Case study: University of North Florida

Breathing new life into institutional repository content with Digital Commons Exhibits

Digital Commons

Showcase your institution's research and scholarly work
with Digital Commons

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"We wanted to share the rich content in our Digital Commons IR in a more visually appealing and thematic way. Digital Commons Exhibits **enables us to bring together materials from across different collections into one thematic exhibit** to tell a story."

Digital Commons Exhibits is not only helping University of North Florida raise the profile of the digital assets in its IR, it's also improving access to them.

Background

The year 2022 marked an historic anniversary for University of North Florida (UNF) – 50 years since the first student set foot on its Jacksonville campus. Since those early days, the relationship between the institution and its home city has continued to deepen. In fact, today, UNF is among only 5% of US universities to hold the prestigious Community Engagement Classification from the Carnegie Foundation.

Helping to maintain those bonds is a key focus for Courtenay McLeland. As Head of Digital Strategies & Technology at the university's Thomas G. Carpenter Library, she manages a unit that looks after the library's systems.

The team is also responsible for preserving digital assets that reflect the rich history of the institution and the Jacksonville area. And they are tasked with ensuring that history is shared as widely as possible.

Challenge

One of the ways that Courtenay and her team do this is by uploading relevant content to their institutional repository (IR) – UNF Digital Commons. It has been the "digital home for the research, scholarship, special collections, and archives of the University of North Florida community" since 2012.

However, while the IR has proved the ideal platform to publish and preserve a wide array of materials, Courtenay and her colleagues have been seeking a way to increase the content's visual appeal.

"Showcasing content effectively can strengthen our university in several ways," she explains. "It can help us raise the profile of the distinctive collections that we hold. And it speaks to the aspect of stewardship – donors know that if they entrust us with their material, we will endeavor to make the content accessible digitally to the extent possible." For Courtenay, one welcome by-product of that trust is likely to be an increase in donated collections. Another, a rise in people using the IR content for research purposes.

Over the past few years, Courtenay has experimented with hosting exhibits of IR content on an open-source platform with some success. But the process has also had its drawbacks. "We have to upload content to two separate systems, which not only takes time but can also impact accuracy. And it's not always easy to link the exhibits back to the IR, so page views aren't necessarily as high as they could be." In fact, in some cases, visitor numbers to Digital Commons Exhibits are proving to be up to seven times higher than those to the open-source platform exhibits.

Solution

In 2021, word reached Courtenay that Elsevier was looking for beta testers for a new Digital Commons module dedicated to exhibits – she immediately signed up. She explains: "Everything we've digitized for new special collections and archives is in our Digital Commons IR. So, when I heard that it would be possible to import those IR items directly into Digital Commons Exhibits, I knew it was something I wanted to try."
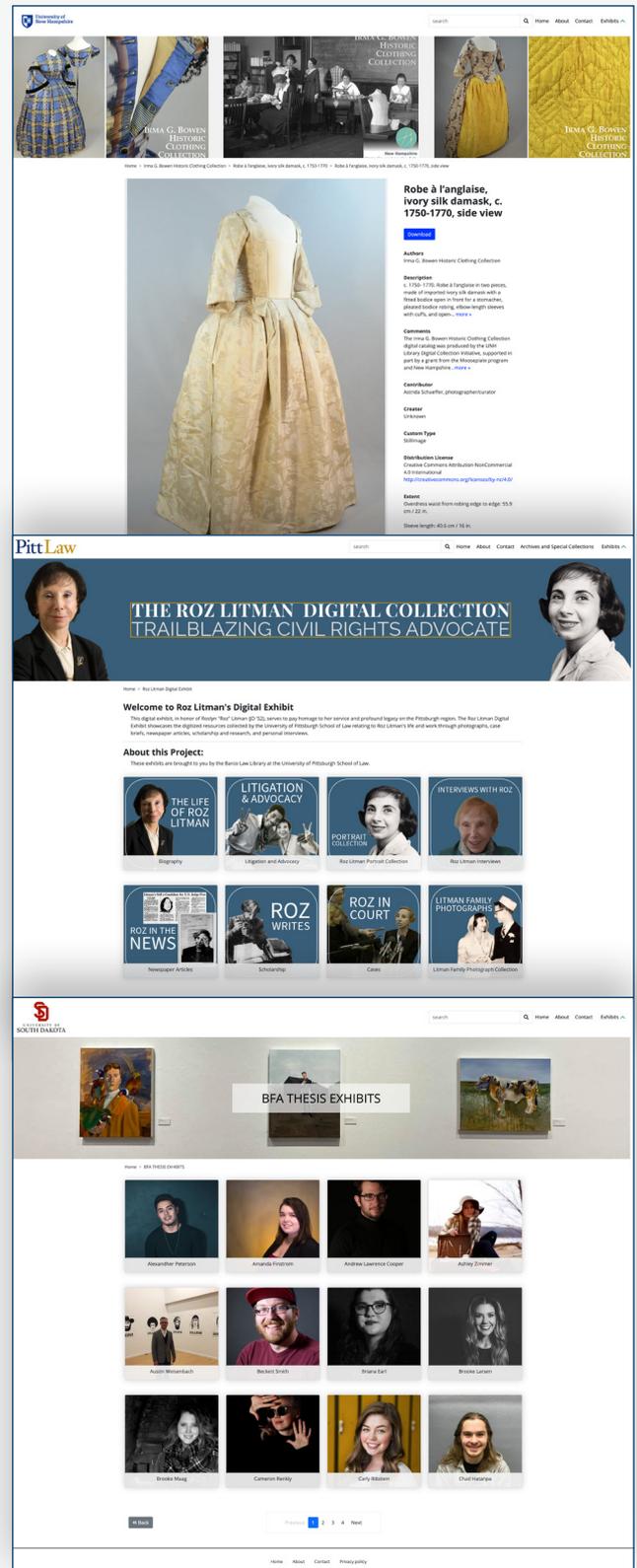
Introducing Digital Commons Exhibits

