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Students, alumni scholarly efforts preserved online

Story by Amelia Benner '09



Scholarly Communications Librarian Stephanie Davis-Kahl recently finished uploading two decades' worth of programs from Illinois Wesleyan's John Wesley Powell Research Conference onto Digital Commons, the University's online archive.

Her excitement is infectious as she shows off the results of her work, organized neatly on the computer screen. In the past year, she says, more than 10,000 documents have been downloaded by both members of the Wesleyan community and the wider public.

"I try not to be a numbers person," she says, "but I'm pretty happy with that."

Davis-Kahl calls the Digital Commons an "online archive of exceptional student work, both scholarly and creative. ... Not just papers that were graded 'A' but the best of the best."

Visitors can browse or search a collection of over 3,000 documents — mostly papers by current and former students, but also historical records, faculty scholarships and video/audio recordings.

"I see the Digital Commons as a key way to celebrate the work of our students and faculty, share our scholarly achievements with the world and preserve that content for future generations," says University Librarian Karen Schmidt. "IWU students and faculty have a highly productive record of remarkable artistic, creative and scholarly work, and we're very proud to be able to share this with prospective students and families, as well as current students and our alumni."

Although most of the Commons' documents are text, Davis-Kahl says that she has uploaded video recordings of this year's Gallery Walk of student art and performances of student compositions.

"I'd love to get to the point where we have even more music and even more art," she says. "We thought that was a really compelling way to capture students' artistic endeavors."

Most of Wesleyan's student academic journals are now accessible on Digital Commons, including *Res Publica* (political science), *The Park Place Economist* (economics), *The Delta* (English) and *Constructing the Past* (history). The user-friendly layout of the site allows readers to search all issues of a particular journal, and documents from the Digital Commons can even be found via search engines like Google.



Papers available on Digital Commons range from the 1992 mathematics honors project "On the Construction of Prime Desert n-Tuplets" by Derek M. Marusz '92 to "Everybody Drinks Water": Mark Twain's Critique of Social Darwinism" by Sarah Vales '04, one of the "All-Time Top 10 Downloads" on the site.

Stephanie Davis-Kahl

Documents uploaded to the Digital Commons must be scanned and run through optical character recognition (OCR) software. Because OCR doesn't always recognize text from older, often typewritten documents, uploading historic materials such as the minutes of faculty meetings from decades past can take more time.

The idea for the Digital Commons came from the library's strategic-planning sessions in 2004, but the current system didn't go online until 2007. The platform for the Commons is provided by bepress (Berkeley Electronic Press). Many other universities use this service to publish faculty work, but Davis-Kahl and her colleagues saw an opportunity to do more.

"We thought about the fact that there's a lot of faculty-student collaboration going on and a lot of original ideas from students, and decided that using this tool to collect student work was the way we wanted to go."

One of the benefits of the Digital Commons, Davis-Kahl says, is that students and faculty can link directly to their work from online resumes or personal Web sites. The authors of the papers also retain all rights to their intellectual property, granting The Ames Library only the opportunity to display their work.

But even more than that, the archive provides insight into the intellectual issues that interest Illinois Wesleyan students and a way to share their work with those outside the University.

"We feel that this is an unprecedented opportunity to give a deep and clear picture of the University in a way that's accessible on the Web," Davis-Kahl says. "It's a way to demonstrate the vitality of our intellectual community."