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# Engaging Alumni: The How and Why of Author Outreach for Dissertation Scanning Projects

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## Abstract

In 2008 the University of Florida George A. Smathers Libraries began a project to digitize their collection of over 14,000 print dissertations, ranging from 1934 to 2006, and upload them to the Institutional Repository (IR@UF). At UF, copyright remains with dissertation authors and not the university. Thus, we started an outreach effort to ask authors to opt in to the Retrospective Dissertation Scanning (RDS) project. We worked with the Alumni Association to get contact information for our doctoral graduates, then reached out to them through multiple mediums: e-mail, letter, and postcard.

In 2011 Gail Clement and Melissa Levine published "*Copyright and Publication Status of Pre-1978 Dissertations: A Content Analysis Approach*." In light of this, our project transitioned to an opt-out model. In addition to the e-mail, letter, postcard method from the opt-in phase of the project, we added a webpage where authors could opt out of public access for their work. If we did not have contact information for an alumni we performed a "reasonable search" to locate such information.

Outreach to alumni for a project like this has many benefits for academic institutions, including fostering a collaboration between libraries and external organizations—the Alumni Association in our case. It expands access to the scholarship of alumni, which not only showcases the institution but also encourages researchers to continue or respond to existing scholarship. Additionally, authors and next-of-kin can reconnect with the library and university and appreciate having their work shared online.

As academic libraries' collections are becoming more and more digital, the trend of digital submission of an institution's graduate theses and dissertations to the library has followed. Access to these works is greatly expanded through deposit into a local institutional repository, into vendor-run databases such as ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global (PQDT Global; <http://proquest.com/go/dissertations>), and into open access databases, such as those provided by the Networked Digital Library of Theses and Dissertations (NDLTD; <http://ndltd.org>) and Open Access Theses and Dissertations (OATD; <http://oatd.org>).

Print theses and dissertations continue to make up a large portion of this scholarly body, and the question has become how to provide access to these valuable works beyond the walls of the library. One solution is to digitize these works and make them available as part of the larger digital theses and dissertations corpus. One major difference between the two formats is that authors of digital theses and dissertations are alerted to how their works will be made available after graduation, or after an embargo period; authors of print works were not.

At the University of Florida (UF), like at many peer institutions, intellectual property rights remain with the authors of theses and dissertations. The institution must consider several factors before beginning their digitization efforts. Will the scanned works, like the digitally submitted works, be made available to all? Will access be limited to campus users, mimicking the access of the original print work? Or will the print-to-digital works be created for preservation purposes only? If opting for open access of the works, will the institution undertake efforts to contact the authors to gain permission? If so, what resources are available to identify current contact information (Clement, Shorey, & Dotson, 2011)?

The UF George A. Smathers Libraries considered these questions and began a large outreach project to authors of print doctoral dissertations in 2008 to kick off its digitization efforts. Working with the alumni association to get contact information, this continued until 2011, when a change in how dissertations were perceived in regard to publication status occurred. Since then, the project has moved forward following an opt-out model, allowing for the broader body of works to be made available.

## Background

The first print master's thesis in the UF archives is dated 1908. The first doctoral dissertation was submitted in 1934. The collection contains an estimated 21,000 theses in print and 14,115 identified dissertations. With the first electronic theses and dissertations (ETDs) submissions accepted in 1998, the print collection contains almost twice the number of works as the digital collection, which, as of the end of the spring term 2018, counted 17,042 titles.

When the George A. Smathers Libraries at the University of Florida began their scanning project, the main focus was doctoral dissertations. Not only were there fewer titles, but also it was presumed that, on the whole, doctoral-level work would have more immediate value to users than master-level work. Once that decision was made, copyright status of the works was the next consideration. In consultation with the scholarly communications and copyright librarian, it was determined that while the works were in a bound format, there was no precedent to indicate that the dissertations were considered published by traditional standards. Unpublished works fall under common law copyright protection, rather than federal copyright protection. Prior to the implementation of the Copyright Act of 1976 in 1978, published works required registration of copyright and printed notice of copyright ownership in the work in order to be considered in copyright. However, common law copyright was an automatic protection that did not require registration of copyright or inclusion of a copyright notice in the work. Common law rights provided more protection than federal copyright law as they conferred "unrestricted protection against any unauthorized use of the work" (*Copyright Law Revision*, 1961).

