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**Documenting Student Life: Using Omeka to  
Connect Students to the University Archives**

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**Abstract**

One of the many functions of our university's archive is to document the history of student life and student organizations on campus. In the past students collected scrapbooks and other memorabilia, some of which would find its way to the university's archive. Now, with the advancements of technology students are more likely to have images stored on their smartphones and posted to social media than to donate these materials to the archives. To better document student life on campus, the Special Collections Department at our university library developed a website called STATE-IT to engage students with the University Archives. Utilizing the Omeka platform, we house digitized archival materials, digital exhibits, and oral histories as well as provide a simple way for students to become part of university history by contributing images, videos, and documents to the University Archives. STATE-IT provides students with a convenient option to contribute their experiences as a student at our university while also giving them a glimpse into the past.

Keywords: STATE-IT; Omeka; University Archives; outreach programs; student organizations; Terre Haute; Indiana

## **Introduction**

Many institutional archives struggle to gain and maintain student participation in documenting the student experience. The history, images, and records of students and their various organizations are fundamental to the narrative of the university. Capturing the experiences of students and campus life is a difficult task as students create organizations, plan and attend events, and maintain a social media presence, all of which are rarely documented in university archives. At this institution, the Special Collections department wanted to increase students' use of services and resources, and increase student donations to the archives to grow student-centered collections.

## **Literature Review**

The institutional history of a university is a valuable resource for local and professional historians, school administrators, the local community, as well as past, present, and future students. University Archives document many aspects of the university's history such as the development of the university, school architecture, employee and student records, meeting minutes, oral histories, images, and memorabilia. The Archives also document students' personal experiences and the history of student run organizations.

Student life, student organizations, and their respective artifacts serve as a wealth of data for research in many areas of study. In 1994, John Straw investigated why archivist should value documenting student life. He states "The answers lie in the need for serious, scholarly, and systematic research in the area of student life from many angles so that educators can understand the realities of the education process" (p. 28). Straw emphasizes the value of documenting the similarities and diversity of student life

from the history of hazing and development of Greek organizations to racial tensions and rioting on campuses (Straw, 1994).

Samuels, (1992) also acknowledged the historical value of student life information for the institution and outside researchers. Although this information provides great insight, there are many barriers to collecting and maintaining the records. Samuels, highlights legal considerations, technical issues, and concerns about database security (1992).

Students make up much of the university's population, yet they are underrepresented in archival records and archival use. Correcting this gap is becoming more problematic as technology develops. The days of scrapbooks are behind us. Students are documenting their lives largely online through social media and most images today are digital and living in the cloud.

According to the Office of Campus Life, there are currently 270 registered student organizations at this Midwestern institution (Author, 2017). Leaders of these organizations eventually graduate, while some transfer to other institutions or simply stop participating in their organizations. When archives personnel are able to find organizations and make connections, they may be short lived and new bridges are required.

At Iowa State University, the archives received limited donations from students. In response, the archives collected oral histories from attendees at one of the largest annual student run events on campus. Christian (2002) reported that by collecting stories directly from students and other attendees, they were able to collect more in-depth details from individuals than they could have discovered from any records. In addition, by

participating in these events, they were able to make personal connections and advertise their services, which led to building a Student Life collection.

Swain (2008) reported the University of Illinois, Urban-Champaign (UIUC) wanted to build their student collections because they were valuable for documenting the study of higher education, social trends, and social movements, and held potential for various fields of research. UIUC cited issues such as students' habits of discarding documents rather than preserving them and lack of resources and time. In response, they created an innovative outreach program to engage their students and grow their Student Life and Culture Collection. The archives staff focused on connecting with students through the student administrators and advisors. These stakeholder were in touch with students regularly and knowledgeable about student activities. They also requested organizations' records and newsletters. These combined efforts led to strengthened relationships with student organizations. By hosting events for student organizations in the archives, they were able to provide trainings in best practices for archiving, preservation, and collect information for the archives.

Many other institutions face similar problems. According to a study by Wagner (2013), most archivists do not collect nor do they schedule collections of student life material, although they do see value in it the material. Wagner describes that archivists believe the collections would be used, but there are not enough materials to collect regularly, and it is difficult to make the connections with the student organizations. Like the University of Illinois and Iowa, the archives staff at this institution were confident their students had great stories to share and needed to be better represented in the archives.

## **The Archives**

In this Midwestern university, the University Archives serves as the official repository for the university's history, from its inception in 1865 to the present (Hiddle, 2010a). The Archives houses various unique collections of university records, memorabilia, images, meeting minutes, and other historical items that document operations and campus life. The Archives' staff provide access through the Special Collections reading room for patrons to view archival items. Archives, along with the rest of Special Collections, also curate items into Fall, Spring, and Summer exhibits that are open to patrons.

