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Carpe Diem: Establish an Institutional Repository for Your Organization

By Carol A. Watson, Published on December 24, 2007

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A law firm associate has prepared a continuing legal education PowerPoint presentation that resides on the hard drive of the associate's laptop. Another associate has served as an expert witness at a U.S. congressional hearing and the testimony is available on the GPO's website. The law firm's annual report from last year is stored on the intranet on the firm's web server. The firm's librarian has delivered an educational presentation at a professional meeting that is available on the web as a podcast.

How can all of these diverse items be captured, archived, organized and readily accessible on the web in one location for public access? An institutional repository can provide the perfect solution.

In our current technological age, most communications and scholarship are born digital and are often scattered across various servers and hard drives. Most of these virtual items are not as carefully archived or preserved as are traditional print publications. Librarians have a unique opportunity to fill a void by taking a leadership role in organizing and preserving digital information. In today's computer dependent environment, our extensive archival expertise is timely and germane. One particularly effective means for filling the void and seizing the opportunity is to establish an institutional repository to collect the intellectual output of your institution.

What is an institutional repository?

Simply stated, an institutional repository is a formally organized virtual locus for collecting and disseminating the digital intellectual output of an organization. The scope of the institutional repository is flexible and can be defined by each individual organization. Content can include solely educational or academic materials or can be broadly defined to serve as an archival repository for all mission-related items of an institution ranging from official documents such as annual reports or litigation memorandums to public relations materials such as press releases or client brochures.

Large academic libraries were the early adopters of institutional repositories. However, as the usefulness of repositories is realized, their implementation is no longer solely the province of large research libraries. Many digital repositories are being created on a small scale. For example specific academic departments or special library collections have implemented repositories. Several law schools already have implemented institutional repositories. Librarians need not be intimidated nor fear the size and scope of setting up a repository. Realistically, the content of most currently existing repositories is still small in size. According to a recent survey, the majority of U.S. repositories have less than 1000 documents stored in them. The time is ripe for additional academic law libraries and all types of law libraries, such as law firms, court and corporate libraries to consider building an institutional repository.

Why should an institution establish an institutional repository?

Institutional repositories can useful for academic libraries as well as law firm, court and corporate libraries. Depending upon the type of library that you are in, rationales for initiating an institutional repository may differ. Since reputation rankings are a major concern in academia, academic librarians will likely be particularly interested in a repository's potential for increasing exposure of its faculty scholarship. Court, law firm and corporate librarians may be more interested in the archival functions of an institutional repository. Having a readily accessible, well-organized central location for all digital information can be a tremendous asset for a business organization.

As mentioned above, a primary benefit of an institutional repository is that it will enhance the reputation and visibility of your organization. A digital repository will showcase your institution's intellectual quality as well as preserve and disseminate the collective capital of your constituents. Generally, an institution's intellectual output is spread across various websites, servers and numerous law journals and miscellaneous publications. Centrally storing the intellectual product of your organization in a repository better demonstrates the value of your institution's research as a whole and its impact on the larger community

Furthermore, a repository can make your institution's research and publications available to an international community on a scale impossible to achieve in paper. Your institution's research and publications can be quickly disseminated to a worldwide audience. Long delays often attributed to the cumbersome traditional publication process can be eliminated. Writings can be distributed with a simple keystroke. In fact, as I was preparing this article, I encountered a law review article about institutional repositories and legal scholarship that had been deposited in SSRN (Social Science Research Network). At the time of the writing of this article, the law review article was not yet available in the print version of the law review that had accepted it for publication, yet I was able to quickly retrieve the pre-publication version via SSRN.

From time to time, an author may question whether this is the best medium for dissemination of scholarly works. It should be noted that free online availability maximizes a publication's impact and fulfils a societal role. Online access to scholarship has been proven to increase readership. According to Steve Lawrence's article "Online or Invisible?" 411 Nature 521 (2001), articles freely available online are more highly cited. Lawrence argues that for greater impact and faster scientific progress, authors should aim to make research easy to access.

An institutional repository also permits an institution to provide open access to its publications. Traditional publication models

and subscription barriers often limit the readership and availability of most scholarly research as well as obscuring its institutional origin. Open access publications provide the obvious benefits of instant access to digital materials, round-the-clock, without physical boundaries. The philosophical foundation for most libraries is to provide equal and unlimited access to information to all patrons. Providing open access to all digital scholarship and publications is a natural extension of our mission as librarians. Institutional repositories provide the library with the unprecedented opportunity to be at the leading edge of the distribution of scholarly output.

Having well-organized materials readily available on the web can streamline a librarian's job as well. An organization that lacks a central system with standardized document storage is at risk for suffering time inefficiencies. Searching for documents in multiple locations can be time-consuming. A repository with consistent metadata describing its contents empowers your information consumers by providing them with a self-service option for retrieving frequently requested materials. Librarians are freed from having to repeatedly retrieve commonly requested items for multiple patrons. An added benefit is that multiple patrons will be able to simultaneously use popular items.