A review of the UF Intellectual Property policy showed that theses and dissertations did not fall under "university-supported works" for which the copyright was owned by the institution. The ownership of copyright and other intellectual property rights remained with the thesis or dissertation author. Given these factors, the Retrospective Dissertation Scanning (RDS) project began with an opt-in strategy, by which dissertations would only be digitized after the libraries received a signed Internet Distribution Consent Agreement.

## Finding Authors

The big challenge with the opt-in strategy was in locating the copyright holders of the dissertations.

Given the date of our earliest works, we acknowledged that for some authors, copyright may have been transferred to next-of-kin or an estate manager, from whom signed forms would also be accepted.

To begin the process, a list of print dissertations was created, as identified by certain fields in the catalog records, yielding 12,114 titles. The UF Alumni Association provided a copy of their contact information list for all individuals who had graduated with a doctoral degree. They had information from 16,078 doctoral alumni.

Utilizing a Microsoft Access Database, several queries were run comparing the two lists. The bulk of the synthesized list came from a three-point match of last name, first name, and graduation year, although this did yield some false matches. Additional searches were done with a two-point match of last name and graduation year, which added to the list a number of alumni whose first name differed between the official school record and what was listed on the title page of the dissertation. Finally, a three-point match was done where the last name from the catalog was compared to the maiden name field provided by the Alumni Association. In total, we identified contact information for 8,730 of the dissertation titles, or 72% of the collection.

## Outreach Efforts and Results

Contact information from the Alumni Association included e-mail addresses and both domestic and foreign postal addresses. Where e-mail was available, it was the preferred first method of contact, given the expediency of delivery, bounce notifications, and lack of financial cost. Utilizing the Microsoft Word Mail Merge feature, we were able to personalize each message to include the author's name, the year of graduation, and the title of their work. This also prompted some responses where an incorrect match between title and alumni contact information had been made.

For those individuals who did not reply to our e-mail, or did not have a valid e-mail address, we sent the cover letter and Internet Distribution Consent Agreement by U.S. post. Due to cost considerations and the small number of individuals with international addresses, letters were only sent to authors within the United States. Our final outreach effort to these alumni was via a postcard, which we believed could garner response from those who perceived letters on

official stationery as fundraising attempts. The card was marked, “We want to digitize your dissertation . . . at no cost to you,” and included information on how to request the appropriate forms for participation.

Over about four years, we contacted 5,805 authors. We achieved a 70% positive return rate, where authors submitted their signed form, granting us permission to digitize and include their dissertation in our institutional repository (IR@UF). We did not get replies from 1,720 authors (29%), and had 42 authors (1%) who replied, but with an opt-out decision.

## Tides Turning

The study, reported in “*Copyright and Publication Status of Pre-1978 Dissertations: A Content Analysis Approach*” (Clement & Levine, 2011), concluded that:

Pre-1978 American dissertations were considered published for copyright purposes by virtue of their deposit in a university library or their dissemination by a microfilm distributor. For copyright purposes, these were acts of publication with the same legal effect as dissemination through presses, publishers, and societies. (p. 825)

When considered as published works, pre-1978 dissertations would fall into the public domain if the authors did not register copyright, and renew where applicable, and did not include copyright notice in the work. Thirty-three percent of the print titles at UF were published prior to 1978. Of these 4,846 works about half, 2,306, were not yet digitized and did not have copyright notices, placing them in the public domain. Of the yet-to-be-digitized titles, 314 works did have the copyright notice in place, yet only one had renewed their copyright.

With the number of titles falling into the public domain, and with a strong case for fair use to digitize these unique works, the UF libraries created a new opt-out model for dissertation scanning (Fruin, 2011). Efforts would be made to contact all authors as a courtesy, with the understanding that many of their works might already be in the public domain.

