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A Dream of Spring: Creation of an IR Managers Forum

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[One] can only attain knowledge with the help of those who possess it. This must be understood from the very beginning. One must learn from [one] who knows.

—George Ivanovich Gurdjieff

Abstract

Sometimes it's hard to find answers for work-related questions. This difficulty is compounded when one lacks the means to engage with a community of peers who face similar situations and problems. As institutional repository (IR) managers, we found ourselves with access to resources and listservs that didn't quite fit our needs. Available discussion spaces were either too general in scope, drowning out repository-specific concerns; or too narrowly focused on platform-specific issues and technical details.

Lacking an appropriate forum, we decided to create a discussion space for IR managers. The IR Manager Forum (<https://groups.google.com/forum/#!forum/irmanagers>) is designed to foster a community of practice for repository managers, regardless of software implementation, institutional setting, or technical expertise. Using the Google Groups platform, members can post and view threaded messages in an online interface or by e-mail.

Conversations in this space have the potential to help IR managers develop their repository policies and local practices. The authors hope that the forum will also support cross-platform comparisons to identify useful features and limitations of various software, areas for practical improvement, and larger trends in institutional repositories that speak to their future direction. This paper covers how IR managers from the University of Florida, University of North Texas, Texas A&M University, and University of Massachusetts Amherst created the IR Managers Forum. It also gives an overview of the forum's usage and growth over the first year and a half, and lessons learned along the way.

Introduction/Background

Identifying a Need

In 2003, Clifford Lynch first highlighted institutional repositories (IRs) as valuable tools within the scholarly publishing landscape (Lynch, 2003, p. 2). Since then, IRs have become a common part of digital collections at academic libraries and within other types of organizations. Although institutions managing IRs share a common goal of preserving and providing access to digital content, each institution implements their repository independently.

As of November 2018, the Registry of Open Access Repository Mandates and Policies (ROARMAP) lists over 141 unique IRs managed by institutions within the United States. With this large number of

repositories, a diverse ecosystem of different implementations has arisen over the last 15 years. In terms of running repository software, some institutions use home-grown platforms that are developed locally (e.g., SobekCM); others use open-source platforms with a community development model (e.g., DSpace and Fedora); and many use privately developed software (e.g., Digital Commons). Depending on the software platform and local resources, some institutions also host the repository locally and control content storage locations, while others outsource software hosting and content storage concerns to external organizations (e.g., bepress, DuraSpace). Ultimately, the software implementation dictates available features and functionality for managing content. It also can limit an institution's level of involvement with future software development priorities and schedules.

When combined with institutional practices, the platform a repository uses will inform workflow options and growth opportunities for a repository. At many academic institutions, repositories are managed by a single full- or part-time staff member. IR managers are asked to understand the software implementation and the features it provides; advocate for new functionality; implement appropriate policies; design workflows for managing materials over time; and develop strategies for growing collections. An IR manager oversees multiple collections of digital content, usually containing heterogeneous materials in a variety of formats. At academic libraries, content collected within a repository often include digitized materials belonging to the library; student theses and dissertations; products of faculty research; and other scholarly work. Since the IR is often a component of a larger set of digital collections, management involves not only working with content providers, but also collaborating within and beyond the institution, in order to acquire materials, maintain collections, and improve repository usability.

High-level national conversations concerning IRs take place in the literature (Arlitsch & O'Brien, 2012; Poynder, 2016; Salo, 2008) and at meetings of institutional administrators, such as the Coalition for Networked Information (CNI) (Report of CNI Executives Roundtable, 2017). These conversations consistently propose new technical directions and shifting the purpose of IRs to increase their value as scholarly communications tools. Many IR managers are expected to track these trends in order to determine which materials ought to be collected, collections to work toward expanding, and new features and policies to develop locally. As these advocates are struggling to resituate IRs within a changing scholarly communications landscape, repository managers are increasingly asked to continue working toward goals established within their local implementation environment, and also shift focus to align with broader stakeholder discussions.

Since institutions often rely on a single person to successfully execute and expand the repository vision, IR managers can benefit greatly from a stronger community of practice. Although institutions choose their implementations and design workflows and policies according to their own priorities, IR managers still face similar situations and constraints across repository implementations and within the larger scholarly environment. For example, repository managers run into obstacles such as lack of faculty engagement at academic institutions, copyright concerns from

content providers, difficulty with repository assessment, and limited resource allocation. IR managers can learn from open discussions about the practical implications of high-level initiatives and comparisons across organizations.

Existing Community Spaces and Their Challenges

When IR managers communicate about their initiatives in papers that describe the development of new software tools, workflows, or outreach strategies, these articles are published as after-the-fact success (or failure) stories. Broader communication concerning ongoing projects, new initiatives, and day-to-day repository management is lacking. Therefore, it can be difficult for IR managers who work alone to find real-time answers to their practical questions, discuss ideas for repository improvement, and identify trends from the activities taking place at other institutions.

