevant output by the university. Examples include the university's newsletters, Board of Governors' meeting minutes, and student newspapers. The institutional repository brings Marshall University's scholarly and intellectual output together under one umbrella, with an aim to preserve and provide access to its contents. With these factors in mind, Thompson identified MDS as the best option for providing centralized access to the department's finding aids. She then reached out to Gretchen Beach, catalog & digital services librarian. Beach worked with the software firm administering MDS to create a finding aid template that included custom metadata fields supplied by Archivist and Digital Preservation Librarian Elizabeth James, such as accession number, a link to digitized collections in Past Perfect, and an access and use statement. James and Lindsey Harper, then scholarly communication staff librarian and now archivist and records management librarian, worked to locate, convert, upload, and add metadata to finding aids in MDS, making these materials full-text searchable for the first time.

The 703 PDF finding aids uploaded to MDS were added between July and December 2019; during this time the finding aids have



Special Collections retrieves readership stats from this dashboard on Marshall Digital Scholar.

received 9,592 readers from 23 countries. It is important to note that finding aids were added continuously throughout this period and usage statistics increased toward the end of this period due to the growth in the cumulative number of finding aids present. Part of what drew Special Collections to the bepress platform was the platform's emphasis on search engine optimization strategies that enable search engines to more easily access and index the content within the repository. As a result, even users who may not know about our collections can locate content directly from their preferred search engine rather than going to the Special Collections website. Collections may then be used by an increasingly diverse population beyond academics who already know how and where to search for archival materials. Most notably, patron wait times and employee search times decreased dramatically when finding aids could be located confidently and swiftly as a result of this project.

Ultimately, the full potential of shared institutional repositories as a method of providing access to archives materials has been relatively unexplored. Future directions within the scope of this project include cross linking exhibits with the manuscript collection finding aids so researchers may see not only the finding aid, but also textual and pictorial artifacts also contained within the collection. This project has also carved a path for further archival materials to find a home on MDS. Materials published by the University such as commencement programs (1870-present) and a still in-progress digitization of catalogs (1870-present) have now been added. Additionally, thanks to the flexibility in the structure of metadata, we have started including miscellaneous inventories and other Special Collections materials that are unique to the university and local area, which further

enhances Marshall's status as an R2 university. Other initiatives include taking advantage of the simultaneously scholarly and accessible nature of the platform to host digital projects, such as primary source sets and other products, with the goal of making additional archival material usable by a wider audience. Digital projects such as these do not fit neatly into standard archives content management systems that aim to provide access to digitized archival materials. As a result, this project has broad implications for archival work, both to our own institution and for institutions with access to similar resources. As the needs of the archives field and of archives users evolve over time, so must the way we provide access to our materials. By meeting users where they are, institutions can increase access to their materials by individuals who otherwise may not have known the resources ever existed.