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## Neon in Nevada: A Case Study in Statewide Collaboration

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# Neon in Nevada: A Case Study in Statewide Collaboration

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## ABSTRACT

Neon signs in Nevada capture the spirit of glitzy gambling meccas, boom and bust towns, and frontier settlements that dot the vast geography of this unique state. However, many iconic and hidden signs are in constant danger of disappearing as populations shift and the elements naturally break down the physical aspects of the signs. In addition, neon signs in Reno and remote, Northern Nevada locales have remained relatively undiscovered. UNLV has had a long history of documenting the art of neon and has partnered with the Neon Museum in Las Vegas to preserve this rapidly disappearing cultural heritage. Digital Humanities faculty and Librarians at UNR secured an IMLS grant to partner with UNLV to document and create an archive of images of neon signs in Northern Nevada. Taking this combined expertise, a desire to build partnerships and work together to solve problems and adding the statewide priority of piloting collaborative digital preservation workflows, UNR and UNLV committed to a statewide project that resulted in the successful digital preservation of thousands of neon signs from every corner of Nevada.

The neon signs found in Nevada cities and towns, ranging from sleek gambling meccas to remote mining locales, represent the “last frontier” mentality prevalent during the growth and development of the state throughout the 20th century. Many of the neon signs are, as an artform, recognized worldwide as a symbol of the commercial entertainment and gaming attractions that make up the state’s unique economy.<sup>1</sup> But these signs are at continued risk. Changes in property ownership and new sign technology mean Nevada’s iconic neon signs are disappearing, while the danger of this history fading into obsolescence increases.<sup>2</sup> Although art museums, historical societies, libraries, and nonprofit organizations have made efforts to locate, preserve, and document neon signs in Nevada, the vast distances between institutions, coupled with remote locations and limited resources, have proved a deterrent. The University of Nevada, Reno (UNR) and the University of Nevada, Las

1. Carolyn L Kane, “Neon Visions: From Techno-Optimism to Urban Vice,” *Visual Communication*, June 9, 2020; Jonathan Hoefler and Peter Hall, “Alphabet City,” *ID: The International Design Magazine* 46, no. 6 (October 1999): 76-77.
2. Jeremy Ebersole, “A ‘Noble’ Cause: Neon Signs and the American Preservation Movement,” *Society for Commercial Archeology Journal* 38, no. 2 (Fall 2020): 6-11.

Vegas (UNLV) partnered to assist Nevada memory institutions in gathering documentation of Nevada's neon heritage and to create a digital archive that would expand access far beyond Nevada's borders through the Digital Public Library of America (DPLA).

Nevada's neon signs epitomize a distinct historical visual style that influenced design and commerce for decades.<sup>3</sup> Standing examples of famous neon signs such as the Vegas Vic cowboy, "Welcome to Fabulous Las Vegas Nevada" sign, and Reno Arch are internationally recognized as symbols of Nevada. Because neighborhoods grow and change, however, many neon signs in Nevada are constantly at immediate risk of demolition, while others are being converted to LED lighting, irreparably removing key elements of their historical significance, namely, the craftsmanship of neon construction.<sup>4,5</sup> For years, Nevadans have had a strong interest in preserving and celebrating their unique neon signs.<sup>6</sup> The importance of this art form to Nevadans has motivated some digital curation of neon signs, but efforts have been disparate and uncoordinated. A grassroots effort led by the nonprofit organization Nevada Neon harnessed the power of Nevada elementary students to create and push through a bill in 2019 to make neon the official state element of Nevada.<sup>7</sup> The Neon Museum in Las Vegas collects retired physical signs and has a strong international social media following, but they are limited on how many physical signs they can curate (rescue) and do not currently offer an open digital library. UNLV Libraries has worked with the Neon Museum and other Las Vegas memory institutions to photograph standing signs in southern Nevada and Las Vegas. In addition, they have been digitizing the archived collection of the Young Electric Sign Company, the company responsible for creating many of Nevada's most iconic neon signs (see Figure 1). However, Nevada libraries, historical societies, enthusiasts, and museums can only do so much with the limited resources they have to preserve Nevada's neon heritage.

