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Documenting University Life During COVID-19

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Documenting University Life During COVID-19

Presented by Eric Milenkiewicz at the 2021 Society of California Archivists General Meeting

START -- 00:00:00

Slide 1

- Good morning everyone, my name is Eric Milenkiewicz and I'm the University Archivist at California State University, San Bernardino (which from this point on I'll refer to as CSUSB)
- I'm here today to talk about the project I launched in mid-April 2020 to document how the CSUSB community was responding to and coping with the COVID-19 pandemic
- This project began as an in-house collecting initiative, focused on documenting the University's administrative response to COVID-19 through university-issued statements and official communications distributed via the campus website and listserv
- Shortly after beginning the project, though, I realized that these materials alone wouldn't adequately document university life during the pandemic and how students, faculty, and staff were actually dealing with COVID-19
- So to address this shortcoming, I started efforts to collect first-hand accounts, personal narratives, and reflections from members of the campus community on how COVID-19 was directly impacting their lives
- My goal is to create a resource that will provide future generations with a snapshot of how individuals and University communities navigated their way through this historically important time
- If you look back at the Spanish Flu a little over a century ago, there isn't a whole lot of documentation from that time detailing the impact of that pandemic on society and the daily lives of the people that experienced it
- Today, it's much easier to capture documentation and preserve these stories with the technology available to us
- So people 15, 20, 30 years from now will be able to look back and gain a better understanding of what life was like in 2020 and 2021 during the COVID-19 pandemic
- In my presentation today I'm going to focus on the community-centered aspect of my project, detailing the steps I took to acquire and integrate contributed materials into a fully searchable and accessible online digital collection that will support continued research, scholarly inquiry, and exploration into the impact of COVID-19.

Slide 2

- My first step in this project was to formulate its purpose and scope:
 - This is essentially, to collect, preserve, and provide access to materials that document both the university's administrative and the campus community's response to the pandemic
- I then created an informational webpage detailing the project as a way to raise awareness of it and also to solicit contributions
- There are a few key components of this page that I'd like to point out:
- It includes the general collecting parameters, detailing the types of materials that I'm looking for:
 - So, items that detail the transition from an on-campus to remote environment, the impact of technology on learning and/or work, and the ability of individuals to stay connected with classmates, teachers, co-workers, and family during this time

- It also includes some examples of the format types that I'm interested in, so:
 - Accounts of everyday life documented in journals or diaries
 - Expressive and creative works such as photography, artwork, or poems
 - And Audiovisual materials like oral history interviews, performances, or messages
- The content restrictions established for the project are also listed on this page, with examples of materials that will NOT be included in the collection such as any personal health information AND materials that are not owned or created by the contributor.
- A section on "How to Participate" is also part of the page:
 - Here I provide some direction on how to start the process of documentation and offer a few guiding questions for individuals to consider as they begin.
 - Some of the questions I posed are:
 - How has your life changed during the pandemic?
 - What adjustments have you had to make?
 - And how are you staying connected to others during times of social distancing?
- Lastly, at the bottom of the page a link is provided for individuals to begin the submittal process and contribute their works to the project
- Having a publicly accessible landing page for community-centered projects like this is an extremely useful tool that can support outreach efforts, project promotion, and content contributions, providing individuals with everything they need to learn more about your project and to participate in it.

Slide 3

- The submittal process is comprised of two forms that the contributor must complete
- The first is a Project Submission Agreement form
 - For this I used Springshare's LibWizard, a multi-purpose, web-based Forms tool (you can also easily set-up a Google Form for this purpose if you don't have access to something like LibWizard)
- The Project Submission Agreement serves two primary functions:
 - To ensure that contributors own or created the materials that they are submitting
 - And it also allows the library to obtain permission from the contributor to preserve and make their work publicly available online
- This is essentially the equivalent of a Deed of Gift form that would be used for traditional archival acquisitions
- The completed form for each contributor is then stored and maintained electronically in LibWizard as a record of the donation and the usage permissions assigned to the Library

Slide 4

- Once the Project Submission Agreement form has been completed, the contributor is then taken to a second online form to complete their submission
- This is the File and Metadata Submission form hosted separately in our CSUSB ScholarWorks platform
- Contributors must begin the process by entering their full name
 - This allows me to verify that each contributor has completed their Project Submission Agreement in LibWizard, giving the library permission to publish their work publicly online
- Contributors then add some basic metadata about the item that they're contributing such as a title, format type, creation date, and a short description of the item
- You'll also notice the inclusion of an Attribution field which provides the contributor with the option to remain anonymous in the publicly accessible digital collection if they so choose

- This was made available for people that may want to contribute to the project and have their experiences documented for the historical record, but are uncomfortable with their name being attributed to this work in a public space
- Allowing people to express their feelings, thoughts, and fears without requiring them to be listed publicly as the creator was a method I employed to ensure that the widest range of voices are included in the collection, providing an outlet for those people that wish to remain anonymous
- If this option is selected I'm able to suppress the contributor's name from public view, but it still exists in the administrative interface to maintain that link to the permissions form
- Once the metadata fields are completed, the contributor attaches the digital file of their work and submits all of this information to the project
- This information packet is then placed into a queue in the ScholarWorks administrative interface that allows me to review and approve submissions for the online digital collection
- We use Digital Commons by Bepress as our digital asset management system, but many other platforms available on the market today offer similar functionality for user-contributed content, so this isn't a unique feature to Digital Commons
- It is likely that the systems in-use at your institutions also support a similar process for user contributions
- So now let's take a closer look at my approach to collecting for this project.