Your organization holds a wealth of treasures, many of which are likely to be in your institutional repository (IR). The challenge for many institutions is to tell the stories of these collections and outputs in an engaging way that will increase visibility and access.

Digital Commons Exhibits is the latest addition to the Digital Commons suite of modules and is available as an additional layer to the Digital Commons IR. Inspired by the world's best museum sites, it has been custom designed to manage, curate and display your digital assets in a beautiful, modern showcase.

- Create engaging and interactive exhibits using intuitive tools and interactive display options – with no coding or technical support required.

- Mix and match content and file types from different publications in your Digital Commons IR, and control which metadata fields you share.

- Give your site its own unique identity with custom banners, fonts, color schemes, thumbnails and logos.

- Upload any file type or size, with no limit on storage.

- Supplement your storytelling with text, images and embedded media, such as videos, maps and timelines.

- Order content and assign topics or themes to guide audiences on your chosen journey, replicating the experience of a physical visit.

Digital Commons is a fully-hosted solution — all software maintenance, configuration and implementation is managed by Elsevier's systems and development team, saving you valuable time, and reducing the need for local IT support.

Results

Since launching the UNF Digital Commons Exhibits site, Courtenay has hosted an array of exhibits that not only highlight the university's achievements, they also capture key moments in the region's history. This is helping the library meet its strategic goals in several ways:

1. Promoting community engagement

One of the most popular exhibits to date has been the Florida Blue Archives, created on behalf of an insurance company with strong Jacksonville roots.

Courtenay explains: "They offered us a grant to process their collection and then mount a physical exhibit. Because we had Digital Commons Exhibits, we were also able to share their content online in a visually impactful way." The online element proved a pleasant surprise for the company, and they promoted it widely on their Facebook page, opening up the content to visitors unable to attend the university in person.

