Preserving Electronic Syllabi at California State University Long Beach

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ABSTRACT

Since its founding in 1977, University Archives and Special Collections at California State University Long Beach has collected syllabi from the classes offered during the academic year. Tens of thousands of syllabi exist in paper format, and thousands more exist on CD in various electronic formats. This poster describes efforts to transform syllabi collection into an all-digital process, while providing for the future preservation of historical syllabi.

General Terms

Institutional opportunities and challenges; Preservation strategies and workflows; Training and education.

Keywords

Syllabi, Access, Collection.

1. INTRODUCTION

Syllabi are an important part of building courses at any university, and they are the most accessed item from the University Archives at California State University, Long Beach. The preservation of syllabi for use by future students, alumni, and faculty touches on a number of different issues in digital preservation. Staffing issues, software issues, standard issues, and intellectual property issues all come to play in the quest to digitize and preserve the history of courses taught since the University's founding in 1949. This poster will demonstrate the state of our efforts to achieve this over the coming years.

The CSULB University Archives are unusual among CSU campuses for collecting course syllabi at all. Most university archives in the system do not collect them, and people looking for syllabi are referred to academic departments. However, at CSULB, the collection of syllabi goes back many years. Syllabi for some departments are found going back decades, and in 2004, an Academic Senate policy was passed requiring departments to turn in copies of all syllabi to the University Library by the census date of every term. In practice, collection does not reach 100%, but the University Archives still houses tens of thousands of syllabi from the roughly 18,000 course sections taught every academic year. Increasingly, these syllabi are electronic.

According to Academic Senate Policy, the Library is able to specify the format of syllabi collection. In practice, University Archives and Special Collections has collected all syllabi, in any format they are given, including paper. The Archives have only asked for a different format if an electronic file was found to be unreadable. Moving forward, however, University Archives would like to streamline the collection process so that all syllabi are collected in a standard electronic format.

2. PROCESS

2.1 Evaluate

For the last year, we have been assessing our current situation. We have identified many pain points in the collection process, such as the confusion that results when syllabi are turned in multiple times during a term for a single department, or when files are labeled in unconventional ways. We have also identified vulnerabilities, such as electronic syllabi stored on CD with no copies. These are vulnerable to damage and degradation. So far, one set of syllabi has been found on a 5¼-inch floppy, and it is not yet known if there is any recoverable data still on that disc. The next step is to assess the approximate number of paper and electronic syllabi, and in what formats. We then need to evaluate the repository systems available, and possible collection methods, such as using the University's standard course management software, or perhaps using a standalone product. Once the evaluation process is done, we can create new policies and procedures for our system.

2.2 Train

Archival staff and student assistants will need to be trained on new software and procedures, and there will of course be a learning curve. Staff and faculty in other departments will also need to be trained to submit their syllabi in a new way, and for some, in a new format.

2.3 Implement

In the implementation of this project, the first step will be collecting new syllabi according to new procedures and storing them in the chosen repository. The next step will be to prepare and load electronic syllabi that are currently stored on CD in the new system. The final stage of implementation will be to digitize historical paper syllabi, so that they too are accessible electronically. This will be the most labor intensive step, but by the time it is taken, most of the difficult decisions will have been made, so it should be possible to get it done using student assistants.

3. CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

3.1 Institutional

Special Collections and University Archives has gone through several changes in the past year. The first is that the staff member who had been managing the area retired, and a new staff member and faculty member were hired in her place. This has been a challenge, as all staffing changes are, but it also presents the department with the opportunity to update processes and procedures. Library Administration has shown a strong commitment to investing in the department, which is an important factor moving forward. University policy is also on our side with this project, as the Academic Senate passed a policy in 2004 that requires departments to turn all syllabi into the Library by the census date of each term, in the format specified by the Library. The main challenges on an institutional level are the cooperation of academic departments in changing procedures, and the limits of funds and staff time, which are always in short supply, even in a very supportive environment such as ours.

3.2 Technical

Syllabi are the most used item in the University Archives, and as such, it is important that we retain access to all of the historical syllabi collected. For this reason, the choice of format for syllabi is important. The format must be something that will continue to be supported into the future, and that will not render us dependent on a specific vendor. Additionally, the repository system chosen must be able to produce appropriate metadata so that we can search and sort the syllabi in our system as necessary.

3.3 Legal

One potential issue with providing digital access to syllabi is that many faculty members feel that syllabi are their intellectual property, and they are hesitant to allow syllabi to be available on the open web. As the CSU develops IP policies to address this issue, this may become clearer. Until that time, however, digital copies of syllabi are unlikely to be available on the open web, and are likely to be held in a closed repository for staff use only.

4. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS