

Legacy Matters: How Academic Repositories Can Fulfill Emotional Requests | Peer to Peer Review

By Kelly J. Applegate on October 6, 2016 [Leave a Comment](#)

When I tell folks what I do at IDEALS (Illinois Digital Environment for Access to Learning & Scholarship), usually the first question is, “What’s an institutional repository?” Unless, of course, I’m speaking to another academic or library worker—and sometimes they ask even then. Then, once explained, I often hear the common assumption: “Theses and dissertations, right?” Well, yes, it is true that those items make up a large corpus of repositories, particularly those in large research universities like the University of Illinois. However, there are two aspects of repositories that many people do not know about:



1. Many academic repositories contain a vast amount of material beyond the requisite theses and dissertations.
2. Those that do ingest them often contain such documents dating back to the 1800s or, in some cases, earlier.

That might not sound like something to get too excited about. But, do you know who does get enthusiastic about that? The web surfer who stumbles across something her beloved great-great-grandfather wrote in 1886, or his father presented at a conference in 1970, or a whole host of other legacy material that can be found in an institutional repository.

In my time as a graduate assistant, I have received multiple emails like these:

“My late father Dr. Laxman Singh graduated from UIUC from the Agronomy Department with a PhD in 1969. I am trying to obtain a soft copy (pdf) of his dissertation for his grand children and grand nieces-nephews to see and read. Not only was he the first in our extended family to travel overseas but also the first to obtain a PhD. His work means a lot to all of us. I’ll be grateful if you can help me obtain a pdf version of his dissertation, ‘Maternal and Cytoplasmic Effects on Protein Content of Soyabean Seed.’

Sincerely,

Padmaraj Singh”

“My name is Sameer Malik, my father Sarmad Malik is an alumni at University of Illinois. His PhD Dissertation is ‘An Experimental Study of Flame Holding’ and we are trying to get a copy which we wanted to gift him for his birthday which is coming up on November 7th. Is there a way I can get a PDF version regardless of the cost? If someone could please contact me regarding a solution for this. Your help would be greatly appreciated.

Regards,

Sameer Malik”

In my correspondence with these patrons, it was clear that their interest did not at all lie with the subject matter of the documents they sought. Rather, the brass ring they were grasping for was an intricate piece of their own family history. They have placed a high value on an academic achievement of a family member, and believe that such accomplishments are of maximum importance to their own family heritage and culture.

These sentiments aren’t often considered in discussions of digital repositories and their dual quest for preservation and access. Usually the dialog concerning these technological warehouses of scholarly output is about academic facts, the substance of scholarly research. Yet there is a discernible warmth to the conversations I had with these two patrons requesting access to material normally restricted to the campus community only.

When I contacted Padmaraj Singh to ask if I could quote him in this piece, he said:

“Delighted to hear from you once again. It will be difficult for me to explain how much my father’s dissertation has meant to me. One can notice that his subsequent professional work was very much influenced by his training at UIUC.

I was a year old when we arrived in Urbana-Champaign. I lost count of how many times my eyes went moist on reading the last sentence of his acknowledgements:

‘The patience and encouragement of his wife, Ruxmani, and children, Jyoti, Tilotma, and Padmaraj, have been a great help to the author, especially when these attributes are lacking on his part.’

Thank you so much for keeping us in mind.

Best Regards

Padmaraj”

This may seem more like the work of a university archive than an institutional repository. In a way, it is, as often the mission statements of university archives use the word “legacy” in their literature and web copy. Perhaps if repositories like ours started using the word more in our rhetoric, our user base could be expanded to include folks like Sameer and Padmaraj who aren’t necessarily looking for traditional academic research, but, instead, for their own history.

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