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## The Rise and Fall of Favor-Based Digitization: Workflows Taste Better on a Cake

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## The Rise and Fall of Favor-Based Digitization:

### Workflows Taste Better on a Cake<sup>1</sup>

Mikala Narlock, Pat Lawton, Patrick Rader

#### **Introduction**

At Hesburgh Libraries at the University of Notre Dame, digitization had been an obscure process: roles and responsibilities were unclear, capacity was opaque, and institutional capabilities were mostly unknown. Collections were being digitized, but to many it was unclear how to go about it and what the possibilities were. What had evolved was characterized by some as a “favor-based” system. To resolve these uncertainties, the Digital Collections Workflow (DCW) Team was established and charged with ensuring digital initiatives could flow smoothly and processes were understood by all. Over the course of a year (January-December 2018), this team identified nine use cases and tested six workflows. The success of this team ultimately resulted in the creation of a new oversight team led by Case Managers responsible for monitoring all digital project requests.

#### **Spring 2018: Digital Collections Workflow Team**

In early 2018, DCW kicked off. Drawing from units across the library,<sup>2</sup> this team had digitization specialists, developers, catalogers, subject selectors, and archivists. This team was tasked with answering a large question shared by many in the library: *How do items move from selection,*

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<sup>1</sup> This article is based on a presentation at the Best Practices Exchange 2019 held in Columbus, OH April 29- May 1. Slides available here: [doi:10.7274/r0-pwd4-jp23](https://doi.org/10.7274/r0-pwd4-jp23).

<sup>2</sup> With special thanks to the DCW Team members: Kevin Cawley, Aedin Clements, Jeremy Friesen, Helen Hockx-Yu, Hye-jin Juhn, Robert Kusmer, Laurie McGowan, and Patrick Milhoan.

*through digitization, to being preserved and accessible to library patrons?* This process was, at first, like exploring a knowledge jungle: with new territory to cover and unknown collection ‘creatures’ of different shapes and patterns, DCW team members were often cutting through undergrowth and forging new paths.

It soon became clear that there was a problem with our current system, namely that the process of digitizing content and creating digital collections seemed more like a favor system instead of a codified process. Subject selectors and curators felt forced to reach out to their preferred points of contact and were unsure how to sustain the digitization process. To address this, DCW created avenues for transferring knowledge between units and individuals. After fits and starts, two DCW members devised a particularly complex use case designed to challenge the team. This theoretical project, comprised of everything from manuscripts to a tea set, required involvement from every department in the library. DCW members were asked to describe and chart how this collection would move through their respective units on large whiteboards. Over the course of several marathon working sessions, the group came to a shared understanding of how this project would progress through the library (see Image 1). The final narrative and workflow for this use case had clearly defined roles, hand-offs, and unit involvement. This was crucial in establishing a shared understanding across units.