Slide 5

- Very early on while designing this project I made the conscious decision to reduce the number of requirements for contributed content.
- So:
 - I don't require the use of specific file format types
 - I don't have prescribed rules for the metadata component
 - And there are no restrictions on the content itself
- My rationale for doing this was to reduce the barrier for entry as much as possible, in order to increase participation in the project and generate more content
- I've worked on similar projects in the past and community engagement and participation has always proven difficult
- Expecting people to participate while adhering to numerous rules and restrictions, especially now while in the midst of a pandemic, not only didn't seem appropriate but also felt like a surefire way for this project to fail
- I also didn't want to put any restrictions on the content itself, in order to encourage freedom of expression and to give contributors complete control over how they wanted to document their story or experience
- For the most part this approach paid off, as I've been pleased with the level of participation the project has received
- It has garnered hundreds of unique submissions from the campus community, ranging from original poems, handwritten journals, and musical performances to comic strips, video interviews, and artwork
- However, the downside of this approach quickly emerged as the lack of requirements has led to additional work on the processing front as materials are prepared for the online digital collection

Slide 6

- I've encountered several recurring issues with the contributed content as a result of the reduced barriers I just discussed:

- Content has been submitted in a range of different file formats, from PDFs and Word Docs to Quicktime Movie files and Powerpoint Presentations
 - This was expected and not a problem per se, but I did decide to normalize the file types and perform some reformatting so that users would have embedded access to files within the ScholarWorks platform itself or their web browser
 - This increases the accessibility of the content and keeps users from having to download files in proprietary formats that require specific software applications to access
- Also since there were no prescribed rules for metadata creation, the quality and extent of the provided metadata varies quite a bit
 - Again, I expected this
 - What I didn't anticipate, though, is that many contributors wouldn't assign a unique title to their submission. I assumed individuals would name their work with some type of descriptive title. But many entries were submitted with generic, non-descript titles like "COVID-19" or "COVID-19 Archive".
 - The information entered into the Description field was equally non-descript with entries like "daily log", "my experience", or simply "video"
 - As an archivist accustomed to descriptive standards, this bothered me at first and I planned to enhance the titles and descriptions before pushing them live online
 - However, as I thought more about this I realized that the contributor assigned titles and descriptions could actually be considered as part of the documentation itself, pointing to the capacity and/or decision making of individuals during this time as they described their own works. This may even be something of interest to future researchers as they begin to engage with the content
 - So I made the decision to push all metadata through as-is and unchanged with a note for future users stating that this information was "contributor generated"
- Lastly, I had to take the time to anonymize the content of some works based on a contributor's preference to remain anonymous
 - Many submissions have come through where the contributor noted that they wanted to be listed as anonymous in the publicly accessible digital collection, but they still included their names or videos of themselves in the work itself
 - I'm working to redact names from submitted textual and graphical works, and will eventually post these online
 - However, for video submissions that feature contributors that wish to remain anonymous, I will need to contact those individuals for additional permissions
- In hindsight, I probably would've done a few things differently and there were some lessons learned here

Slide 7

- Reflecting back, I probably should have created a brief information sheet for contributors detailing some best practices like:
 - Please save Word files or Slide Presentations as PDFs
 - Here are some tips on how to produce more meaningful and descriptive Titles and Descriptions
 - And these are some points to consider if you want your contribution to remain anonymous
- Some basic guidance would've likely standardized the submissions a bit more and cut down on processing time without creating too much of an obstacle for contributors
- However, this is all a balancing act!
 - If the process seems overly complicated or there are too many obstacles in-place then you run the risk of losing potential contributors

- I much rather have solid participation and rich content, even if that means it takes me more time to process because at least then I have the materials in-hand, successfully captured and preserved for the digital collection.
- For this project, the benefits I've enjoyed by reducing the requirements and minimizing restrictions has clearly outweighed the extra processing time that I've had to put into the contributed content

Slide 8

- Now let's briefly take a look at the digital collection in ScholarWorks and how users can engage with the content
- There are currently 150+ items publicly accessible online, however this number will continue to grow as I process through the backlog and the newly submitted contributions
- The collection is arranged into Sections based on format type:
 - So documents, diaries, oral histories, videos, etc
- I feel like most researchers interacting with the content will find this structure useful, and it also facilitates browsing for those with a more casual interest in the materials
- Each section is then sorted alphabetically, by system default, according to the item's assigned Title
- Users can keyword search the entire collection to locate specific item types or topical coverage
- One unique feature of this particular collection is that typed documents have also been fully indexed with their contents keyword searchable in the platform, allowing users to find specific words or terms within the documents themselves
- This can help researchers identify and surface themes across items, comparing and contrasting coverage of specific topical areas and subjects
- Each Item has its own individual page that contains some basic descriptive metadata like title, creator, date, description, comments (if any), and recommended citation.
- There are options on this page to view and/or download the file itself and the ability to share it with others via email or through various social media outlets, again increasing its accessibility and extending an item's reach to be used and re-purposed in any number of ways
- All of these functions work together, allowing researchers and the general public to effectively examine and interact with this content to fulfill their informational needs
- The CSUSB ScholarWorks platform also allows me to track usage statistics so that I can measure the reach and impact of this collection, providing me with valuable information for decision-making on how to grow the collection in a particular direction or insights on how to approach similar projects in the future.
- Hopefully my presentation has given you some things to think about, pitfalls to avoid, and ideas to consider as you begin or continue on with your own community-centered documentation project

END -- 00:13:57