

Y'ALL Means All: Piloting a Distributed Digitization Program to Support Digital Diversity

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Abstract:

Louisiana State University Libraries applied for a 2022 LYRASIS Catalyst Fund grant to fund “Y'ALL Means All: Piloting a Distributed Digitization Program to Support Digital Diversity” to advance digital inclusion for small and under-funded cultural heritage institutions by creating a permanent regional digitization hub in central Louisiana. This was to build on the work accomplished by the Louisiana Heritage Digitization Award (formerly the You Are Louisiana’s Legacy, or Y’ALL, award), in which LSU Libraries works with smaller cultural heritage institutions to digitize their holdings and share them in the Louisiana Digital Library.



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Goals

LSU Libraries is the technical home of the Louisiana Digital Library (LDL), which gathers and showcases the digital cultural heritage of over thirty institutions across Louisiana. Unlike many state-wide digital libraries, nearly all participating institutions rely on the LDL as their sole means of displaying their digital collections online. Because of this, the LDL is a distributed system, allowing each institution to select, upload and describe its own content.

We know there are many valuable, at-risk collections which cannot be added to the LDL because their institutions lack the equipment and staffing to digitize, describe, and upload the content. These institutions may also find paying the \$700 LDL membership fee to be a challenge. Due to climate change and budget cuts, many of these collections face increasing risk of being lost in the future. In addition, the LDL does an imperfect job of correctly representing the state of Louisiana because larger, more resourced institutions, mainly located in the southeastern part of the state, contribute most of the content. As LaBeaud and Lawrence (2013) said of the Mississippi Digital Library, the LDL “is as diverse as the participating institutions” (p. 2).

The intention of the “Y’ALL Means All” project was to leverage the strong ties within the LDL community to facilitate broader representation of the state’s digital cultural heritage by helping small institutions digitize and share their content. The LDL team at LSU Libraries worked with a team at Louisiana State University of Alexandria (LSUA), and later with a team at Louisiana State University Shreveport (LSUS) to set up a regional digitization hub to make digitization equipment and staff expertise available locally to cultural heritage institutions in a geographic area not currently served by these resources.

“Y’ALL Means All” builds on current initiatives. LSU Libraries currently offers the Louisiana Heritage Digitization Award (formerly the Y’ALL Award) to expand participation in the LDL by sharing digitization equipment and expertise with under-resourced libraries, archives, and museums. The award’s former name was intended to gesture toward the project’s focus on community. “Y’ALL” is not only an inclusive and regional plural pronoun, but an acronym for the award’s motto: You Are Louisiana’s Legacy. While we have changed the name after feedback from partners that the word “y’all” can easily be read as othering, the goal of greater inclusion of the full Louisiana community is still at its core. The Louisiana Heritage Digitization Award is open to any state heritage institution with a preference toward collections that are inclusive of communities that have been historically underrepresented in cultural heritage repositories.



The Y'ALL Means All project is intended to expand the digitization capacity in the state and decentralize LSU in Baton Rouge as the principal actor. Funds from this grant allowed us to purchase equipment for a community-focused digitization space in a second location: Louisiana State University of Alexandria, situated in central Louisiana, an area that is both rich in cultural history and currently geographically underrepresented in LDL collections.

Process

In March of 2023 LSU Libraries staff members set up two digitization stations at the Bolton Library at Louisiana State University of Alexandria (LSUA). One station consisted of an Epson Expression 12000XL flatbed scanner with a transparency adapter and a PC. The second station consisted of a Canon EOS 5DS DSLR camera, a copystand with lighting, and a PC. Where the flatbed scanner is suited to unbound, flat materials, as well as film and other transparencies, the camera and copystand are suited to oversized items as well as large bound items, giving the digitization space the ability to handle a variety of materials.

