Digitization process provides access to university history

BY CYNTHIA WASHICKO – POSTED ON FEBRUARY 23, 2012

As the head of a collaboration between the Pollak Library, Information Technology and University of Michigan Goals Initiative (UMGI), Susan Tschabrun is leading a project to digitize documents chronicling Cal State Fullerton’s history.

The project, funded by a UMGI grant, takes historical documents and images from the university archives to scan and eventually digitally upload to the Internet for public access.

As part of the digitization process, each document will be scanned and processed using Optical Character Recognition (OCR), which recognizes the letters in the document to make it easily searchable. The OCR process will make the previously archived documents accessible to students.

“Watching the university kind of grow and evolve through that documentation is fascinating, and with it being searchable I think that … people will be able to go back and maybe understand how the university evolved,” said Tschabrun.

That evolution is thoroughly documented in the archives, which contain historical material ranging as far back to the university’s first years.

“I just think that right now all the information about the university is buried, and when it’s easily searchable I think that students will have fun with it,” Tschabrun said. “I think that it will be possible to actually have a research paper on university topics. Right now … that would be hard.”

These documents will open a new vein of information on the university that is difficult to find elsewhere.

Albert Ybarra, 36, one of the graduate students working to digitize the documents, said the scope of information is what makes these documents so valuable.

“It will give students an area of research that has been neglected. It’s like an homage to our school … it’s good for students to see how far we’ve come,” said Ybarra.

Looking at the evolution of the university also provides students with context to compare where it is now, said Abraham Johnson, 31, a history graduate student and president of the History Students Association.

“(The documents) will help students to see the progress of the school, see where it came from, where it’s going,” said Johnson.

This information, Johnson said, may only be of interest to a specific set of students, detracting from its overall campus impact.

“I think that if anybody wanted to do an oral project on the school that would be a lot of good data for them,” Johnson said. “It will consolidate the information so you don’t have to go to different newspapers and will make research on the school a lot easier, whether or not the interest is there we won’t know until it’s out.”

For those students not looking to research CSUF’s beginnings the project will still be of use, allowing transfer or graduate students easy access to past course catalogs for course descriptions and possibly providing new jobs on campus.

“I don’t think the project will stop and we’ll stop digitizing … (the project) can be run with mostly student workers, and that’s useful because it makes jobs for students, and so I don’t see it stopping when the grant money runs out at the end of May,” Tschabrun said.

Lack of material will certainly not bring the project to an end, as the project will move from documents and images to the more difficult digitization of historic audio and video sources.
“This is just the beginning because this is just the start of the grant,” Ybarra said. “We have so many more collections we want to bring online.”

**TAGS:** Cynthia Washicko, Daily Titan, digitization, Pollak Library, technology

About Cynthia Washicko

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