## New Outreach Strategies

Our new policies required an author to contact us if they did not want their dissertation made publicly available via the IR@UF. With the previous opt-in model, nonresponse could be interpreted as a desire

to not be included in the project, so additional outreach informing the 1,720 “no reply” authors of the policy change was necessary. This group of authors was our first correspondence under the new policy.

We maintained the three-tier (with e-mail) and two-tier (without e-mail) contact strategies implemented under the opt-in phase. Since nonreply was now implicit approval to place their work online, we established deadlines by which they must indicate if they wanted to opt out of this public access. The deadline was set 90 days after the first correspondence was sent. If the first was e-mail, a letter was scheduled to go out on day 30, and a postcard on day 60 if a reply had not been received. If we did not have a valid e-mail address, the letter was the first correspondence, and a postcard was sent on day 45 to those authors who had not yet replied.

In addition to receipt of signed forms, we also implemented a website that interfaced with our tracking database. From this page ([www.uflib.ufl.edu/mydissertation](http://www.uflib.ufl.edu/mydissertation)), dissertation authors could indicate if they wanted to receive a link to their work once it was digitized, opt out of public access, or see where their work was in the process.

With the implementation of the new opt-out workflow, we also built in a “reasonable search” effort to locate contact information for authors whose work was not in the public domain. Student assistants executed a manual check of unmatched dissertations in comparison with the latest contact information from the alumni association. If that yielded no results, they performed a directed Internet search, using sites such as Google Scholar, LinkedIn, and Web of Science to try to locate contact information.

In order to make our best effort to reach authors for whom we had no contact information after our reasonable search efforts, we posted to a public webpage “a list of the authors and works intended for digitization. If the author /copyright holder does not respond to the public notice within 90 days, the Libraries [would] proceed to digitize and post the dissertation” (Fruin, 2011), and issued press releases about the project and webpage.

## Future Applications

As of October 2018, we completed all outreach efforts for authors with contact information. Under the project we have digitized 11,786 (84%) of our identified doctoral dissertations, with an additional 300 titles

discovered along the way. Fewer than 200 responding authors opted out of public access for their work.

Despite the progress made in scanning dissertations, we have identified other projects that could benefit from the outreach workflow we created. As the digitization of doctoral dissertations winds down, we are preparing to roll out phase two, digitization of over 21,000 masters' theses. We have been able to get contact information from this cohort as well, and we will be building a database similar to the one used to track dissertation scanning and accompanying outreach efforts.

One major difference with the masters' theses scanning is that Clement and Levine's 2011 study focused only on doctoral dissertations, and assumption of publication status did not extend to masters' theses. As such, they likely do not qualify for federal copyright protection. We will be conducting outreach to these authors after their works have been digitized and placed in our IR@UF with access limited to on-campus computers. Authors will be alerted of the opportunity to "free my thesis" for broader public access.

Another use for the contact information we gained from our dissertation scanning project is a new partnership with BiblioLabs, which is providing an opt-in model Print-on-Demand service for our theses and dissertations authors. Our initial outreach for this project is to those authors who responded to our project, whether by e-mail, mail, or via the website.

Finally, we are currently improving our institutional repository platform to enable us to add contact information for authors where (a) the author did not

upload the work and (b) we have a verified e-mail address. The authors from the RDS project are a good example of this group. By adding this contact information, authors can receive monthly usage reports of their items, hopefully encouraging them to remain engaged with their alma mater.

## Takeaways

Based on our experience, we recommend the following considerations when building an outreach strategy:

1. Who is your audience?
2. What is the purpose of contact?
3. Are there copyright considerations?
  - a. How will you handle them?
4. Where will you get contact information?
5. Who will send and monitor correspondence?
6. If sending by U.S. post, how will this be funded?
7. What are acceptable formats for replies?
8. Do you require a paper signature, or is electronic sufficient?
9. What is the timeline for contact?
10. What type of deadlines will you have, if any?
11. Can you think of other uses for this contact strategy?

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