Although neon in Las Vegas attracts international attention, neon signs in Reno and other northern Nevada locales are still relatively undiscovered. In 2019, project

3. Kane, "Neon Visions."

4. "Community Fights Over Downtown Demolition, Revitalization," *Reno Gazette-Journal*, April 1, 2018, <https://apnews.com/article/afb6d28eaba34302b653e6029040246c>.

5. Madeline Purdue, "Reno Arch Ditches 80s for Silver and Blue," *The Nevada Sagebrush*, February 13, 2018, <https://archive.nevadasagebrush.com/blog/2018/02/13/reno-arch-ditches-80s-for-silver-and-blue/>.

6. "Painstaking Restoration Brings Fallon Neon to Life," *Northern Nevada Business Weekly*, November 3, 2013, <http://www.nnbw.com/news/2013/nov/03/painstaking-restoration-brings-fallon-neon-to-life/>; Mike Higdon, "Neon Sign Flickers Back to Owner," *Reno Gazette-Journal*, February 23, 2017; Don Cox, "Saving Nevada's Neon," *Reno Gazette-Journal*, July 3, 2001.

7. Joey Lovato, "Students Succeed in Making Neon the State Element," *The Nevada Independent*, April 24, 2019, <https://thenevadaindependent.com/article/students-succeed-in-making-neon-the-state-element>.

team members identified hundreds of neon signs scattered throughout northern Nevada that needed to have their images digitally preserved. These locations are hundreds of miles apart and would be impossible for a curator to access within the confines of a weekend excursion. Nevada encompasses 110,000 square miles of rugged terrain (for comparison, the British Isles total 120,000 square miles, and the United Kingdom is only 93,000). There are fewer than 100 towns and cities in this huge geographical area, and most of them have a population less than 1,500 people. In fact, Nevada only has one city outside of the Las Vegas metro area with a population of more than 100,000 (Reno). Many of the towns that boomed in the early-mid 20th century have become ghost towns with lonely neon signs reminding the occasional traveler that people used to live and thrive in that area (see Figure 2). The distances are so vast, and many of the towns are so remote, that the project team decided to essentially split the state in half for this project: UNLV continued to focus on southern Nevada and Las Vegas, while UNR gathered images of neon signs from northern Nevada towns.



Figure 1. A worker is shown with the head of Vegas Vic, an iconic Las Vegas sign that was originally created for the Pioneer Club on Fremont Street. This image was taken prior to having the neon tubing installed. *Photograph of worker with Vegas Vic's head in the YESCO shop (Salt Lake City), 1951* (sky000493), Young Electric Sign Company Corporate Records, 1957-2001, MS-00403, Special Collections and Archives, UNLV University Libraries, <http://n2t.net/ark:/62930/d16688zop>.



Figure 2. Signs for Sue's Motel, likely installed in the 1950s, still sit on the now abandoned property in Mina, Nevada. *Sue's Motel mounted signs, Mina, Nevada* (NNN000899), Northern Nevada Neon Photograph Collection, PH-00439, Special Collections and Archives, UNLV University Libraries, <http://nzt.net/ark:/62930/d1ft8hpiv>.