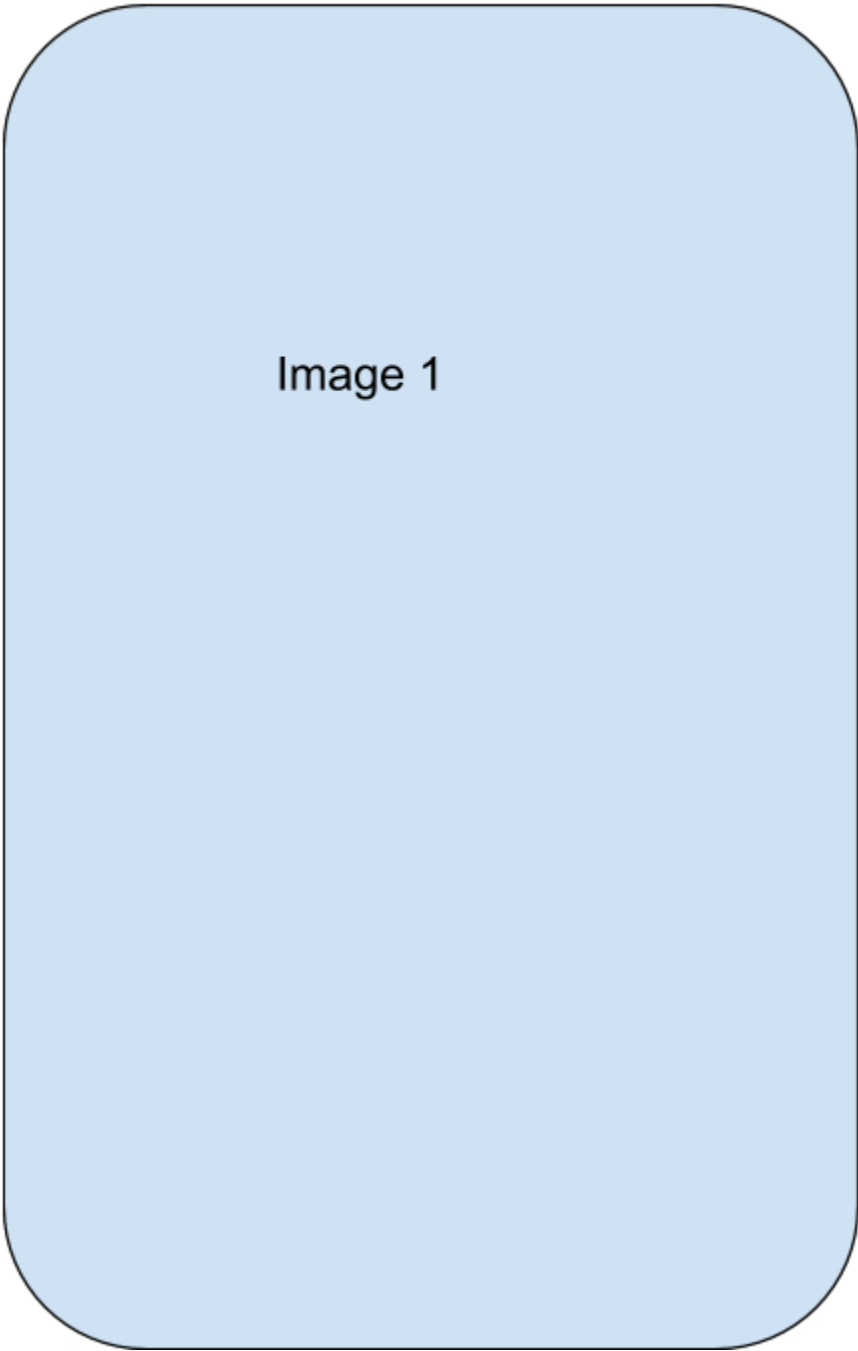


Image 1

Image 1: Our first use case, which would impact every unit in the library.

## **Summer 2018: Demise of the Favor System**

Having worked through the most intricate use case possible, the team had a clear vision of their task and set out to develop a set of use cases based on requests. At the end of the project, there were nine distinct use cases: from small collections destined for our institutional repository to migrating born-digital media, these sample projects were representative workflows that could flow smoothly. Each use case brought a different challenge to the team, including: how content is ingested into our repository, how we communicate with units to request work, and how a selector will know when the item is accessible online. This extensive and iterative process necessitated many small meetings between units: representatives would meet outside of DCW to describe their workflows to one another and decide how the process would flow. While time consuming, our team produced robust use cases with customized workflows represented in simple diagrams, resulting in a clear understanding of unit and individual responsibilities.

For the remainder of the summer, the team tested six of the nine use cases. With every implementation, more issues emerged and additional solutions were created. The implementation process was crucial for ensuring the workflows would proceed as anticipated. During this time, we refined supplementary documents in response to questions raised early in the process, all aimed at clarifying and sharing knowledge across the library. The first of these was a glossary of terms and acronyms, an extensive document that ensured we were working from the same definition. The second deliverable was a thorough description of the various storage and access systems available to our library. For each system, we defined the scope, formats accepted, primary function, access controls, and set about the units and individuals responsible for managing the system and uploading content.

