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APPLICATIONS OF BEPRESS DIGITAL COMMONS IN SPECIAL COLLECTIONS: INITIAL EXPERIENCES AT ABILENE CHRISTIAN UNIVERSITY

By McGarvey Ice, Abilene Christian University

In late fall 2014 Brown Library at Abilene Christian University (Abilene, TX) launched the university's first online digital repository using BePress Digital Commons (<http://digitalcommons.bepress.com/>). The platform rollout was a coordinated effort between two library departments, Special Collections and Archives and Educational Technology. Both departments are small and neither has as its sole focus the visioning, administration, structuring or population of the repository. Therefore, the workload was shared among a team of library staff and faculty who in turn recruited broader campus-wide input and assistance.

Governing our decision-making process were questions such as 'How can we showcase the unique scholarly activities generated at ACU?' followed closely by 'How can we render our unique assets visible and usable by the larger community of scholars?' From these core commitments, a cluster of select foci emerged to shape our initial launch of an institutional repository. We chose to showcase faculty and student intellectual products in the form of theses and dissertations from graduate programs and honors projects and theses from across the undergraduate curriculum; to publish two born-digital scholarly journals; and to publish digital assets with accompanying metadata of items held in Special Collections. Determined to begin small and execute well, we felt this approach was broad enough to ensure our familiarity with a range of options BePress offers while at the same time allowing for scalable growth both in terms of breadth and depth of our offerings.

The initial launch for student-generated work began with newly-completed theses for our Doctor of Ministry program. Early and enthusiastic support from this department and the D.Min. graduates resulted in a successful beginning. While they are the only projects currently

available, we have enjoyed seeing them reach a readership (and a growing download rate) across several continents. We followed this by expanding and formalizing processes for submittal of electronic theses across all graduate programs and undergraduate honors program projects. Utilizing the range of Creative Commons licensing, we ensure students are informed of their rights as they break into scholarly publishing for the first time. At the same time, we are navigating the sometimes sensitive concerns about premature publishing, particularly in the sciences (e.g. when a student may want to embargo research in our platform in order to submit it to a peer-reviewed journal).

We utilized the journal publishing capabilities to launch *Dialogue & Nexus* to explore the relationship between modern science and Christianity and *Discernment: Theology and Practice of Ministry*, a peer-reviewed journal complementing the publication of the Doctor of Ministry projects. Additionally, through collaboration with a faculty member who served as its editor and publisher in analog, we seized an opportunity to scan the full run (fifteen years) of *Horizons Chrétiens*, a French-language popular-level Christian journal. This unplanned addition allowed us to test the BePress journal capabilities against archival content. We used the functionality of the BePress journal features to ensure a robust volume and issue presentation, structured navigability, and custom graphic design for enhanced visual appeal.

A major component of our rollout included hosting online for the first time collection-level metadata for hundreds of archival collections held in Special Collections. This Finding Aids series raises collection visibility and allows us to present, through selective and targeted digitization, a small sampling from each collection. This approach will allow users to make an informed decision whether and how a collection is appropriate for their needs. The long-term goal is a much richer and deeper presentation of archival material as discrete collections within

the repository. We scanned and uploaded a carefully curated set of printed works, mostly rare pamphlets, journal issues, and a few full-length books. The guiding criteria for inclusion in this series was that the works we uploaded must be of significant research value for students and scholars and be unavailable elsewhere online. The goal was to leverage our repository as a means by which the scarce items in our care could become widely and freely available.

To employ the capabilities of the Digital Commons platform, select archival collections were scanned *in toto*, chief among them is a set of 9,600 35mm slides of antiquities of Europe, Israel, Turkey, Greece and Egypt. One of our longtime and much-beloved and respected professors utilized these slides across decades of classroom teaching. Other substantial image collections include a set of two hundred 20th century baptistry paintings, over 1,800 pre-1969 missionary photographs, and a set of hundreds of historic campus and university-related photographs. The digitization, metadata creation and uploading of these sets established for us a sense of what processes and workflows are required to generate an online archive of this scale and successfully deploy these kinds of digital assets in a repository. While in some cases we conceived and executed digitization plans specifically for upload to DC@ACU and in other cases we uploaded already-scanned sets, we came to understand how aggregating all of them in a single location increases the utility and visibility for all of them.

Special Collections holds a robust collection of spoken-word recordings representing a wide array of preaching among Churches of Christ in the latter twentieth century. We chose to present audio files by beginning with small sets of oral histories concerning African-American preachers (digitized from cassettes) and a large set of reels from long-running radio ministry supported by Churches of Christ (with scans, in PDF form, of the accompanying printed scripts

and some photographs). Finally, we added a set of hundreds of taped lectures in Christian history by another long-tenured and much-beloved ACU professor.

As we launch into the second year we are employing the repository to serve users interested in ACU's religious heritage. Through collaboration with teaching faculty, librarians and archivists from across Churches of Christ, Christian Churches and the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) we will compile a broad and deep repository of primary sources useful for the study of these traditions. Each partnering institution will contribute selected unique items for upload to ACU's instance of DigitalCommons. Again, the goal is to leverage the power of a common platform to serve as a broad collaborative effort to bring together in one digital space what a researcher must travel to multiple archives to see in person. Other future initiatives include expanding our support for hosting both faculty and student publications or other scholarly or creative works, expanding digital publishing of a wider variety, both scholarly and popular, and deepening our online presentation of unique archival collections.

We envisioned our task to bring before the public, whether they are current residential students at our university, distance-learners in one of our off-campus or non-traditional programs, faculty in a variety of disciplines, or interested researchers anywhere robust and varied primary-source material and high-quality scholarly output. We targeted our approach to match a wide-range of capabilities offered by the BePress DigitalCommons platform with our own unique or original digital assets. With the analytics gathered thus far we have seen the impact of these efforts reach hundreds of countries across the world. A persistent challenge we faced is the efficient creation, description and management of digital assets. In terms of personnel and workflow management, the first year was a satisfying learning process. Until a project is executed, one never really knows what it will take; having a year's work behind us, we have a much better grasp of the

challenges of project management. A corollary to project management is the challenge of managing an initiative such as this with a small team of staff, all of whom have other regular responsibilities. We better understand the range of technical capabilities and limitations on both our end and those of the DigitalCommons platform. We are beginning to explore how we can use the platform to foster creativity, innovation and collaboration, not just host digital assets. McGarvey Ice is Archives Specialist at Abilene Christian University. He may be contacted via email at mac.ice@acu.edu. ACU's institutional repository is at digitalcommons.acu.edu.