

5-2020

## From Power to Partner: Harnessing institutional digital collections for community archives projects

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### ScholarWorks Citation

Benefiel, Annie, "From Power to Partner: Harnessing institutional digital collections for community archives projects" (2020). *Conference Proceedings*. 12.  
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# From *power* to *partner*

Harnessing institutional digital collections for  
community archives projects

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- Background: Grand Valley State University is a mid-sized comprehensive university near Grand Rapids, Michigan. Special Collections & University Archives (SCUA) is part of the University Library system, and is located in the Seidman House, on the main campus in Allendale. SCUA has about 30,000 rare books, around 2000 linear feet of manuscript collections, and another 1500 or so linear feet of University Archives.
- Staffing: 3 Full-time library faculty
  - Curator of Rare Books & Special Collections,
  - University Archivist & Digital Collections Librarian, and
  - Archivist for Public Services and Community Engagement.
- One full-time support staff member, who primarily works with digital collections and metadata,
- Students: staff our reading room and assist with processing, digital collections, exhibits, and social media.
- Additional support:
  - Metadata & Digital Curation librarian
  - Library Application Developer
  - Web Services Librarian
  - General systems and technology support
- In other words not huge, but also not tiny and unsupported

## Outline

- Digital Collection Development
- Community Archives Collaborations
- Managing Collaborative Collections

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- Quick outline of what this presentation will cover:
  - Digital Collection Development
    - How the scope has evolved over the past 15 or so years
    - How support and technology has changed in the past 10 years
  - Community Archives partnerships and projects
    - Partnerships that have been fruitful on our campus and how those reach into wider communities
    - Building representation for previously unrepresented groups through these partnerships
  - Managing collaborative collections
    - Lessons learned



Images from GVSU Digital Collections: B'nai Israel Collection, Summers in Saugatuck-Douglas collection, Oceana County Migrant Labor History collection

# Digital Collection Development

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- In this section I want to give some background about how the Digital Collections at GVSU have developed over time. Before I proceed, I want to make a few acknowledgments.
- First, I want to acknowledge the work of others in developing GVSU's digital collections. Some of those folks are still working in GV Libraries, and others have moved on to new jobs or happy retirements. All of them had a hand in creating, testing, preserving, and shaping our collections.
- Second, I want to acknowledge that changing direction, especially in archives, takes time.
- And finally I want to acknowledge that building relationships of trust takes time, empathy, and humility. With each new project and community that I interact with, I try to proceed with respect, transparency, and openness to the individuals and groups whose voices, history, and memory is being collected and preserved.

## Evolving Collection Scope

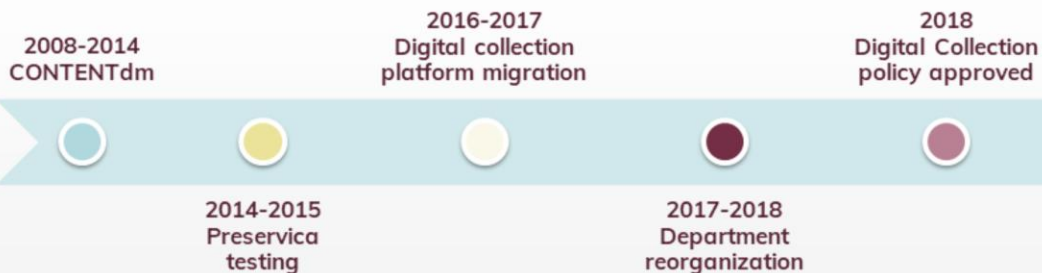


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Evolving Collections Scope: This diagram illustrates how our digital collections have evolved over time through different eras and phases

- Early on, GVSU Special Collections began scanning materials mostly from the rare book collection, focusing on book arts and history of printing
  - Decorative book bindings
  - Incunabula, early books printed before 1501
  - WPA Pine Tree in Michigan, public domain woodcuts
- Then moved towards scanning university history materials
  - Photographs
  - Yearbooks
  - Student newspaper
  - Course catalogs
- Eventually moving into collections relating to veterans and American wars
  - Civil War collection
  - Veterans History Project (this is where we start getting collaborative!)
- And now, we balance digitizing our own collection materials with collaborative partnerships focused around regional community histories
  - Oral history projects
  - History Harvests
  - Cooperative digitization

## Support and Change



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This timeline shows some of the technology and organizational change that occurred as we grew our digital collections.