Self-service is not just limited to information consumers. It is possible to set up a repository that requires minimal intervention by library staff. When establishing an institutional repository, administrators have a choice of allowing authors to self-submit items to the repository. As a repository administrator, the librarian need only approve the contribution and it will automatically populate the repository. It is also very simple to incorporate depositing documents in the repository as part of the normal library workflow. Once the subject framework of the repository has been solidified, document submission is a quick and simple process.

It should also be noted that institutional repositories provide an outlet for storing materials created in a variety of formats. Repository items are not limited to traditional text only publications. Multimedia items can be easily accommodated. Research and publications that have been created in a variety of digital formats including audio, video, and images can be archived. Repository content can include lectures, slide presentations, music, photographs, artwork, data sets from empirical research or any other hidden treasures in your collection that are digitally formatted.

How does a library create an institutional repository?

Basically a library has two choices:

1) Implement an open source repository system. A significant advantage of open source software, of course, is that it is free. The downside is that open source software typically requires skilled expertise to install, customize and maintain. For librarians who are technologically savvy and have a strong technology support staff, installing open source software can be an ideal solution.

Open source solutions that are currently available include:

- ePrints
- DSpace
- Fedora (Flexible Extensible Digital Object and Repository Architecture)
- Greenstone Digital Library Software
- Provide leadership within the parent organization to ensure that the library is vital to the organization.

2) Select a commercially available platform. Commercial software solutions for institutional repositories can be expensive. However, there are several advantages to choosing a turnkey system. Usually startup time is significantly reduced. Most libraries can begin uploading content very quickly. Commercial vendors provide quick turnaround for customizations. Generally commercial solutions provide hosting space for content so hardware costs are can be eliminated as well.

Many commercial solutions exist. Popular products include but are not limited to:

- Blackboard Content System
- CONTENTdm - DiMeMa, distributed by OCLC
- Digital Commons - bepress
- Digitool - Ex Libris
- Encompass for Digital Collections - Endeavor
- Hyperion - Sirsi
- Symposia - Innovative Interfaces
- VITAL - VTLS

Conclusion

Establishing an institutional repository is a natural task for librarians as technology continues to evolve exponentially and as the amount of electronic information mushrooms. Repositories can provide significant benefits after an initial investment of time and fill a void that currently exists. Librarians are uniquely qualified to rise to the challenge and take on the task of evaluating the information needs of their constituents and ensuring that a solid infrastructure is developed for the repository. Additionally, librarians will profit from the new relationships and collaborations that emerge as a result of implementation.

If you are unable to commit to setting up an institutional repository for your institution, you should be aware of the existence of institutional repositories and be prepared to use them as a research resource. Repository software is optimized to ensure that repository items are discoverable by popular search engines so there is a high probability that you will encounter a repository item when providing research assistance in the very near future. Understanding the concept of institutional repositories will help librarians evaluate the credibility and usefulness of any repository resources that are discovered during information retrieval searches.

In summary, an institutional repository can boost the prominence of your institution and optimize dissemination of your institution's publications to a worldwide audience. An institutional repository can also promote open access to publications and scholarship. Finally, the scope of the repository is not limited to text format. Research and publications that have been created in various digital formats can be included in the repository. Open source and commercial applications are available as institutional repository project solutions. As archival specialists, librarians are uniquely poised to communicate the value of institutional repositories to their organizations as well as to provide a leadership role in establishing a repository.

- Duke Law Faculty Scholarship Repository
- KU ScholarWorks - University of Kansas School of Law
- Nellco Legal Scholarship Repository - New England Law Library Consortium
- Pace University School of Law
- University of Georgia School of Law
- University of Maryland School of Law
- University of New Mexico Law Library

Useful Links for Further Info

Marilyn Billings, Institutional Repositories: Selected Resources (2005)

Raym Crow, The Case for Institutional Repositories: A SPARC Position Paper (2002)

Susan Gibbons, Institutional Repository Bibliography - prepared for LITA Regional Institute "Establishing an Institutional Repository" (2005)

Adrian K. Ho and Joe Toth, Content Recruitment for Institutional Repositories (IR's) (2007) - An annotated bibliography for a panel discussion at the 2007 American Library Association Annual Conference.

Clifford A. Lynch, Institutional Repositories: Essential Infrastructure for Scholarship in the Digital Age , 226 ARL BIMONTHLY REP. 1 (2003)

Cat S. McDowell, Evaluating Institutional Repository Deployment in American Academe Since Early 2005 , D-Lib Magazine (2007)

Carol A. Parker, Institutional Repositories and the Principle of Open Access: Changing the Way We Think About Legal Scholarship, currently available on SSRN and to be published in New Mexico Law Review, Vol. 37, No. 2, Summer 2007

Selected Works on Institutional Repositories (IRs) - Institutional repositories articles selected by bepress.

Carol Watson and James Donovan, Faculty and Access Services Librarian, Alexander Campbell King Law Library, University of Georgia School of Law, are currently drafting a White Paper on institutional repositories which will contain detailed information on preparing a business case for establishing an institutional repository as well as a discussion of implementation issues such as determining the scope of your repository, suggestions for generating content, and intellectual property issues.