Asset Mapping in Academic Libraries:
Collaborating Across University and Library Departments

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ABSTRACT

Miami University Libraries harnessed the power of asset mapping to create and manage eight remote digital projects during the COVID-19 pandemic, drawing on library staff and students from across the university. This chapter documents the steps and actions and offers insights into techniques and approaches that may be adopted under different circumstances. Asset mapping facilitated matching available staff and skills with available projects and resulted in a dramatic increase in productivity. Properly deploying asset mapping involves identifying ways to provide benefit to all involved parties. Special collections used the quarantine to jumpstart alliances with other departments, who provided staff time, skill, and labor, but the initiative's success is demonstrated not merely by productivity during quarantine but staff interest in maintaining a degree of involvement afterward.

INTRODUCTION

In 2013, the Miami University Libraries began digitizing Ohio postcards from two postcard collections held at the Walter Havighurst Special Collections & University Archives. The Clyde N. Bowden and Charles D. Shields collections encompass nearly 600,000 postcards from the 1880s to the present day, of which approximately 26,000 relate to Ohio, where Miami University is located. Year after year, staff and students chipped away at the immense task of creating metadata to make digitized postcards fully

accessible (Ladd, 2015). Yet after seven years of working on the project, 2024 was the most optimistic date for completion if everything went as planned.

Despite the disruption of the COVID-19 worldwide pandemic in 2020, the first phase of the postcard project was completed two years ahead of schedule thanks to cross-departmental collaborations and the strategic use of asset mapping techniques. Nor was this the only success that Special Collections enjoyed. During the first 21 months of the pandemic, Special Collections created postcard metadata, led seven other remote collaborative projects to improve yearbook and oral history transcripts, and created metadata for student protest photographs, advertising trade cards, and architecture lectures. These projects resulted in seventeen corrected yearbook transcripts, 40 oral history transcripts, metadata for 521 photos, 413 trade cards, and 70 architecture lectures. Further, Special Collections collaborated with a regional campus library to crop digitized newspapers for a new digital collection, comprising over 800 pages. In total, Special Collections and their internal and external collaborators created over 5,360 new digital assets during the pandemic, which provided students and researchers with additional online resources at a critical time.

Although the pandemic and quarantine circumstances jumpstarted collaborations across library and university departments, success was the result of hard work and careful planning. Asset mapping enabled Miami University Libraries to create and manage multiple remote digital projects under unusual circumstances and has the potential to do the same for libraries in normal operations. Asset mapping is a strategy of identifying strengths in a community that can be mobilized to form partnerships and align resources for specific goals. Although more commonly used in the non-profit sector to mobilize communities and create impactful partnerships with limited resources, it is also an effective way to create and manage initiatives across library departments and universities.

Asset mapping offers the means to make short-term projects more efficient through identifying synchronicities and untapped alignments. However, applying asset mapping to medium and longer-term projects runs the risk of presuming stability and failing to anticipate shifts in staffing, availability, knowledge, and resources. Academic libraries interested in using asset mapping techniques should consider fair workloads and remuneration if staff responsibilities are realigned through participation in collaborative projects or new partnerships. Nevertheless, asset mapping provides savvy and patient leaders with opportunities to match available resources and interests across organizations.

This case study discusses how Miami University Libraries harnessed the power of asset mapping to create eight remote digital projects for eighteen library staff members and eleven students over the course of a year. It also offers insights into techniques and approaches that can be employed in a variety of library situations.

BACKGROUND

Miami University was founded in 1809 as the second public university in Ohio. It is a mid-sized institution with a number of masters and doctoral graduate programs although the university focuses on undergraduate education. The main campus in Oxford is primarily a residential institution, but the university also maintains small regional campuses in Hamilton and Middletown. Similarly, the main campus libraries work with the regional campus libraries to provide services to all students, faculty, and staff. For the purposes of this chapter, references to Miami University Libraries indicate the main campus libraries unless stated otherwise.

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