Resources available through the University Archives are also used in classes to facilitate critical thinking skills through the use of primary sources. Recently, the Special Collections department, with the assistance of the University Archivist, received funding to purchase an oral history booth to help record and preserve oral histories as part of a Special Collections project for the university's Sesquicentennial (150 years). The oral history booth provides another great resource for capturing history and personal experiences, which can then be accessible through the university. The Oral History Booth was purchased with a mini grant from the Sesquicentennial Committee. It is a 6 ft. by 6 ft. booth frame with sound-proof padding that is moveable and can be taken down and put back together. This booth is used to record audio and video recording of oral histories and has been primarily used at events, such as Homecoming, to capture oral histories even in noisy areas.

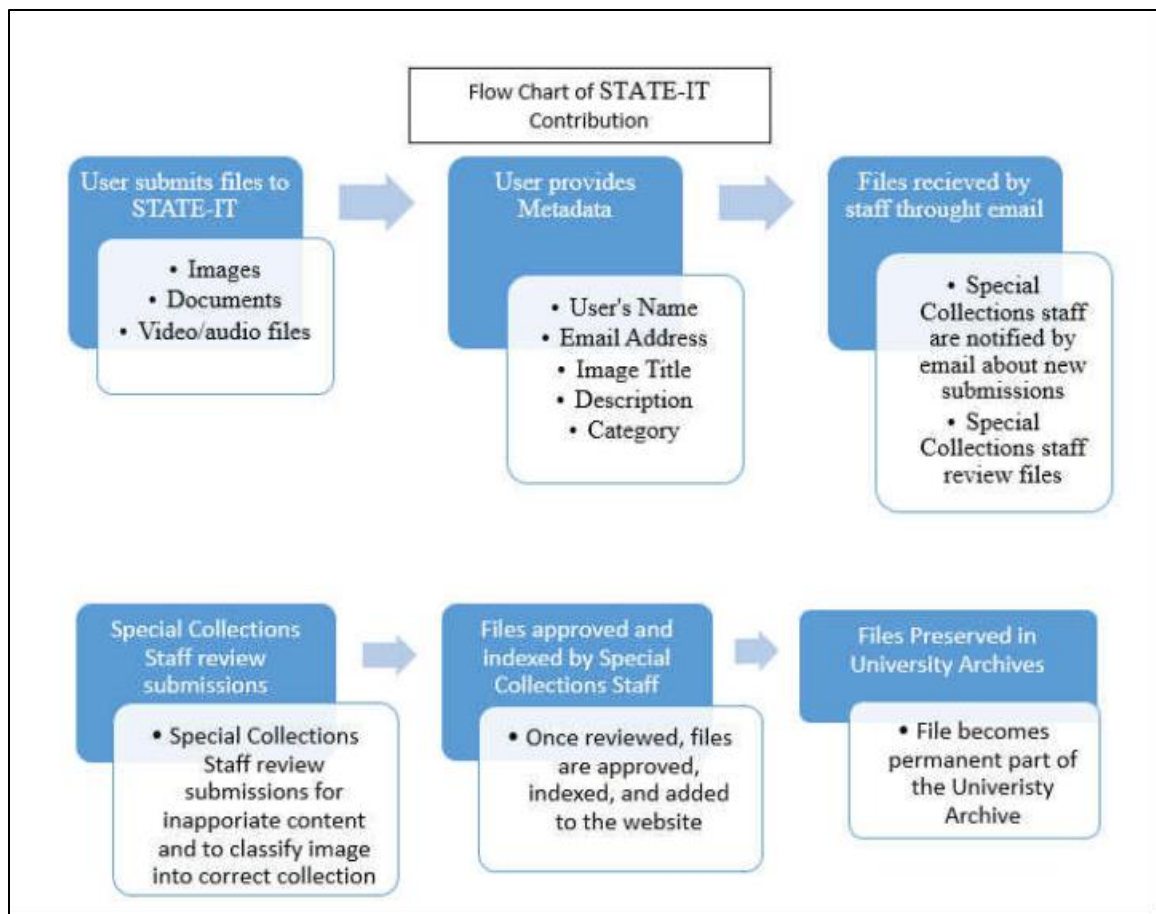
University Archives resources and services are more frequently utilized by faculty and staff than students at this institution. Outreach efforts are required to increase student

awareness of available collections and encourage students to contribute to and access the University Archives. With the upcoming celebrations, including the university's Sesquicentennial as well as Homecoming, Special Collections began a campaign to increase student awareness and use of archival resources and services by incorporating a new web product that utilized a software called Omeka.

