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## **Curating Collections by Curating Connections: How to Increase the Use and Usefulness of Institutional Repository Content**

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# Curating Collections by Curating Connections: How to Increase the Use and Usefulness of Institutional Repository Content

by Sean Lind

Effectively managing a university open access institutional repository requires more than curating content. It also requires curating connections: collaborative, mutually beneficial working relationships with faculty and administrators in university departments which produce and collect student scholarship.

Like many academic libraries, the Brooks Library at Central Washington University (CWU) works closely with our School of Graduate Studies and Research to make graduate student theses available through our open access institutional repository, ScholarWorks @ CWU. But we're also working to form new partnerships with other academic units across the university so we can promote student scholarship and support a renewed university emphasis on student success and retention.

The digitization of print theses began soon after the ScholarWorks @ CWU repository was launched in January, 2014, and an electronic thesis mandate was adopted by CWU Graduate Studies for the 2015 academic year. CWU no longer collects student theses in print format, so, moving forward, ScholarWorks @ CWU will function as the institutional record for graduate student scholarship.

There are currently 4,506 print theses available for check out in the fourth floor library stacks which have circulated 13,171 times (including in-house use), all-time. That's approximately 3 circulations per item, with the most popular single thesis having circulated 51 times.

There are currently 430 electronic theses in ScholarWorks (including born digital and digitally scanned theses). Electronic theses have been viewed and downloaded more than 18,181 times. That's approximately 47.5 uses per theses, which means that electronic theses get 16 times more views and downloads than traditional print theses.

Although the content and authorship for print theses and digitized versions might be exactly the same, comparing circulation statistics of print theses to views and downloads of electronic theses is only shocking if you don't understand how the internet works.

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Physical copies of any library resource are bound by space and time. Patrons can only check out what's on the shelf, and only one person can check out a specific resource at a given time. Open access electronic resources do not have the same constraints. The digital scholarship in our search-engine-optimized institutional repository can be easily discovered, browsed, viewed, and downloaded by anyone with an internet connection, and multiple users can view and download the same work simultaneously from anywhere in the world.

Providing access to student scholarship through ScholarWorks @ CWU effectively supports the broader university emphasis on student success and retention because electronic theses have a much larger potential audience than print theses ever could, and our own circulation and usage statistics show that electronic versions of student scholarship are accessed much more often than print.

In order to maximize the benefit of the digital medium, we thought: what's the defining feature of that medium and how can we use it to our advantage? The internet was founded upon hypertext markup language (HTML). The defining feature of both HTML and the internet is links, and links are active, ongoing digital relationships. If something doesn't link on the internet, we even describe it as "dead." Relevancy rankings in search engines are influenced by what sites a site links to, but also what sites and how many sites link back to that site. Sustained linking relationships increase relevancy in search results. All subject-specific electronic theses in ScholarWorks @ CWU link to the departmental webpage for that graduate department. For example, our Biology theses landing page links to the Biology graduate school pages.

Linking to other sites is a good first step and something we can control as administrators of ScholarWorks @ CWU, but getting academic departments at the university to link back to the institutional repository is a bit more of a challenge because the library does not control the content or links from individual department websites. So in order to maximize the benefits of the internet medium, we found it necessary to bring analog relationships to a digital world.

In talking with CWU professors and administrators, we discovered that electronic theses are only one kind of student scholarship at CWU. The objective now is to grow our collection of high-quality

*continued on page 24*

missing. Each game has a list of contents inside the cover and the sturdy bags containing game pieces are clearly labeled as to their contents. The contents label asks that patrons alert staff to missing parts only “if any parts are missing that prevent the game from being played.”

To prepare the games for circulation, considerable time was spent reinforcing the manufacturer game packaging (based on feedback from other libraries, we decided to circulate items in their original boxes, rather than repacking in separate bags or cases). Cardboard game box covers (top and bottom) were contact-papered and the corners reinforced. Inner plastic trays containing parts were affixed to the box bottom, folding game boards were reinforced, and instruction booklets were laminated. We use the Corner 2 Corner bands recommended by John Pappas to ensure that game box lids stay on firmly.