We coordinated with the staff of Bolton Library as the University Archivist worked with community partners, including local public libraries and a local history museum to identify materials for digitization. While we set up the equipment, the community partners delivered their materials to the library. We spent a week digitizing items belonging to Bolton library's community partners and training the University Archivist in the use of the digitization equipment. These materials included, but were not limited to, WWII era newspapers from a nearby military base, newsletters from the local public library, as well as public library photo collections.

Our agreement with LSUA's Bolton Library was that we would train them in the use of the digitization equipment and assist with some digitization the week that we delivered and set up the digitization stations. The University Archivist at LSUA would then, in conjunction with community partners, describe the digitized items in a way that allowed for inclusion within the Louisiana Digital Library.

Unfortunately staffing changes at Bolton Library, specifically the departure of the University Archivist, made it impossible for them to maintain the regional digitization hub in the ways we had agreed, in addition to no longer having the staff to describe community materials in a way that would allow for their inclusion in the Louisiana Digital Library.

Given these changes, we evaluated other potential sites for the regional digitization hub and decided to move it to Louisiana State University Shreveport (LSUS), located in northwest



Libraries

Louisiana, about two hours northwest of Alexandria. Like central Louisiana, the northern part of the state is underrepresented in the LDL, and given our connection within the LSU system, it made sense to change the location of the regional digitization hub to Noel Memorial Library at LSUS.

In November of 2023, after agreement from our new partners at Noel Memorial Library, we transferred the scanner, camera, and PCs from LSUA to LSUS. Because LSUA had chosen to use a camera copystand they already owned, we used some of the remaining grant funds to purchase a new copystand and lighting for the camera. This equipment was set up in a dedicated room, and preliminary training was given to Noel Memorial Library staff, with an open-ended plan to provide further support when the library partnered with nearby cultural heritage institutions to digitize and describe their holdings.

Accomplishments

Despite unexpected changes in location, staffing, and community partners, we were able to create a digitization hub in an underserved area of the state. Our ongoing conversations with and planned support for the staff of Noel Memorial Library at Louisiana State University Shreveport give them the equipment and support needed to partner with under-funded and under-served cultural heritage institutions in northwest Louisiana, an area underrepresented in the Louisiana Digital Library.

We had planned to focus on central Louisiana, but by utilizing our partnership with LSUS we were still able to place a digitization hub nearer to the central part of the state than the Baton Rouge campus of LSU in the southeastern part of the state.

We were unable to post a completed digitization project to the Louisiana Digital Library by the end of this grant, but due to the strong ties within the LDL community, as well as partnerships within the statewide LSU system, we were able to pivot and build a framework and a digitization hub for future digitization projects with underrepresented and underserved cultural heritage institutions in an area of the state that is underrepresented in the Louisiana Digital Library.



What Comes Next

Ongoing conversations with the leadership and staff of Louisiana State University Shreveport are what keep this plan moving forward at the end of this grant. We are in the process of transferring ownership of the scanner, camera, copystand, and two PCs from LSU's Baton Rouge campus to LSU Shreveport's Noel Memorial Library. This will better equip them to maintain the equipment, ensuring its accessibility to smaller institutions with whom Noel Memorial Library can partner in the future.

LSU Libraries staff in Baton Rouge will provide further training on digitization and on metadata creation as needed for projects undertaken by Noel Memorial Library in conjunction with local cultural heritage institutions and other community groups. LSU Libraries staff will also upload completed projects to the Louisiana Digital Library as the files are received.

The digitization hub in Shreveport facilitates the inclusion of digital cultural heritage materials held by under-resourced institutions and community groups in central and northern Louisiana. This project makes it possible for these groups to share their collections online without using limited resources to purchase digitization equipment or pay for the cost of an LDL membership. Finally, the digital materials these institutions share will help present a fuller, more accurate picture of the history, culture, and people of Louisiana to LDL users around the world.

Learn More:

Louisiana Digital Library: <https://www.louisianadigitallibrary.org/>

References

La Beaud, E., & Lawrence, N. (2013). Mississippi Digital Library. *The Primary Source*, 32(1), Article 5. <https://doi.org/10.18785/ps.3201.05>