## Nevada's Statewide Collaboration

Within the rural Nevada communities exists a desire to build partnerships and work together to solve problems, but the challenges of geography extend to library and memory organization collaboration. Central to tackling these issues, the Nevada State Library, Archives and Public Records (NSLAP), located in Carson City, Nevada, has consistently supported collaborative work as well as the idea of a statewide digital library that could overcome geographical limitations and co-locate materials through

the power of technology. Jason Vaughan wrote a detailed analysis of the work initiated in 2008 to form the Nevada Statewide Digital Advisory Committee.<sup>8</sup> This effort was led by external consultants and resulted in a Statewide Digital Plan that contained a survey of digital activities, as well as a newly formed governance structure and working groups focused on metadata and content.<sup>9</sup> It was recognized that many organizations were actively digitizing content but lacked support in the technical infrastructure for capture and online access, education on applying interoperable metadata standards, and providing sustainable digital storage and preservation. The statewide committee had some success, and in 2010, UNLV worked to create a proof-of-concept statewide portal in Omeka to demonstrate one potential path to access via harvesting, but due to several external factors (budget cuts and the last recession most critically), the project slowly lost momentum and engagement. The statewide digital library project languished and lost momentum. To this day, collaboration needs persist, most notably unifying a search interface for disparate resources and addressing critical digital preservation needs, but no lead entity has succeeded in building a statewide portal.

The NSLAP has an organizational mandate and long history of providing much needed support for digitization through their administration of the federal Institute of Library and Museum Services (IMLS)-funded Library Services and Technology Act (LSTA) state grant program.<sup>10</sup> Both UNR and UNLV have leveraged this program to access funds for projects, and in 2016, UNLV applied for a large-scale image digitization grant that included a component of sharing the lessons learned with colleagues across the state. This project featured a statewide digital symposium with education sessions on purchasing digitization/camera equipment, metadata for high efficiency, copyright, online access, digital preservation, and grants. The in-person workshop was assessed as part of the grant, and, seeing that the attendees found a high level of value in the sessions, UNLV applied for a follow-up grant the next year (2017) for another manuscript collections large-scale digitization project with the accompanying statewide workshop. The second workshop responded to feedback from the first attendees and was geared to be more hands-on and to address the expressed need to build collaborations across the state. But there is only so much that can happen in a one-off session. While UNLV and UNR have both contributed to the regional aggregators, Mountain West Digital Library and Digital Public Library of America, neither of these networks provide digital preservation services.<sup>11</sup> Networked

8. Jason Vaughan, "Toward a Nevada Digital Collaborative" *Journal of Western Archives* 2, no. 1 (October 2011): 27, <https://digitalcommons.usu.edu/westernarchives/vol2/iss1/4>
9. "Collaborative Digital Projects," Lyrasis, accessed January 2023, <https://www.lyrasis.org/services/Pages/Digital-Toolbox-Collaborative-Digitization.aspx>.
10. "LSTA Projects Funded," 2014-2020, Nevada State Library, Archives and Public Records (NSLAPR), accessed January 2023, <https://nsla.nv.gov/projects-funded/home>.
11. "Mountain West Digital Library," accessed January 2023, <https://mwdl.org/>; "Digital Public Library of America," accessed January 2023, <https://dp.la/>.

digital libraries like these are also grappling with their own funding and sustainability challenges as they look at different models to increase participation at a reasonable cost for a diverse group of organizations. With no shared repository, no common best practices across the state, and very little practical work to test communication and workflows, the state had a prime opportunity to design a project that explored solutions.

In 2019, UNR applied for a LSTA grant from IMLS through NSLAP that would specifically pilot work on a shared disciplinary research collection (neon signs) and create online access using a shared metadata model with UNLV. Both institutions would also leverage each of their unique strengths. The grant was awarded in May 2020 and began in August 2020.

## UNR Imaging and Project Role

Once the grant started, UNR held several roles in the project, including overseeing the grant, organizing all collaborators, overseeing the collection and curation of images, processing the images, determining copyright status, and creating the public-facing website built on top of UNLV's repository where the images are housed. The initial project team consisted of two librarians, a typography expert from the UNR Reynolds School of Journalism, and a history professor who specializes in digital humanities. The team changed slightly as the team lead left the university during the project and transitioned to work on the grant in a more focused capacity. An additional librarian joined the UNR team to oversee marketing and outreach. The grant paid for a part-time staff position to process the images, as well as a student position to assist with marketing, which included running an Instagram account and writing promotional pieces for the collection and related events.