Feedback from patrons has been glowing. A Facebook post with a photo of the games preparing to ship out to branches generated a huge number of likes, comments and shares, as well as suggestions for additional titles to add. These games are expensive, and patrons love being able to try them out before deciding to purchase. They are great for parties, family get-togethers, visits from the grandkids, and winter weekend fun. The most common response has been, “it is so awesome that the library now has board games!”

Next up – American Girl® Dolls! Dolls will circulate with a hairbrush and one extra set of clothes. Each doll will also have a diary where kids can write about their adventures. About circulating American Girl Dolls, WCLS Youth Services Manager, Thom Barthelmess, says, “Because of cost, things like this are often out of reach for folks in our community. And the library can offer them without stigma, so boys, older children, and other kids who might not purchase them can enjoy them with pleasure and without judgment.” We are excited to begin offering these dolls for circulation later this year.

The moral of this story is, if you’ve been waiting to experiment with nontraditional collections until you have a budget windfall or a comprehensive plan, wait no more! Decide what kinds of items will spark interest in your community and fit within your collection scope. Think about how you want to circulate the items, create the infrastructure in your ILS, and then start where you can – even (or especially) if it’s a small, targeted collection. Be willing to keep your circulation policies simple. Get staff behind the project early by reassuring them that they won’t be counting individual cards or plastic trains at check in. For a small investment and some staff time, nontraditional collections have a big payoff in patron perception of the library as a dynamic place that provides social experiences as well as more traditional types of access. 📖

student scholarship and build on the success of the electronic thesis collection by recruiting more student contributions from other academic units across campus, furthering the library’s support of student scholarship and promoting student achievement. So far, we’ve been able to recruit two new partners: CWU’s Theater Production department and Mechanical Engineering Technology department, each of which has provided us with unique student content.

Theater Arts graduate projects, which feature complete write-ups of the creative process involved in producing a play or musical, link from the Theater Production Graduate Program to the main ScholarWorks @ CWU page. All projects were scanned by the Theater Department and uploaded into the repository by the library. Scott Robinson, CWU Theater Arts Professor and Chair, described his reasoning behind making those projects publicly available: “The Theatre Production [...] collection will allow K-12 teachers worldwide to review a vast and growing reservoir of research documentation. This collection is not only appropriate to the K-12 production needs, but is a solid foundational research platform that can be used as a springboard to support creative projects at numerous levels. The ScholarWorks project is one in which we are honored to participate.”

Mechanical Engineering Technology (MET) senior undergraduate projects, which detail the design, construction, and utility of a wide variety of engineering projects and provide valuable insight into the engineering process, are linked by individual project to the downloadable PDF versions on ScholarWorks @ CWU. MET Professor Craig Johnson explains, “ScholarWorks enables us to offer a history of successful capstone projects for our students to critique and use as benchmarks: maybe even get a little inspiration. It also serves as a source of evidence to support our accreditation.”

The CWU Theater and MET departments have been enthusiastic, active supporters of ScholarWorks @ CWU, and have contributed time and resources to the uploading and linking of their content, and both recognize that the bigger goal is to use the digital platform to highlight the good work which is being done by their students. This is great for individual students, who now have the opportunity to participate in the scholarly conversation for the first time as undergraduate or graduate students. It’s also great for individual departments, who can use these collections in a variety of ways: 1. As a recruitment tool for new majors (“Check out the interesting work our students are doing. Wouldn’t you like to study here?”), 2. As a resume-builder for students (“Check out the valuable work I did. Wouldn’t you like to hire me?”), and 3. As a recruitment tool for new faculty (“Check out the exciting things our students are studying and making. Wouldn’t you like to teach here?”). And, of course, added interest in individual projects adds to the total use of ScholarWorks @ CWU, which further illustrates the value of the repository to the university as a whole. 📖