Existing venues for community discussions are either too narrow or too broad for many practical concerns IR managers face. So far, IR managers have had the option of participating in discussions organized around two primary areas: repository software platforms and the overall scholarly communications landscape. Open source and privately developed repository platforms often link to a support community for IR managers to join. These communities provide a venue for discussions centered around the software. For example, the DSpace Community Google Group (<https://groups.google.com/forum/#!forum/dspace-community>) includes discussion threads with technical questions about deploying and running software, questions concerning the use of features, and input for feature development and bug fixes. Although discussions sometimes arise concerning more general IR management practices, like metadata creation, the reach of this community is restricted to repository managers using DSpace implementations. On the other hand, organizations such as the American Library Association (ALA) and the Scholarly Publishing and Academic Resources Coalition (SPARC) also host mailing lists. The Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) division of ALA runs a popular open listserv, known as ScholComm. Discussions here address commercial publishing practices and an overall scholarly communications agenda. Repository-centered discussions in these venues are primarily concerned with addressing systemic scholarly communications issues. Neither of these types of spaces provide a venue

for detailed conversations that compare day-to-day practices and operations across the diverse ecosystem of IR implementations.

A Space of Our Own

The authors—four IR managers from different academic libraries—first discussed these challenges at the US Electronic Theses and Dissertations Association (USETDA) 2016 conference. We identified shared unanswered questions; the lack of a venue for discussing them with others; and expressed a desire for such a space. After our initial meeting, we continued conversations to determine the features of such a space.

Our goal is to create a virtual space designed to bring IR managers together as a community of practice. We agreed to aim for a discussion forum with the following characteristics:

- Focused on platform-agnostic conversations;
- Open to international membership;
- Independent from existing organizations;
- Supporting a community of peers.

Platform-Agnostic

Since many repository managers are restricted to platform-specific communities, building a platform-agnostic space is an essential step toward bridging silos. While each platform may provide specific functionality, many concerns of IR managers are independent of the platform implemented. This includes promoting services within an organization; working with content providers; improving the accessibility of materials; and identifying useful features and workflows to develop. A platform-agnostic space emphasizes sharing this type of knowledge and also provides a place for IR managers who work with home-grown software to join discussions.

International

While we are familiar with institutional repositories as a growing trend among academic and research organizations in the United States, Europe and the United Kingdom also lead conversations about scholarly communication and open access to digital materials. Since we believe that scholarship and practices benefit from a variety of perspectives, creating a

space for international conversations commits us to seeking diverse voices and connecting institutions with similar goals across national boundaries.

Independent

To join a platform-specific community, participants are expected either to use the platform or have an interest in implementing it. While organizational membership isn't required to join the ALA-ACRL ScholComm or SPARC mailing lists, the large-scale concerns of members in these societies drive the direction of conversations more toward strategic planning. By creating a space without formal affiliation, conversations can be led by IR managers according to their own areas of interest.

Community of Peers

Although all four authors have worked in academic libraries, we recognize that many types of organizations run IRs, including museums, government agencies, research groups, professional organizations, nonprofits, and companies. By placing emphasis on a community of peers, we aim to promote discussions among individuals in roles that involve daily repository operations, and to treat each member as a peer regardless of their title or status within an organization. Since members are likely to be most familiar with their own types of organizations, we see potential benefits to learning from the experiences and views of peers within other organizational types.

Developing the IR Managers Forum

Choosing the Venue

Once we settled on the aims of our new community, we reviewed platforms that could be used to create a space for community discussions. Although some disciplinary listservs are hosted by a founding member's academic institution, we thought this was risky if one of us left our institution or the community. After also eliminating platforms requiring payment, we narrowed our decision to a choice between Google Groups and Slack. We tested both platforms to ensure they met our requirements: simple procedures for requesting and confirming membership; multiple options for members to send and receive messages; the ability to reference past conversations; and ease of navigation across conversations. We decided that Google Groups provided better navigation and access through threaded messages,

which could be sent and received in an online interface or via e-mail.

Code of Conduct

In order to successfully uphold our aims of bringing together an open and supportive community, we believe that individuals must feel comfortable engaging in conversations, especially since we envisioned the forum as a space not only for seasoned practitioners, but also for those new to working with IRs. In order to foster such an environment, we created a set of policies and a Code of Conduct prior to launching the forum. We reviewed the Codes of Conduct from other communities, such as the Digital Humanities Slack and the ScholComm listserv, compared them to our goals, and adapted language to reflect our values.

Publicizing and Managing the Forum

With the policies and code of conduct in place, the IR Managers Forum was officially launched as a closed Google Group on February 16, 2017. We announced the launch with a message to several existing communities, including the Digital Commons Google Group, the ScholComm listserv, the USETDA mailing list, and the Coalition of Open Access Policy Institutions (COAPI) mailing list. Within 24 hours, over 100 members joined the forum. In addition to this formal announcement, we continued to publicize the IR Forum through presentations and word-of-mouth at conferences and workshops. The authors attended meetings such as the Southern Mississippi Institutional Repository Conference, the Texas Conference on Digital Libraries (TCDL), and USETDA. Most recently, the forum was mentioned as a valuable resource during a SPARC Repository Community Call (October 18, 2018).