### **A Review of the Omeka Software**

Previous staff members developed an online exhibit for Rare Books and Manuscript collections using the open source collection management software Omeka. Often employed by libraries, museums, and educational intuitions, Omeka provides a user-friendly environment to share digitized collections on the web. With customizable themes and various plugins, this platform provides an attractive way to display a digitized version of an exhibit featured in the library, thus expanding access to distance students and the public.

In order to make the Archives more accessible to students and easier to donate materials to the collection, the Special Collections department created STATE-IT. They began by redesigning the Omeka site to be a collection of past and present stories, images, videos, and recordings donated by students, faculty, staff, and alumni of this university. The site gained features, including a new and updated look, as well as newly-added digital exhibits, oral histories, and digitized university holdings. In order to capture the many digital photos students take on their cells phones, they added a contribution plugin. This plugin to allow students to contribute images, audio, and videos to the STATE-IT website and University Archives from any desktop or mobile device.



### **Roadblocks Encountered While Planning and Executing the Website**

Although the site was already constructed and functional, the team required assistance to make needed changes on the front and back end to create the desired site. Omeka was created to be relatively user-friendly and straightforward, allowing customization with the use of plugins. The plugins provide specific services and resources to increase the sites functionality. Special Collections staff found the plugins offered to be very helpful. They chose several plugins that would be needed and began to implement them. Unfortunately, this is where the project stalled. The back end of the Omeka site required command line and none of the Special Collections staff were familiar with this. They sought help from the library's Systems department, which provides technological support to the library. The Special Collections department



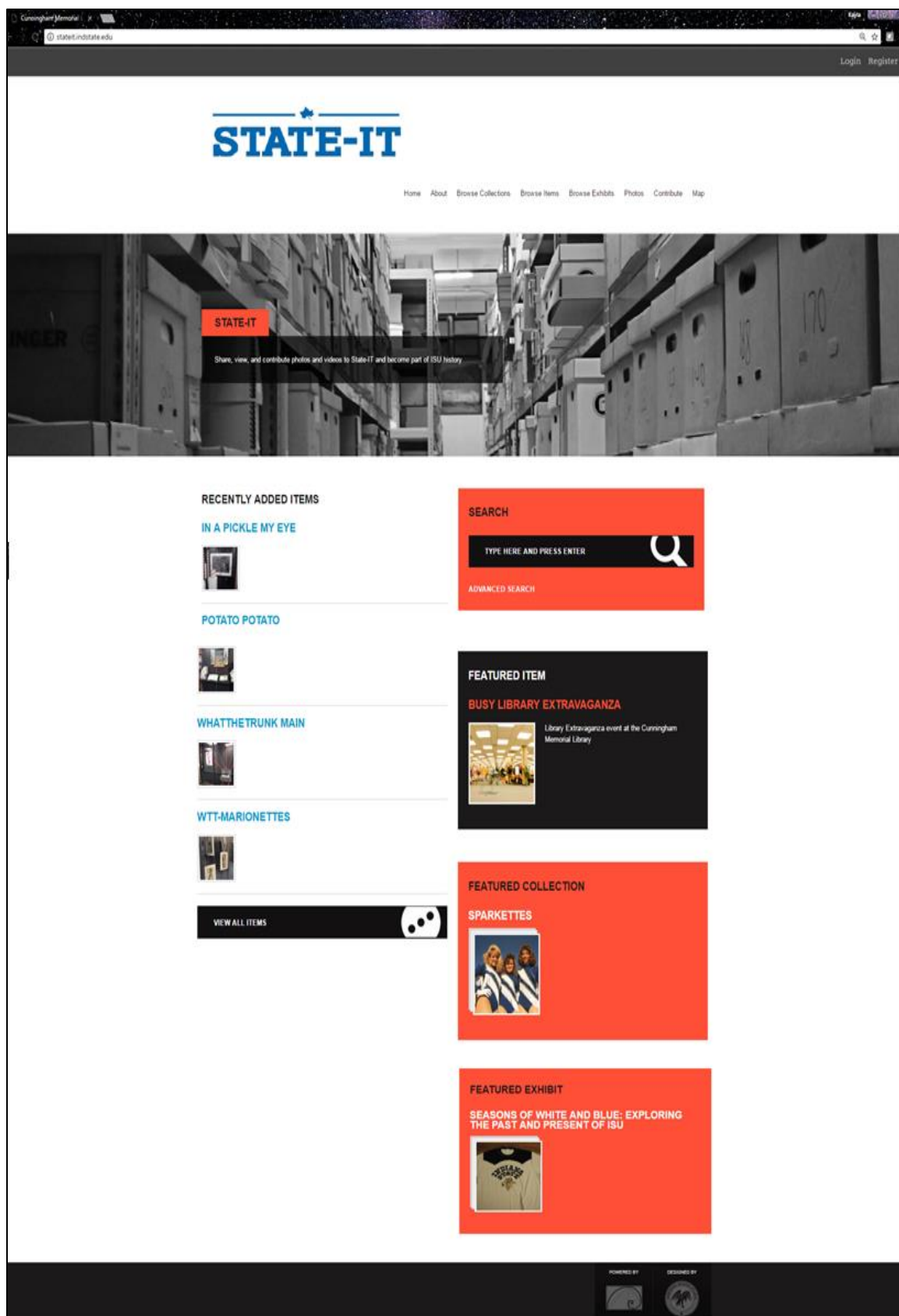
received assistance with installing a number of plugins and the project continued forward (See Appendix).