The main goal of the project was to not only bring together existing images of signs spread out across Nevada's vast and empty geography but to also photograph images of signs without known documented visuals and create a website that would better allow neon design researchers and the broader public to access and interact with these images based on specialized metadata. Another initial goal was to celebrate and promote the collection and website at the end of the project with a one-day symposium open to researchers and amateur neon enthusiasts.

The plan for collecting existing images involved contacting various known people and groups with large collections of images of neon signs. These included the Nevada Historical Society (NHS), which owned historical prints (see Figure 3), as well as images taken as part of *Neon in Nevada: A Survey of Contemporary and Historic Neon Signs in Nevada*, conducted in 1986 by Chelsea Miller for the Nevada Division of Historic Preservation and Archaeology. The NHS agreed to digitize their images and make them available to UNR as part of the project. Another major contribution of images was provided by Peter Laufer and Sheila Swan, a couple who published *Neon Nevada*, a book of images they took of Nevadan neon signs during the 1990s and

again in 2011.<sup>12</sup> The project also included images of neon signs in the Reno area photographed by students as part of a UNR journalism class.



Figure 3. *Various signs along Douglas Alley, Reno, Nevada: photographic print, 1940* (NNN00208), Northern Nevada Neon Photograph Collection, PH-00439, Special Collections and Archives, UNLV University Libraries, <https://special.library.unlv.edu/node/545804>.

Although the contributed images make up an important portion of the collection, the vast majority of images (roughly 1,700) ultimately came from those photographed specifically for the project. We commissioned a photographer after discovering how poorly documented these signs were. A number of signs' only documentation in our collection exists as a result of these commissioned images. By commissioning a

12. Peter Laufer and Sheila Swan, *Neon Nevada* (Guilford, CT: Globe Pequot Press, 2011).



knowledgeable and experienced neon photographer to canvas Northern Nevada for neon signs, we could better ensure a high-quality creation of records for all of these at-risk signs, not just the most well-known or easily accessible ones.

This approach helped ease determining the copyright status of images in our collection. We were able to determine that all images in the 1986 survey were most likely in the public domain, and the images taken by journalism students already included Creative Commons licenses. We also agreed with our photographer to include a Creative Commons-Attribution-Non Commercial license with the newly captured images, whereas our agreement with Laufer and Swan allowed us to include the images with all rights reserved.

Ultimately, we processed 2,135 images and created 1,125 records, which have been added to the existing online collection of images and records covering neon signs found in Southern Nevada and already housed by UNLV. Because these images are now preserved together, our web developer was able to include all of them on the website, NeonInNevada.org. The website includes all images from the project as well as any in UNLV's digital collections that could be identified as containing neon signs with specialized metadata to allow neon researchers greater control in searching the collections. The website also includes several online exhibits created around various themes, such as "Small Town Glow" and "Reno Motels and Their Neon Signs" to help the average user better understand the context of these images, as well as a map viewer that allows users to explore the collection geographically. The website will remain up for at least five years; long-term preservation of the images will be ensured by the ongoing maintenance of UNLV's online repository.

## UNLV Neon Surveys and Project Role

While UNR focused on curating and processing the images, UNLV focused on preservation and integrating the new project with earlier work. In the early 2000s, UNLV's Special Collections and Archives staff revisited a Neon Survey conducted in the 1990s by the Gaming Research Center in the southern section of the state to photograph at-risk signs and create a digital archive of neon. This original website was in need of updating and created an opportunity for UNLV to involve a new cultural heritage partner, The Neon Museum, which did not exist during the first iteration of the survey. In 2019, the partners set a goal to create a new snapshot of neon in Southern Nevada. To do this, UNLV collaborated with museum docents to identify at-risk signs to be photographed and created Sign Data Sheets that were the basis of metadata for the project. This project also incorporated undergraduate photography students who were supervised by UNLV faculty and Special Collections staff to go out in the community and perform this creative work as part of neon documentation teams. UNLV undergraduate students photographed 111 signs, taking over 625 total photographs. An additional student assistant cleaned up legacy data for the project and added 951 photos, 74 informational documents, and compliant metadata for all 237 signs.