The fact that Digital Commons Exhibits accommodates all file types and sizes meant Courtenay could upload an animated GIF banner created in Adobe Photoshop. The same banner was displayed on a touch screen to accompany the physical exhibit in the special collections reading room. And with each section of the online exhibit linking back to the IR for a deeper content dive, visits to the IR also grew.
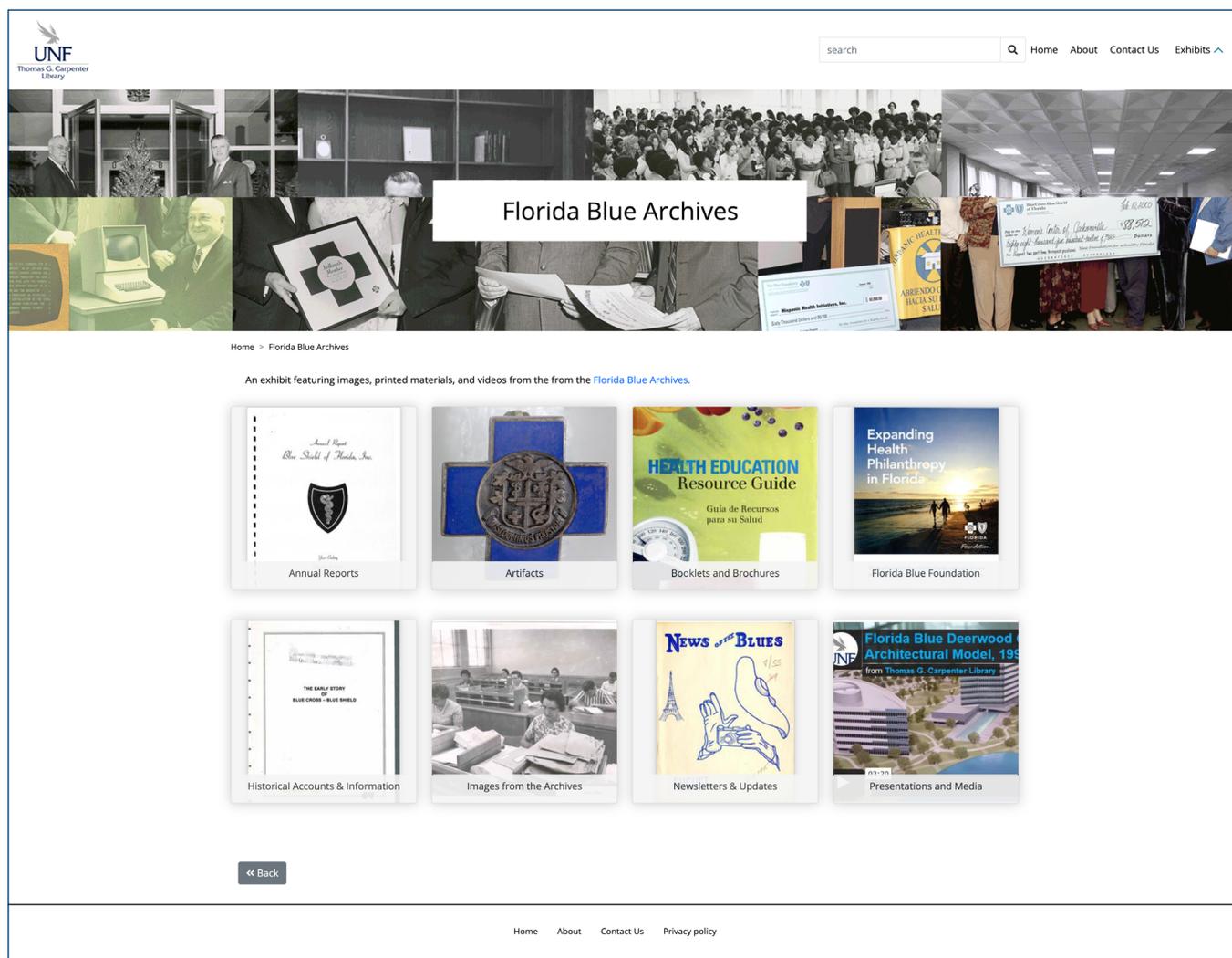
The homepage of the Florida Blue Archives exhibit

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2. Attracting new collaborations and collections

As Courtenay has noted, one of the benefits of highlighting good stewardship is that it can attract new donors. And the Florida Blue Archives exhibit has become a powerful example they can show other corporate collections.

In fact, the ability of Digital Commons Exhibits to tell stories in a visually compelling way is proving an asset across campus. For example, in 2021 the university's College of Education and Human Services received a $4.4M US Department of Education grant for Project InTERSECT. The money is used to offer local educators and teacher candidates STEM and computational thinking training.

Courtenay says: "We host the grant outputs in the IR, but the collaborators told us that although they really love the download map and statistics, they wanted to make more of a visual splash." Her team was able to use the Exhibits module to mount a colorful and attractive exhibit, showcasing the different strands of the project. She adds: "I think it looks fabulous and they are very pleased with the look and feel."

The homepage of the Project InTERSECT exhibit

3. Streamlining workflows

The ease with which content can be imported from the IR to the Exhibits module is proving a "time saver" for Courtenay and her team. In fact, for individual items, it's as simple as pasting in the IR URL. According to Courtenay, another benefit is that although "there's still some work needed to ensure the exhibit looks the way you want it to, with Exhibits you can edit thumbnails directly in the platform." She adds: "It also automates layout tasks, so there's less work to be done in terms of choosing an arrangement."

Courtenay and her colleagues also like the user friendliness of the administrator interface. "It's pretty intuitive to use. You can manage your pages and images, you can see what type of exhibit page it is, when you last updated it, etc."