- We began around 2008 with CONTENTdm and around 2012 hired a Metadata and Digital Curation Librarian who began investigating digital preservation strategies
- Then around 2014 we started testing the Preservica digital preservation system, using both its digital preservation functions as well as testing it as an access system for our digital collections
- With a new Digital Curation Librarian coming on board in 2016, we soon ruled out Preservica as a preferred solution, due to cost, sustainability, and the access needs of our users.
- We then migrated all of our digital collections from CONTENTdm and Preservica into Omeka and ScholarWorks, our Digital Commons institutional repository
- From 2017-2018, we went through some administrative and organizational change, which resulted the responsibility for developing digital collections being more clearly defined.
- Since much of the responsibility shifted to me, one support person, and one faculty fellow with a 3 year term, I took the opportunity to formalize some of the directions we'd been heading into a collection development policy that aligned with some of the library's strategic priorities.



## Policy

Build intentionality and structure around an idea, supporting change over time

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The idea behind the policy, which is linked here, is to build intentionality and structure around the idea of using digital collections to preserve and share primary source materials from otherwise underrepresented communities. My hope is that this structure will support change over time as we continue to build and strengthen relationships in our communities and create, share, and preserve new collections.

[https://www.gvsu.edu/cms4/asset/2DCC49CD-BB97-ABFE-4980FB826D75874A/digital\\_collection\\_policy\\_approved.pdf](https://www.gvsu.edu/cms4/asset/2DCC49CD-BB97-ABFE-4980FB826D75874A/digital_collection_policy_approved.pdf)



The policy outlines a number of selection criteria, and most are fairly standard:

- Selection for digital collections generally follows collecting guidelines for Special Collections and University Archives, focusing on university history and regional history;
- Materials selected for digital collections don't duplicate what's already out there, and available online or in other repositories;
- The collection should align with the curriculum, mission, or strategic directions of the university;
- The rights or permissions to share and preserve the digital materials are clear, or we have a strong Fair Use case;
- Perhaps most importantly, the collection documents the experiences, history, memories, or voices of under-represented communities.

The policy also gives guidelines specifically for collaborative digital collection partnerships:

- Projects follow the selection criteria for digital collections;
- Partners must agree to follow our planning and Memorandum of Understanding process
- Partners agree to follow our specifications for digitization and metadata
- Any grants related to the collaboration must include appropriate funding allocated to the University Libraries to support the ingest, preservation, and maintenance of the collection.





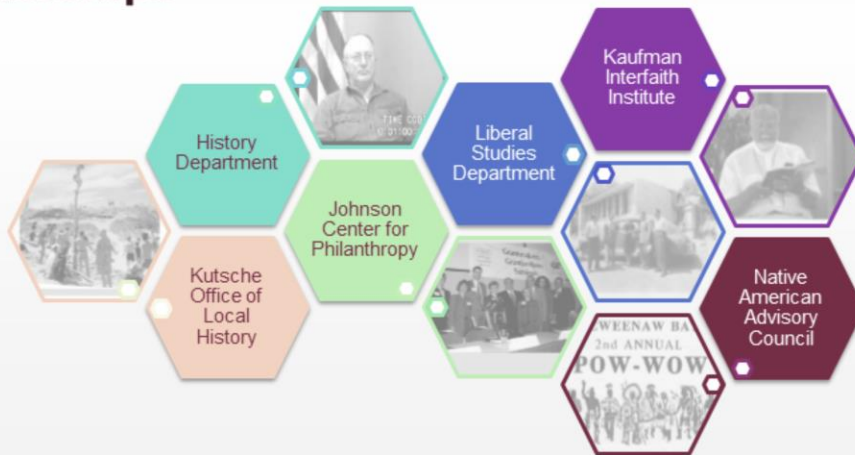
Images from GVSU Digital Collections: Oceana County Migrant Labor History collection

# Community Archives Collaborations

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Since shifting into this new way of collecting, we have fostered relationships with several different departments around GVSU, which has resulted in a number of community digital archives.

## Partnerships



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- The first collaborative digital archive project began with the Veterans History Project, directed by a faculty member in our History Department. The project grew from digitizing a box of old videotaped interviews to recording and providing online access to a collection of over 1400 video interviews.
- Next we connected with faculty and students in the Liberal Studies department, to provide a similar archival home to video oral histories of the Young Lords Organization.
- Other projects and partnerships followed, and we have since had fruitful relationships with the Johnson Center for Philanthropy, the Kaufman Interfaith Institute, Native American Advisory Council, and the Kutsche Office of Local History, which is situated in our college of interdisciplinary studies.
- Each of these partners has its own mission and goals, which occasionally intersect with our own. When these intersections occur, we can harness our strengths and build something together.