Several of the signs that students photographed have since been removed from businesses and cannot be viewed at their previous locations. These removed signs can only be viewed in the digital collections (see Figure 4). This was a powerful experience for the students involved as they participated in cultural heritage preservation in real time and gained new insights into the role they played in capturing history and depositing it in an archive.



Figure 4. The Starlite Motel sits at 1873 North Las Vegas Boulevard. Shortly after this photo was taken, the sign was scrubbed of its neon and made dormant. *Photographs of Starlite Motel at Dusk, Las Vegas (Nev.), March 17, 2017* (ne0000134), Southern Nevada Neon Survey Records, PH-00401, Special Collections and Archives, UNLV University Libraries, <http://n2t.net/ark:/62930/d1pc2thir>.

With these two southern Neon Surveys integrated, updated, and launched online at UNLV, UNR's work dovetailed nicely. Both UNR and UNLV teams felt strongly that users would benefit from seeing all of Nevada's digital collections on neon in one searchable interface, and researchers would also benefit from better long-term preservation of these digital asset. A centralized repository for the digital assets would be possible if UNR prepared their data to UNLV specifications, allowing for the

ingest of their images into UNLV's repository. During the same period UNR completed work on the "Neon in Nevada" grant, UNLV worked to launch a new open-source preservation and access repository to act as a robust backend that could support digital asset lifecycles as well as disciplinary digital humanities projects such as the UNR Neon in Nevada website. As a result, neon survey photos are now integrated with photos, architecture drawings, and data from other archival collections, such as UNLV's Young Electric Sign Company Corporate Records (YESCO) collection, MS-00403. Equally critically, all the digital assets are being preserved with technical workflows that ensure the ongoing health of the collections. The UNLV portal is built with a Fedora backend, Islandora 8 (Drupal) frontend, and is linked to Amazon Web Services. UNLV's born-digital best practices have been applied to this project as UNLV is hosting UNR's digital objects and metadata without physical counterparts locally, assigning the digital assets to the highest level of UNR's tiered digital preservation policy. Adding the images to the UNLV portal in addition to the project website opened two valuable possibilities: The content is also harvested to the Digital Public Library of America via UNLV's membership with the Mountain West Digital Library, making the images more visible alongside other state digital collections, and the data served as an initial test case in UNLV's pilot digital preservation program.

One of the key needs expressed in statewide collaboration meetings was the gap in skills and experience with digital preservation across the state. This gap is challenging to address in all cases but is especially difficult for smaller organizations or those that do not have direct access and/or control of their information technology infrastructure. UNR volunteered to test drive a digital preservation workflow with UNLV to uncover questions that may arise if digital preservation someday becomes a collaborative project or service that more established repositories can offer to smaller institutions.

This project highlights the mutual advantages of collaboration. The UNR site features neon images from across the state, and the DAMS (digital assets management system) site serves as the central repository of all Nevada neon sign images and their metadata. UNR's team was able to develop a custom website using an API to pull their content from UNLV's portal into a digital exhibit that showcases specific research aspects of the collection. This demonstrates how UNLV's main repository, where all the raw material is stored, can support more custom digital humanities projects developed by disciplinary experts.

## Project Issues

Although we consider the overall project a success, we did encounter several challenges, including the COVID-19 pandemic and the distinct metadata needs of neon researchers.

## COVID-19

One of the biggest issues we dealt with during the project was the COVID-19 pandemic, which hit a few months before the grant was awarded. Initially we did not expect the pandemic to affect too much of the project since much of our work could be conducted remotely and we hoped that the pandemic would have receded by the next summer when we were planning to host our one-day symposium.