When you import IR content into Digital Commons Exhibits, **all of the metadata imports as well, so there is no need to reenter it.** That saves time and improves accuracy."
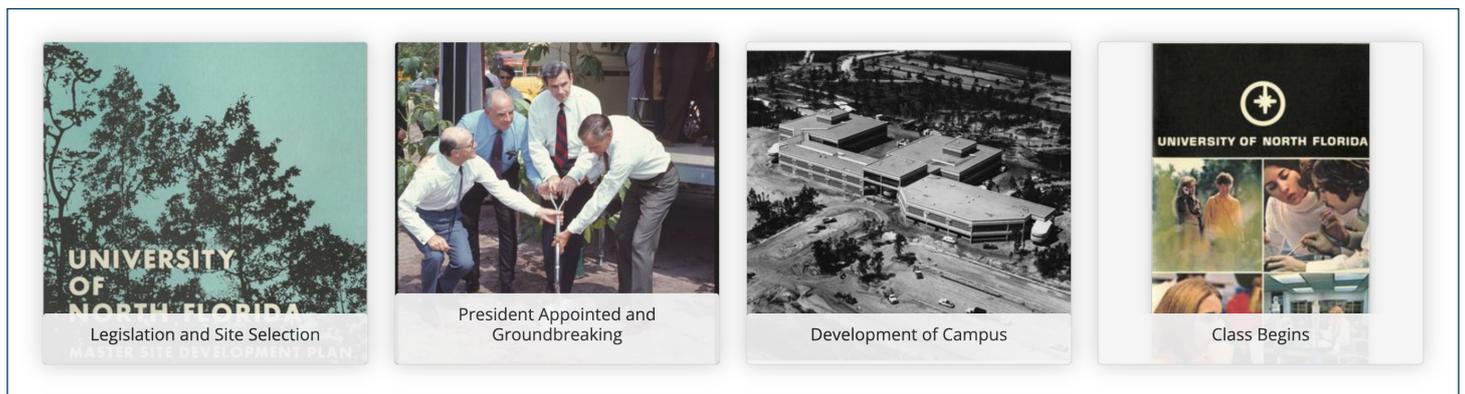
- Courtenay McLeland

4. Increasing visibility of institutional content

The ability to link exhibits to related IR content – and vice versa – is helping to increase traffic to both solutions.

Courtenay explains: "We can use the visual appeal of Digital Commons Exhibits to tease people back to the IR and there are a variety of ways we can do that. For example, an exhibit might feature a cover image of a PDF and then link back to the IR for further reading."

According to Courtenay, this is not only raising awareness of IR content in the Jacksonville community, it's also increasing visibility within the university's own four walls. "One of our first uses of the solution was to showcase our 50th anniversary. We're constantly seeing those images reused for other purposes around campus – that shows me that people are locating them easier than ever before."

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Some of the thumbnails from the Founding UNF exhibit

The anniversary exhibit has also had a profound effect on how the university approaches special collections, as Courtenay explains: "This was also briefly a physical exhibit, until our special collections team looked at the reading room visit statistics versus the Digital Commons Exhibits visit statistics."

With the latter outstripping the former, they took the decision to focus exclusively on digital exhibits going forward.

5. Empowering themed exhibits

As well as making exhibits more visually appealing, the Exhibits module enables Courtenay's team to pull together content from a variety of special collections on the IR. For Courtenay, this is proving a major asset: "It's really valuable to be able to exhibit content thematically. And it offers so much potential. For example, we've recently combined content from different collections of personal papers to create an exhibition on African American fraternal organizations."

It has also inspired an exhibit on local legend Bessie Coleman - the first African American woman to perform a public flight exhibition. "We pulled together material from various special collections, along with clippings from newspaper microfilm." The "Queen Bess" exhibit is also one of two in which Courtenay has used the Digital Commons Exhibits scrolling feature. "It's a really effective way to showcase a chronological timeline."

According to the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture, Bessie Coleman was the inspiration for the character of the female pilot Ruth in the Flying Ace film produced by Norman Studios in Jacksonville, Florida.
This advertisement for the Flying Ace film is from the Richard Mette Collection.

A screenshot of the Queen Bess exhibit

Looking to the future

For Courtenay, next steps include experimenting further with the variety of display options and features in the solution. She explains: "I want to do more with the scrolling option. The versions I've created are relatively simple, but I've seen some interesting examples."

She is also keen to increase the number of people in her team who post exhibits. "To date, it's been me and then one other person on my team. I would really love for some of the others to start curating and posting."

> "So much work goes into processing an archival collection. Digital Commons Exhibits offers a relatively **easy way to visually showcase the results of those behind-the-scenes efforts.**"
>
> - Courtenay McLeland

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