When the forum was launched, the four authors also formed a Steering Committee to share management duties. These duties included approving new member requests and clearing outdated announcements. After the first six months, the committee convened virtually to formalize responsibilities and establish a rotation for forum management. Each Steering Committee member now serves as the IR Forum manager for a six-month period. The forum manager is responsible for approving and tracking new member information, keeping an eye on discussions, as well as posting monthly questions and/or surveys. The manager also flags concerns for the

committee to discuss and schedules the next Steering Committee meeting.

Forum Membership

The IR Forum has been oriented toward developing a community of peers whose work directly relates to institutional repositories. As each member has joined, we have asked them to provide basic information: their institutional affiliation and job title, the IR platform used, and a reason for joining the space. We have used this information to help us understand the alignment between our preconceived aims and how the forum has been developing. We hope that this information may also help us to be more open and identify new areas of potential value.

By the end of September 2018, nearly 20 months after launch, the forum had 376 members from nearly 280 unique institutions. This institution count attempts to merge departments and colleges within a single university, while treating separate university campuses as distinct institutions. Members were counted as unique e-mail accounts joining the forum; some individuals may have joined with multiple e-mails and we expect modest duplication. Although nearly 300 of the members joined during the first two months, membership has continued to increase steadily. Our members are predominantly from institutions within the United States, which is expected considering the limits of our outreach so far. Nonetheless, 16% of members are affiliated with institutions outside of the United States, and 10% are affiliated with institutions outside of North America. This includes institutions across Europe, the Middle East, Asia, and Africa. Forum members self-identified primarily as staff, librarians, and faculty at academic institutions, with various levels of supervision and administration over their institution's repository.

The Steering Committee permits representatives from companies and communities who develop platforms, as well as organizations that host repository software, to join the forum. This includes representatives from SPARC, the Center for Open Science (COS), Online Computer Library Center (OCLC), USETDA, the Open Access Button, bepress, and Elsevier. Although the Steering Committee debated whether such representatives might negatively influence the candor and topics discussed by members, representatives were permitted in recognition of their collaborative partnerships with the IR

community. These groups organize conferences and meetings, and the Steering Committee recognizes that they play a role in building a stronger communication network between IR managers.

In order to effectively support conversations across software platforms, we attempted to identify the platforms used by members at the time they joined the forum. Platforms were identified from member responses with additional Steering Committee review. We've found that nearly half of members use the Digital Commons platform with DSpace following as a close second. Members also use Eprints, Hydra/Samvera, Fedora, and Islandora software at their institutions. Additionally, some members expressed interest in bringing up a new repository at their institution when joining, and others mentioned switching platforms. We hope that the interest in bringing up and changing software, in combination with the diversity of platforms represented by members, will support general conversations about cross-platform assessment.

Forum Content

Repositories run by academic libraries are often built around collections of student theses and dissertations (commonly called ETDs). Considering forum membership, it is therefore no surprise that ETDs remain a consistently popular topic. ETD conversations have touched on the use of Creative Commons licenses, removing pages with sensitive information, and the use of ProQuest services. Tangential questions about posting and sharing related work by students are also posed with relative regularity.

Aside from discussions about ETDs and student work, other popular discussions have focused on:

- Tools used to mint digital object identifiers (DOIs) and content types meriting DOIs;
- Author consent agreements;
- The use of student assistants in libraries;

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- Implementations of item versioning;
- Item accessibility issues;
- File type preferences;
- Defining a “published” work.

These conversations have the potential to help individual managers develop their repository policies, outreach, workflows, and best practices.

Lessons Learned Along the Way

From the start, the Steering Committee has wanted to ensure that participation in the forum doesn't drop off after the initial buzz has died down. We have therefore experimented with seeding discussion topics to initiate conversations. We first posted monthly calls for self-promotion (“toot your own horn”). After several lackluster attempts, we found that this call did not work for engaging the community to share their successes. We then distributed a survey to determine potential discussion topics. Many members participated, and we used this information to set a schedule for seeding discussions. These discussion topics have generally garnered member engagement. Occasionally, the Steering Committee also cross-posts relevant posts from other forums (with the original author's permission). This has served to bring new information into the forum and provides opportunities to further spread the word.

We attribute the success of the IR Forum so far to many factors, including the lack of other suitable platforms for the types of concerns that IR managers face. In researching existing venues, we gained an understanding for how such discussion spaces can be structured and identified how existing spaces did not fulfill our aims. We continue to seek ways to support conversations that will strengthen our community and grow IR Forum membership. There isn't always a good place for conversations, and if that is the case, it's up to members of the community to create a space and make it their own.

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