However, one of our project partners, who was initially planned to serve as our commissioned photographer as well as the designer of the frontend of our website, faced travel restrictions in returning to the United States and then had to greatly reduce their role in the project because of health issues. In response, we brought in another project collaborator outside the universities, a local neon expert and schoolteacher who took multiple road trips to photograph neon signs in several northern Nevada locations (see Figures 5 and 6). While we had planned on having all images collected no later than March 2021, various delays meant this aspect of the project was not completed until June 2021, which in turn delayed other steps of the project. Responsibility for all website development shifted, which meant we had to pare down our plans for the website. This included exploring how we could improve expanded metadata to better aid discoverability and interaction for neon researchers.



Figure 5. *Ranch Inn Motor Lodge sign, Elko, Nevada: photographic print (NNN000332), Northern Nevada Neon Photograph Collection, PH-00439, Special Collections and Archives, UNLV University Libraries, <http://n2t.net/ark:/62930/d1c24tf9k>.*



Figure 6. The Pig BBQ & Pub wall mounted signs, Winnemucca, Nevada (NNN000768), Northern Nevada Neon Photograph Collection, PH-00439, Special Collections and Archives, UNLV University Libraries, <http://nzt.net/ark:/62930/d16h4gvod>.

We had also hoped to travel to various rural libraries, museums, and historical societies to work with them to digitize neon sign images in their collection that they would then submit to our project. However, COVID-19 again prevented this. We instead contacted these organizations by email and invited them to digitize any images they had and then send them by depositing them into a Box folder we created. Response was fairly low to these messages, with three organizations submitting a total of 78 images, many of which we were not able to use. Because we did not hear from most of the organizations we contacted, it is hard to say why they did not participate; however, a likely culprit was again the COVID-19 pandemic. Nevada enacted a number of restrictions on public establishments and cut the state budget in the summer of 2020.<sup>13</sup> Many government entities had to initiate hiring freezes during that year. All of this likely affected the ability of rural libraries, museums, and

13. James DeHaven, "Skip the Special Session? Here's What You Missed," *Reno Gazette-Journal*, July 29, 2020; Peggy Santoro, "Timeline: Tracking the Story of COVID-19 in Nevada," *Reno Gazette-Journal*, March 7, 2021.

historical societies, often already strapped for resources, to be able to take part in this project.

## COVID-19 and Outreach

Perhaps the pandemic's largest impact was on our outreach efforts. We realized by January 2021 that planning for a large, in-person symposium that July would be impossible due to the pandemic and instead switched gears to planning several smaller virtual events. These included three Zoom sessions aimed at children to teach them about neon and neon signs. To continue to include an interactive component, we created activity bags that contained stickers and magnets with images from our collection as well as wooden discs that we engraved (using a laser cutter from our makerspace) with some of the neon signs that could be used as ornaments. The packs also included markers and waxy cloth strips that children could use to decorate the wooden discs and turn them into ornaments. People who registered for these sessions were instructed to pick up activity packs from the local public library, which agreed to assist us in distributing the supplies for the event. The main branch of the public library in Reno also set up a large screen so that children there could take part in one of the three sessions. These sessions were led by our local neon expert and schoolteacher who also led the initiative of school children to have neon proclaimed as Nevada's state element. He incorporated lessons about neon signs while leading the children in an activity to decorate their own "neon" sign ornaments.

As part of the project, an online panel of project partners and neon experts was produced in July 2021, with participants discussing the importance of neon to Nevada's cultural heritage, as well as project milestones. A video of the panel discussion is included on the project website (<https://neoninnevada.org/video>).

