How the Digital Public Library of America Supports Teaching and Research

Content Creation & Dissemination Team
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The Board had questions for us at its September meeting and challenged us to better articulate the advantages and impacts for institutions that DPLA participation would bring.
Undergraduate Learning

- Widely described desire to develop and support information-literate learners who can:
  - Discover information
  - Access information
  - Use that information effectively for academic success, research, and lifelong learning

This is from the mission statement of Seattle Pacific University's library. It’s a good example of the commonly-held ideals of colleges and universities for undergraduates. They are drawn from Standards for Libraries in Higher Education, an ACRL publication from 2011.

[amplify from your own work with undergrads at WSU, on on WSU’s standards]

So, when we look at unique resources, what does the landscape currently look like, and how can this initiative at the Alliance support the learning outcomes that our member institutions hold dear?

We’ll look at a case study: Japanese-American relocation centers in World War II, specifically Heart Mountain Relocation Center in Wyoming. This was one of the places that Japanese Americans from Oregon, Washington, and California were taken.
So, let’s start with a collection at one of our smaller repositories, Western Oregon University. It’s a nice collection of newsletters from Japanese-American relocation center newsletters.

For a small undergraduate focused institution like WOU, this collection represents both an opportunity and a limitation. Students could use these materials as exemplars for basic-level primary source analysis; they could compare the newsletters across the camps and use the increasingly rich secondary sources on the Japanese internment camps. They can find them easily through a google search because they’re represented in Archives West.

But the collection is only 2 boxes. WOU doesn’t hold any other collections on this topic. So this collection in isolation doesn’t support the broader goals of teaching undergraduates to discover, access, and use more complex primary sources. In short, this will support a class exercise; it won’t support a 400-level paper, an undergraduate thesis, or a more creative work like a 3-d virtual representation of life in the camp.
As it happens, there is quite a large collection of Heart Mountain related materials at WSU Libraries. There’s not only this one, but a number of others.

And we have a number of these collections online at WSU Libraries Digital Collections.

So there’s a much larger group of materials at WSU that can support more complex inquiries. [amplify this some!]

However, we still have the same problem: This is only a small piece of what’s available on Heart Mountain. We still are not supporting complex research and learning. We’re only able to provide a limited set of primary sources on this compelling topic.
We know there’s a lot more material scattered across institutions because they’re represented in Archives West. While there’s quite a lot at WSU, there are also significant collections at the University of Washington, University of Utah, University of Montana, and Oregon Historical Society. A significant number of those collections are digitized, specifically those from the University of Washington and University of Utah.
If we perform the same search in DPLA, we find a different set of materials, 620 objects, across...
A different set of institutions. The only overlap is the University of Utah and University of Washington, and that is a far smaller number of objects. As you would expect, the National Archives is a rich source since the camps were run by the federal government. So, there’s a huge hole in this topic on a national level.

So how does this hole impact those undergraduate learning outcomes that we so heartily support?
There are a number of learning impacts, both positive and negative.

On the positive side, students can discover materials. But they have to do so in a number of different spaces.

Students can access materials, but in a variety of ways. There are some digital items with online access, some collection descriptions with physical access only, and not a lot of clarity on how items and collections relate.

Students can use materials to support traditional academic products, like papers. There are significant barriers to using materials in 21st century products, like multimedia and creative works. Rights statements are one area where DPLA has done a huge amount of groundbreaking work; being part of that facilitates use.

On the whole, the experience for students is uneven, and that’s based largely on what institution they attend. That’s different from our shared or purchased collections, where we have largely equalized access for students regardless of institution.
Faculty Support

• Teaching
  – Faculty are using primary sources but are time-constrained
  – Comprehensive sources make their work easier
  – Placing local collections in larger context allows consideration of more complex analyses

• Research
  – Support for digital humanities and 21st century creative and academic works: move from hand-built to sustainable resources
  – Clarity in rights statements is essential
  – Emerging practices, younger faculty, rapid change

[amplify and illustrate with your own experiences]
What exactly do we mean in that last point about supporting research? What we most often see with faculty are projects like Century of Action, which focused on the 100th anniversary of women’s suffrage in Oregon. This is a great site: it brings together many exciting resources around this important topic. It was supported by grant funds in 2012.
But like most sites of its type, it relies on hand-built lists of documents and collections rather than taking programmatic advantage of harvestable metadata.

This is the thing that can change most with DPLA: rather than building a million subject portals by hand, we can use the open metadata and API to make apps that constantly update the available content and create comprehensive resources on any topic that keep themselves current.
Larry Cebula, Eastern Wa Univ.

“For the past four years I have been working with my students to build up the content on Spokane Historical, a website and smartphone app for regional history. They have come up with about 400 unique, place-based stories of local history.

I am proud of the work that they have done, but finding suitable images that we can use has always been a problem. Digital history is hungry for images...

I have been a fan of the DPLA from the beginning, it is the historical content aggregator that we have been looking for since the early 2000s at least. An expansion of their regional content...would be tremendously helpful to my teaching and research.”

And our faculty support this. Larry Cebula is one of the best-known digital humanities faculty in the region (he’s a history professor at Eastern Washington University).
Here’s the site and app that Prof Cebula and his students have built