## Community Representation



OCEANA COUNTY MIGRANT LABOR HISTORY COLLECTION



SPEAKING OUT: WESTERN MICHIGAN CIVIL RIGHTS ORAL HISTORIES



SUMMERS IN SAUGATUCK-DOUGLAS COLLECTION



YOUNG LORDS IN LINCOLN PARK INTERVIEWS



RICHARD A. RHEM COLLECTION



NATIVE AMERICAN PUBLICATION COLLECTION



B'NAI ISRAEL TEMPLE



MICHIGAN PHILANTHROPY ORAL HISTORY PROJECT INTERVIEWS



OUR STATE OF GENEROSITY



VETERANS HISTORY PROJECT

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- Through these partnerships across campus we have built collections of digital primary sources from the following communities:
  - Muskegon's Jewish community
  - LGBT+ community and summer residents of Saugatuck-Douglas
  - Grand Rapids and West Michigan Civil Rights activists
  - The Young Lords Organization, Chicago's founders and early members of the Puerto Rican and Latinx civil rights and human rights group
  - Michigan's indigenous communities
  - Grand Haven and Spring Lake's interfaith congregation
  - Michigan philanthropists and non-profit organizations
  - Michigan's many military veterans
- A number of these digital collections have been adopted into curriculum and classroom assignments, used in exhibitions, and are taught in library instruction sessions
- We're so grateful to these communities for partnering with us and helping to document the stories of Michigan



Images from GVSU Digital Collections: B'nai Israel Temple Collection

# Managing Collaborative Digital Projects

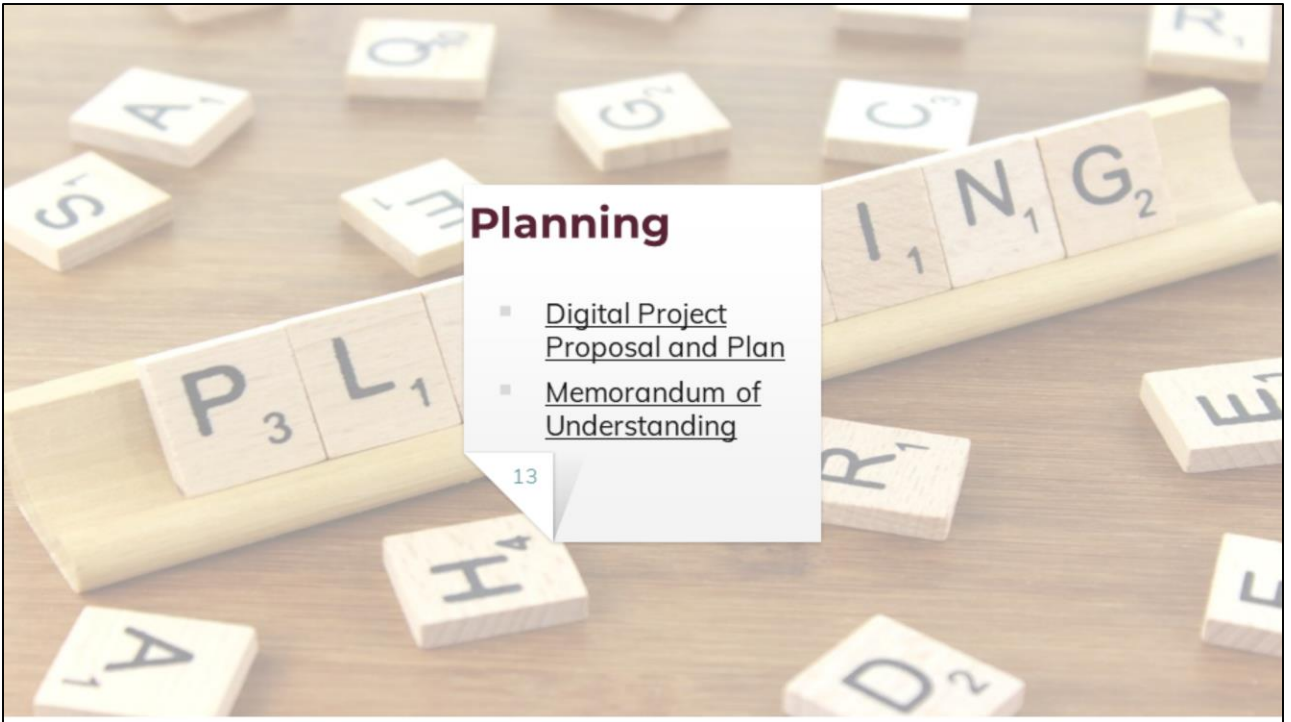
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- At this point, I'd like to shift away from the success we've had with our partnerships and discuss some of the lessons I've learned over the past few years.
- Good management of these projects can help to shift partners' perception of your repository as a "power" to that of a "partner," certainly with expertise and resources to share, but certainly with limitations of budget, staffing, and tech.