Assessment of these events was difficult to conduct as we realized multiple people took part through just one Zoom account, meaning any attendance numbers we collected through Zoom were low. We believe about 18 children took part in the three activity sessions, and at least 29 people watched the panel discussion. Overall, outreach efforts were much more limited than we initially planned. However, considering the circumstances we faced, we felt the pivot to virtual outreach at least allowed us a way to connect with and promote the collection to neon researchers, amateur enthusiasts, and children.

## Metadata Needs

Another challenge this project faced was creating a common metadata standard, balancing the need for uniformity and portability with the desires of curators and users to search and retrieve rich descriptive data that required disciplinary expertise and customization of metadata elements and values. Part of the initial goal of this project was to explore enhanced metadata that went beyond the standard Dublin Core and would address facets specific to neon signs and those who research them.

As part of our processing of images, we included separate fields indicating whether a sign was lit or unlit, inside or outside, the time of day, the manufacturer of the sign, and the owner of the sign. However, we had to still work within the rules and parameters of UNLV's repository, which uses a metadata application profile built of elements from the Dublin Core Metadata Initiative and the Portland Common Data Model.<sup>14</sup> These standards support the creation, normalization, and reuse of data within the linked data RDF triplestore in UNLV's Special Collections and Archives Portal but were not designed with specialized researchers in mind. Because of timing and funding constraints, UNR opted to add the information from their additional fields to the record's description field for the UNLV repository.

All data from this project was initially ingested into the UNLV repository for preservation and for access via the API for further web development projects. However, we kept separate metadata for the enhanced research website which separated them out as individual fields for search queries. Because of this, our web developer was able to include them as separate filters that users can select in their search results on the enhanced website built on top of the UNLV datastore.

Search results were further enhanced by using machine learning to allow users to filter images by color. This is not perfect, however, since some individual dots in an image might be coded as blue in order to help the overall area appear as another color. The computer is not always able to tell the difference, which can be confusing to users. Only the images processed as part of the grant included the extra metadata that allows for this function to operate. These extra fields were not added to images already part of UNLV's collections. Fortunately, our web developer was able to create a computer program to parse out some of this information, usually from the title and description fields, so that they could reside in individual fields. This allowed us to include the interactive map on the website.

While we were able to use the website to provide more detailed metadata created specifically for neon signs, we acknowledge that much remains to be done in this area. Our work was limited; for instance, we were not able to get as much input from neon researchers as we would have liked. One potential area for future exploration could be making use of linked data and Wikidata.

## Areas of Future Research and Collaboration

With many organizations working on digitization and digital humanities projects that bring unique research collections out of the archives and into the digital realm, digitization programs, historians, librarians, and archivists have begun to work strategically to develop and mature collaborative programs that support this type of

14. "DCMI Metadata Terms," Dublin Core Metadata Initiative, accessed January 2023, <https://www.dublincore.org/specifications/dublin-core/dcmi-terms/>; "Portland Common Data Model," DuraSpace, accessed January 2023, <https://pcdm.org/2016/04/18/models>.

work.<sup>15</sup> The case study of the Nevada Neon Project provides several lessons on where Nevada specifically, and possibly others beyond its borders, can focus attention and future research. We identified three areas as particularly critical for additional work:

### Low-Resource Libraries as the New Normal

Libraries and collaborative cultural heritage partners were experiencing staff shortages, lowered funding, and existential challenges in the years leading up to the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, but the precarity and uncertainty that still challenge our organizations has resulted in a sustained state of scarcity and risk. Some of the main areas where low resources affect collaborative projects are:

- Unstable staffing and labor markets; high turnover, hiring freezes, and unfilled vacancies
- Workload considerations for existing staff; difficult ethical scenarios of using contingent labor for ongoing or core functional work
- More competition for external funding from granting agencies and donors to support new projects
- Less funding in budgets to maintain or sustain technology and ongoing costs of digital projects and digital archives work
- Less professional development and travel opportunities and funding to connect people and skills to build capacity

To overcome low-resource libraries as our new normal, libraries must work to identify strengths, partners, and communities so that none of us have to do it all and none of us have to do it alone. By combining resources, we can do more and leverage resources to go further. Leaders need to model this behavior and encourage the space to build collaboration and invest in the time needed to establish new ways of working.

We will also need to continue to make extremely difficult decisions on priorities. On a positive note, because of this increased focus on prioritization, many libraries have engaged in reflection and recommitment to projects that really matter. In some cases, this has meant new efforts to conduct projects focused on surfacing underrepresented voices, collections documenting diverse communities, or materials that are of highest interest and research value to their primary user groups.

### Building Stronger Communication Channels

In a low-resource environment, effective communication is often the first casualty of workers under increased stress. There are simply too many emails piling

15. Ricky Erway and Jennifer Schaffner, "Shifting Gears: Gearing Up to Get Into the Flow" OCLC Programs and Research (January 2007), [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/228967842\\_Shifting\\_gears\\_Gearing\\_up\\_to\\_get\\_into\\_the\\_flow](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/228967842_Shifting_gears_Gearing_up_to_get_into_the_flow).



up, or too many critical tasks that need to be completed in too little time. Broken or ineffective communication is the single most dangerous risk to collaborative projects, resulting in inefficiency, stalled productivity, and/or the failure to complete deliverables or meet deadlines. To counteract these risks:

- Project communication needs to be considered as a key component in planning of a project; don't leave it as an afterthought to be figured out after the grant is funded or the project team is in place.
- Take advantage of tools that can communicate messages efficiently and capture documentation and decisions in a central place that can be equitably accessed by all project partners. Grant application materials, timelines, project team checklists, and progress on tasks should be visible with frequent updates.
- Problems and delays should be expected; build in margins for extra time, remedying mistakes, or rework.
- Reframe accountability expectations from prioritizing perfection and completion of goals to prioritizing group communication and problem-solving; when things get rough, committing to checking in and working in coordination with the team.

### Ambiguous Roles when Mapping Digital Humanities Work to Project Teams

Digital projects offer amazing opportunities for collaboration across a wide range of disciplines. These spaces are exciting, innovative, and creative and can be a laboratory for learning about research methods, data, technology tools, and communication styles. But their novelty in some organizations can also mean that this work is not well mapped to current roles and responsibilities. There can be a "hot potato syndrome" where a project is punted to multiple staff members or departments. Sometimes the project dies a slow death while well-intentioned professionals struggle to find a way to say "yes" (e.g., formally approach project development) or say "no" (e.g., outline exactly what expectations the partner can count on with the current library capacity or services).

Actions that could be used but require additional research or investigation to help develop a better approach include:

- Designate a central point of contact for communication rather having requests come in to multiple people through multiple channels.
- Create a menu of supported services and contact information for the staff members.
- Create space for projects that do not "fit" established services or roles; this might be an annual process to review pilot projects, or a committee that

meets to discuss interdisciplinary grant projects or digital humanities projects.

- Create a collaboration partnership expectations document; this may be as simple as a MOU or more nuanced to include roles, communications methods, expectations on how to work together, or how credit will be distributed.

## Conclusion

Although many enthusiasts and memory institutions have made disparate efforts to digitally preserve localized images of neon signs in Nevada, this project is the first attempt at a partnership to create a statewide repository of images of neon signs from all over the state. This project required creating collaborations outside the libraries, reaching out to community partners and seeking support from various academic departments. It is an example of how academic libraries can also partner with academic departments in developing digital humanities programs.

Larger institutions such as UNLV and UNR can combine their resources to support other grassroots efforts to preserve Nevada's cultural heritage. Overcoming challenges brought about by COVID-19 and coordinating a new metadata standard required intensive communication between the two institutions and their multiple partners. In the future, renewed efforts to focus on projects that benefit smaller libraries and underrepresented communities will be ideal since the post-COVID world has left the state with dwindling resources.