Developing use cases, testing workflows, and creating the supplementary deliverables was incredibly time consuming, requiring the investment of dozens of meeting hours. However, it was ultimately crucial to establishing a shared vocabulary and clearer understanding of unit roles and responsibilities. This common knowledge was reported back to DCW Team Members' units, and we realized the favor system had toppled.

### **Fall 2018: Rise of the Case Managers**

In early October, there was a moment of panic among our team. There were only six weeks left in our team charge when we realized that selectors, one of the primary audiences of our work, had no way to interact with the workflows we had painstakingly defined. The workflows alone did not answer the question *“How do items move from selection, through digitization, to being preserved and accessible to library patrons?”* These workflows are more like blueprints: collections may have a different path depending on desired outcomes and identified needs, meaning workflows may need customization. Moreover, these workflows were more important for the units responsible for the work; while they clarify hand-offs and roles, the workflows also require negotiation and compromise. Lastly, a selector has their own responsibilities to attend to on a daily basis. It is unreasonable, and unsustainable, to assume the selector should track their own requests. With all of these concerns, we wondered how to ensure DCW's success continued and this process would be communicated to selectors. Enter the hero: the Case Manager.

The Case Manager, based on project management principles, is a low-tech approach to overseeing workflows and ensuring the timely completion of requests. The Case Manager

provides guidance and support for digitization and born-digital projects, and serves as a liaison between units. As a facilitator, they are also responsible for customizing workflows and keeping the selector apprised of all progress and impediments. In short, this person is the primary point of contact for all project stakeholders (see Image 2). We recognize that there are various project management software that provide some support with tracking and communication. However, we opted for the personal and low-tech approach in order to rebuild trust in the process and to better understand the different types of requests.

### **Winter 2018 to Present: Let Them Eat Cake**

In December, we were fortunate enough to celebrate the

successes of DCW with a cake, complete with edible workflows (see Image 3). We thanked our colleagues for their hard work and took the holiday break to relish our victories. Upon our return in January, we set about sustaining and extending the work by building a community of practice around case management, namely a team of individuals dedicated to ensuring the timely completion of projects. We officially established this second team, the Digital Collections Oversight Team (DCOT) in March with support from our library cabinet.

The success of DCW was due, at least in part, to the cross-unit collaboration and knowledge sharing and building, and we are looking to continue this in DCOT. The team is expanding to include new roles to perpetuate the transparency and processes established thus far,

Image 2

Image 2: The case manager serves as a liaison between requesters, the workflows, and the units responsible for the work. Image by Patrick Rader (CC-BY-NC-ND).

and to support the work of shepherding cases. In addition to Case Managers, we have recruited unit liaisons, who serve as unit representatives, that are empowered to make decisions and report on unit capacities. These individuals are not necessarily in leadership or administrative roles, as we recruited individuals who are responsible for the work. In the event our current Case Managers are overwhelmed with work, we have also recruited a few supplemental Case Managers who will monitor projects as needed. Lastly, our cabinet sponsor will lead an assessment group, which will study the process from request to ingest to discover the patterns of requests, better understand problems and develop solutions organically. While we did not hire any new personnel to fill these roles, many units have encouraged current employees interested in digital collection work to collaborate with us in light of this organizational need. So far, the response to the call for participation has exceeded expectations.

## **Conclusion**

The success of DCW and the creation of DCOT has led to a resolution revolution in the library. Projects are completed in a timely manner. Selectors receive prompt replies to digitization requests and are more aware of timelines and capabilities. Workflow participants know their roles and responsibilities. As we continue to learn and grow, we are optimistic that pain points will



Image 3: Our celebration cake, complete with two workflows.



become obvious and solutions can be sourced from those responsible for the work. The new team will continue to promote transparency, timeliness, and accountability while ensuring all successes are celebrated; after all, workflows taste better on a cake.