- Diagram illustrates digital partnership lifecycle, and each point along the way carries into the next.
- Planning, project management, documentation, and flexibility are all key points on the road to success
- Planning includes
  - Connecting with partners and stakeholders
  - Defining the scope of a project
  - Crafting agreements that outline details of the project, responsibilities and dependencies, required resources, project milestones, timeline, and funding sources
- Project management, often, is where archivists really shine, and includes:
  - Breaking down and assigning discrete tasks to people based on their skills, strengths, and resources
  - Communicating with staffing, partners, and other stakeholders about progress, barriers, etc.
  - Keeping the project moving in a positive direction through organizing information, tracking progress, and communicating effectively
- In the next few slides, I'll share some planning and project management tools that I've used and found helpful in different ways, but first I want to spend a moment talking about flexibility
  - Flexibility has really been a growth area for me personally, and as a practitioner
  - Different communities, lay people, and academic faculty all come to

- these projects with different ideas about scope, success, and purpose
- My approach has always been to be honest and transparent about our repository and institutional mission, what strengths we can bring to a project, and what we can and can't accomplish with the resources we have available.
  - My approach is not always successful! Sometimes potential partners want something we can't realistically deliver, or they find a different partner. That's OK, too!
  - Further, successful projects illustrate your repository's strengths, and your commitment to community archiving
  - Not all projects look the same, and neither does success
    - Even projects that don't necessarily meet early planning definitions of "success," are powerful learning opportunities



- These two links will load tools I use to help plan and manage projects with partners.
  - Proposal: [https://www.gvsu.edu/cms4/asset/2DCC49CD-BB97-ABFE-4980FB826D75874A/digital\\_collection\\_proposal.docx](https://www.gvsu.edu/cms4/asset/2DCC49CD-BB97-ABFE-4980FB826D75874A/digital_collection_proposal.docx)
  - MOU: [https://www.gvsu.edu/cms4/asset/2DCC49CD-BB97-ABFE-4980FB826D75874A/gvsu-lib\\_mou-template.docx](https://www.gvsu.edu/cms4/asset/2DCC49CD-BB97-ABFE-4980FB826D75874A/gvsu-lib_mou-template.docx)
- I typically use the Digital Project Proposal and Plan as a template for a structured conversation with the project partner, to get them thinking about scope, purpose, and details of a particular project. Following the conversation, I use the information recorded to establish a plan, resource needs, estimated timeline and associated funding needs or costs.
- Once I have the plan, I can then loop in library leadership (Associate Dean & Dean) to review and approve it and put together language for a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU).
- The MOU summarizes the plan and timeline, and gives some structure around the agreement for the mutual satisfaction of all partner organizations. We use an MOU template adapted from one created and shared by librarians at the University of Texas at Arlington Libraries



- There are a myriad of project management tools and sites out there. You've probably heard or used one or more of these. But if not:
- Asana – good for small team projects with many associated tasks (personal preference)
  - Task & subtasks
  - Document sharing, commenting, etc.
  - Integrate with other apps and email
  - Timelines/Gantt charts
  - Lots of premium features at higher tiers
  - <https://asana.com/?noredirect>
- Trello – card-based project & task management simulates physical boards
  - Visual approach to project management
  - Project manager & team members can quickly see where various projects are along the workflow
  - <https://trello.com/>
- Basecamp – simple tool for collaboration
  - Document sharing
  - Forums and chat
  - Schedules and automated check-in emails
  - <https://basecamp.com/>
- Plenty of other options – use what works best for you!





# Thank you!

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*Images:*

- *Seidman House, Grand Valley State College, Preliminary Architectural Rendering* by Meathe, Kessler & Associates
- *Seidman House, Architect's drawing of exterior* by Meathe, Kessler & Associates
- Screenshots from [GVSU Digital Collections](#)
- *Planning* by Nick Youngson CC BY-SA 3.0 Alpha Stock Images
- *Graphical Representation of the Project Management Body of Knowledge* by Alexander Budzior CC BY-NC-SA 3.0

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- Thanks for your time. Please reach out if you have questions!