Rice University – Fondren Library

We spoke to Geneva Henry, the Executive Director for Digital Scholarship Services. Henry had been with the library for thirteen years. On July 1, she assumed the position of University Librarian and Vice Provost for Libraries at The George Washington University.

Description of the University and Library

Rice University is a private research university located in Houston, Texas. Established in 1912, the university has produced 101 Fulbright Scholars, 11 Truman Scholars, 24 Marshall Scholars, and 12 Rhodes Scholars. The university is organized into eleven residential colleges and eight schools of academic study. The student body consists of 3,708 undergraduate students and 2,374 graduate students.

The mission of Fondren Library is to "support Rice University's research and teaching aspirations by providing innovative research and information services, access to scholarly resources, and inviting physical and virtual spaces." The department of Digital Scholarship Services at the library consists of the Digital Media Commons, the Kelley Center for Government Information and Microforms, and the GIS/Data Center.

"Specifically with the digital library and Digital Scholarship Services, what we provide are the services and support for maintaining Rice's digital scholarship," Henry says. "And that includes the long-term access and preservation for the digital resources that are Rice-specific scholarship."

Beginnings of Digitization

"I was hired in 2000 to start the Digital Library Initiative," Henry says. "I think there had been some not as well organized, sort of ad hoc digitization activities before I got here, but really it was in 2000 with my hiring that it became more of a formal program."

Henry's background is in computer science. "I came out of industry," she explains. "I had a background in search technologies and artificial intelligence. But I had also worked with universities throughout the country as a consultant to help them get started with their own digital library initiatives." In the three years prior to coming to Rice, she had been focused on medical imagining digital library solutions at IBM.

"I think the most helpful thing to me was really having more of a systems engineering background to understand what all it really takes," Henry says. "It's more than just digitization. You're looking at all of the technologies that need unique support and digital assets, all the way from the storage to the kinds of search technologies that you need to work with, how to present information to people, and just how to manage the digital content."

First Steps

When asked to describe the first steps taken in building the digital library, Henry says that "a lot of it involved meeting people, meeting faculty and finding out what they're researching. The big thing to me, and what I did in my consulting work as well as with the different higher education institutions, was try to figure out what are the priorities. So here at Rice, the things I wanted to understand were: what are the research priorities? What are

people doing now? How are faculty working with information, and what are they doing about digital information? So a lot of it was just going around in order to gain an understanding of current activities and current practices."

When Henry first started, the institutional repository software available was, as she describes it, pretty weak. "There weren't any of the major ones that you hear about now," she says. "I had actually contracted with a programmer to develop, since there wasn't anything, a site that started culling more of the existing research websites at Rice, so that we would have the research projects all in one place. Then right about the time we were ready to launch it, the DSpace platform came out, and it was much more robust. And my view is much longer term when you're dealing with technology, looking at what can I sustain, because the bigger expenses come with the sustainability of a system over time. So at that point, since DSpace had become sufficiently stable and had a large enough community around it, I felt more comfortable going with it rather than a homegrown system. So we adopted the DSpace platform and started putting content in there."

"I made a decision very early on, again it goes back to the sustainability, that I would use one platform. Rice is small, and I've grown my whole team, so we were extremely small at the time. So, driven by what I could sustain, I made the decision that all of our content will be managed in one system, so I have never used our institutional repository in the more traditional sense of an institutional repository. My view was that everything we digitized would be managed in this repository, and that's why open-source is very important, because I knew that each of these collections would have different requirements, and we

would need to be able to modify code so that we could present each collection appropriately. So we had digitized content and then started to try and get some faculty articles in. That's been the bigger challenge, so I worked with faculty members last year to pass an open-access mandate."

Content

The Special Collections and Archives at the library is called the Woodson Research Center. "The mission of the Woodson Research Center, like that of its parent body, the Fondren Library of Rice University in Houston, Texas, is to support the institutional, research and public service programs of the University," their website states. "The Center collects, organizes, preserves and describes official records of the University, special collections of rare books and manuscripts; it makes these materials available for Rice faculty, students and alumni, as well as local, national and international researchers via exhibitions, lectures, and other public events, and by publishing print and web-based materials highlighting the department's primary source collections."

"They have actually now incorporated digitization into their daily workflow," Henry says of Woodson. "They are constantly digitizing their Special Collections and all of that goes into the repository. So that's a lot of rich research content, and we have the faculty publications in there as well. Our Shepherd School of Music a couple years ago agreed to make the concerts and performances of their faculty and students available to the repository, so we also manage all of that. It's all available through streaming capability. We've worked with our IT group here at Rice to make sure that we could stream out video as well as audio. We're also getting more and more oral histories."