

Western Waters Digital Library

Building a Multi-State Aggregated Collection Using CONTENTdm®

<http://westernwaters.org>

Scope of the project:

Years of drought, increasing pollution, and unprecedented population growth have raised concern about the allocation and distribution of water in the American West. The Western Waters Digital Library (WWDL) is a two-year pilot project to begin developing a comprehensive digital information resource about water in the western U.S., and to help westerners manage their water resources wisely. In the current phase twelve academic libraries in eight western states are developing and hosting digital collections covering four major river basins: the Platte, Rio Grande, Colorado, and Columbia. Selected materials include a variety of government reports, legal transcripts, water project records, historical and aerial photographs, maps, and personal papers, representing a variety of formats. The metadata from the geographically dispersed collections are harvested by a CONTENTdm Multi-Site Server at the University of Utah to enable virtual, seamless searching of all the collections from a single web site. Geographic coverage and institutional participation will increase as the project develops.

Launched in 2003, the project is led by Greater Western Library Alliance and funded by a grant from the Institute of Museum and Library Services. Currently, sample digital collections from Oregon State University, University of Oregon, University of Utah, University of Washington, and Washington State University are available to search and browse on the central site.

Project participants have agreed to contribute a minimum of 1400 images per institution for the first two years of the project. They have agreed to acquire CONTENTdm software (or partner with another institution) and mount collections of appropriate digital resources. They have also agreed to follow the Western States Dublin Core Metadata Best Practices, developed by the Western States Digital Standards Group.

The Greater Western Library Alliance (GWLA) is a consortium of thirty research libraries located in the greater Midwest & Western U.S. with common interests in programs related to scholarly communication, interlibrary loan, shared electronic resources, cooperative collection development, digital libraries, staff development and continuing education.

Project activities:

The project coordinator for each institution participates in monthly conference calls moderated by the WWDL Project Manager, and also contributes quarterly reports. Information among participants is also shared via a closed-subscription discussion list, at ALA conference meetings, and on a password-controlled section of the central web site.

Selected materials are currently being digitized and uploaded to distributed local servers, and metadata are harvested by the server at University of Utah. Resulting hits from a central search link users to the local server where the digital objects or collections are hosted. This method allows local customization and clear identification of the materials' owning institution.

A newly-formed metadata task force has begun to investigate adherence to project metadata standards.

The Greater Western Library Alliance's Digital Projects Task Force provides oversight for WWDL on a macro level and is investigating future grant opportunities. A second two-year grant application has been submitted to the NEH to support the project.

Challenges

- **Metadata:** Although project participants have agreed to abide by the Western States Dublin Core Metadata Best Practices there is a great deal of interpretation in the application of the standard.
- **Searching aggregated metadata:** Developing effective search mechanisms and granularity across collections is complicated, and requires strict adherence to metadata standards.
- **Selection of content:** Discussions about the target audience and expected outcomes for the project have informed project participants' identification of suitable content for the project. However, there has so far been limited cross-institutional collection development.
- **Communication:** Consortia are fragile and open communication is imperative to success. Project participants enjoy a great deal of flexibility and autonomy in their approach to WWDL. Since most work is done within the framework of local institutions, it is taking time for some participants to move from the model of prioritizing and completing work in isolation to that of contributing to the group process.
- **Technology:** CONTENTdm is new to many participants and expertise with the software varies. Misconceptions about the software's capability exist, and distinctions must be made about issues with the software vs. issues with metadata and interface construction.
- **Consortia funding models:** Granting agencies appreciate consortia projects, but the lead university's indirect costs requirements for administering those projects can significantly reduce funds allocated to each participant.

Opportunities:

Widening use of metadata standard (and testing, too – “informing” the standards)

Collectively digitize more types of material

Develop consensus on methods for presenting different types of material.

Improve CONTENTdm software by providing consortia feedback to DiMeMa Inc.

Next steps:

Recommend changes to metadata and input

Revise website search interface

Coordinate collection development policy

Make more contacts to comply with Outcomes Based Evaluation (OBE).

Conduct usability studies

Seek additional funding

Establish formal CONTENTdm user group to provide feedback to DiMeMa Inc.

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