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Digital Collections Report Features Biodiversity Heritage Library

The Biodiversity Heritage Library is profiled in *Searching for Sustainability: Strategies from Eight Digitized Special Collections*, a major study funded by the Institute for Museum and Library Services and conducted by Ithaka S+R in partnership with the Association of Research Libraries. The study shares good practices for teams planning for and managing digitized resources, some of which are drawn from the experiences of the team responsible. The report aims to address one of the biggest challenges facing libraries and cultural heritage organizations: how to move their special collections into the 21st century through digitization while developing successful strategies to make sure those collections remain accessible and relevant over time.

“Eighty percent of ARL libraries report digitized special collections are central to their current strategic direction,” said ARL executive director Elliott Shore, citing a survey of ARL members conducted by Ithaka S+R in 2012. “And yet we often hear libraries say that they are unable to adequately staff and fund these efforts over time.”

The Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS), a major funder of digitization projects for the past decade, observed the same challenge among libraries, archives, and museums. As a result, IMLS funded ARL, in partnership with Ithaka S+R, through a cooperative agreement as part of the National Leadership Grants Program to undertake a study to uncover and share examples of good practice, with the expectation that others might model the approaches seen among those digital collections that are succeeding.

The resulting report draws out several strategies that have worked for a range of digital collections across eight institutions, all of which have demonstrated longevity and public benefit, and all of which have reliable and recurring funding models.

The case studies include:

- American Antiquarian Society Digital Collections
- Biodiversity Heritage Library (Smithsonian Institution)

- Florida Folklife Collection (Florida Department of State, Division of Library & Information Services)
- Grateful Dead Archive Online (University of California, Santa Cruz)
- Home Economics Archive: Research, Tradition, and History (Cornell University)
- Maine Memory Network (Maine Historical Society)
- Quakers and Slavery (Haverford College)
- Vanderbilt Television News Archive (Vanderbilt University)

“The case study approach offered us a fantastic opportunity to understand the motivating factors and the strategic decision points of the leaders of these digital resources,” commented Nancy Maron, the Ithaka S+R project lead. “By having the project teams speak candidly about challenges as well as successes, we were able to learn about the tactics that worked in reaching goals and overcoming obstacles.”

Each case study begins with a brief history of a project and an outline of the project’s current sustainability strategy. It then focuses on the project’s economic model and other sources of value, like its ability to attract and serve its users. The studies also highlight potential risks and lessons that others can learn from these project experiences.

The summary report brings together key takeaways from the studies, revealing that collections are most successful when their creation and maintenance are mainstreamed in ways that diverge from special collections of the past. The report also shows that collections best succeed when they align strongly with the missions of their home institutions. While there is not one clear answer or silver bullet for success, there are consistent themes. Some of these reflect insights that emerged from previous studies of digital projects, such as having strong, dedicated leadership and funding models that fit the intentions and value of the resource—from membership fees to strategic partnerships of various kinds.

Tom Hickerson, chair of ARL’s Working Group on Transforming Special Collections in the Digital Age and vice provost and university librarian at University of Calgary, expressed his sense of the value of the study: “These results are important for the creative ideas and tactics employed to assure sustainability for these exciting resources. Even more important is the study’s affirmation of the need for alignment with institutional missions. Within the working group, we are sharply aware that both mission and managerial alignment are necessary to achieve the full potential of our rare and

unique holdings and ensure their ongoing vitality. To realize the distinctive value of these resources, we must embrace a more holistic approach.”

“One of the most wonderful assets the library and cultural heritage communities have is a deep-seated practice of sharing and learning from one another,” commented Deanna Marcum, Ithaka S+R managing director. “This report is yet another terrific example. The project leaders and their staff were incredibly open with us, and this report provides great information that will be extremely helpful for other libraries, archives, and museums, whether they are planning to move special collections online or they already have digital collections in place.”

Searching for Sustainability: Strategies from Eight Digitized Special Collections is freely available at <http://www.sr.ithaka.org/research-publications/searching-sustainability>.

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About the Association of Research Libraries

The Association of Research Libraries (<http://www.arl.org>) is a nonprofit organization of 125 research libraries in the United States and Canada. Its mission is to influence the changing environment of scholarly communication and the public policies that affect research libraries and the diverse communities they serve. ARL pursues this mission by advancing the goals of its member research libraries, providing leadership in public and information policy to the scholarly and higher education communities, fostering the exchange of ideas and expertise, facilitating the emergence of new roles for research libraries, and shaping a future environment that leverages its interests with those of allied organizations.

About Ithaka S+R

Ithaka S+R (<http://sr.ithaka.org>) is a strategic consulting and research service provided by ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization dedicated to helping the academic community use digital technologies to preserve the scholarly record and to advance research and teaching in sustainable ways. Ithaka S+R focuses on the transformation of scholarship and teaching in an online environment, with the goal of identifying the critical issues facing our community and acting as a catalyst for change. JSTOR, a research and learning platform, and Portico, a digital preservation service, are also part of ITHAKA.

About the Institute of Museum and Library Services

The Institute of Museum and Library Services is the primary source of federal support for the nation's 123,000 libraries and 17,500 museums. Our mission is to inspire libraries and museums to advance innovation, lifelong learning, and cultural and civic engagement. Our grant making, policy development, and research help libraries and museums deliver valuable services that make it possible for communities and individuals to thrive. To learn more, visit www.ims.gov and follow IMLS on [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#).