### **Design and Soft Launch**

The initial design for the Omeka site came after reviewing other Omeka sites. One in particular that inspired the STATE-IT site was Florida Memory. Their site was visually appealing, well-organized, had limited text, and emphasized images. After deciding to create the initial website using a similar template, Special Collections staff selected images and text and began to make mock-ups. Next, they presented their request to Systems, and within a few weeks, had a basic page created and began to enter data and test the site (see image on following page). Despite making progress, the team required more assistance with the back end coding, so they hired a computer science major as a Graduate Assistant (GA), giving them the site as their sole project. This proved to be very successful. Although the GA did have to consult Systems often and collaborate with them, he was able to get the software updated and the plugins installed, allowing the department staff to upload digitized archival holdings, oral histories, and exhibits. The plugins assisted with organizing the files and providing access to digitized exhibits featured in the library and oral histories of students and alumni.

### **Spreading the Word**

STATE-IT was officially introduced to students as a new service at an annual library promotional event, Library Extravaganza, in September 2016. The site was on display and students had an opportunity to learn about its services and uses, view a live demonstration of the product, and ask questions. The site was well received by students, particularly those associated with student organizations, sports teams, and history majors.



In an effort to gain more student awareness and participation with University Archives, STATE-IT was featured at the fall exhibit “Rooted in Blue: The History and Importance of Student Organizations” opening program. Student organizations were invited to view the fall exhibit. At this event, they could participate in a private photo-shoot. They were invited to donate organizational items, documents, and photographs to the Archives. The digital images were subsequently added to the STATE-IT website. The staff also used an opportunistic approach to advertise the site. When encountered students and faculty on campus, they would find ways to bring the STATE-IT site into conversations. This was a successful strategy.

### **Current Activities**

The Special Collections department began by creating a new collection for an academic student organization on campus that one of the student workers was involved with. Special Collections provided the space, set up a photo-shoot for the group, and demonstrated the process of contributing to STATE-IT. They were grateful and began spreading the word about the website. The staff was then approached by a student involved in a fraternity on campus, who was requesting assistance with a digitization project. Staff members suggested that the digitized images would be perfect for the STATE-IT site. Next, they scheduled a meeting to discuss further options. The fraternity had 25-30 sets of composite images of current and past members. They requested that the images be digitized for display in their fraternity house. The Special Collections staff provided a demonstration of the site and described ideas for creating a collection to display the digitized images on the site as a part of the University Archives. He was very excited and wanted to begin immediately; he also shared that they had recently renovated

their fraternity house. He was notified that a collection had been dedicated to displaying and documenting the history of campus buildings and that theirs could be a great addition. The Special Collections department was offered a tour of the new facility, and devised a plan to create a collection. This collection would display the historical legacy, academic success, and the unique features and artifacts associated with their organization. Once the relationship was established between Special Collections and the fraternity, they began to plan their collection. The Special Collections staff leveraged that relationship to encourage other fraternities and sororities to participate.

Once other organizations heard about the projects in progress for this fraternity, they were inspired and it promoted competition amongst them. Whenever encountering students who were a part of an organization or sporting club, Special Collections staff would show or describe what was currently held in the archives for them and then showed examples of what was being created for other organizations. The students would become very excited and motivated to also be a part of the site and to make their collections as good as or better than other clubs and organizations.

### **Conclusion**

STATE-IT has been open to the campus for two semesters and is gaining more popularity as the collections continue to grow. Special Collections staff have created collections for all the reported student organizations on campus and sent invitation postcards to encourage their participation in STATE-IT. They began collaborating with the Office of Campus Life to receive notification when a new student organization is created. Once they are notified, they may provide information about STATE-IT to each new organization, as well as an invitation to participate. Special Collections staff also

utilize the Oral History Booth to collect video and audio recordings of attendees' experiences at large institutional events, such as the Library's Extravaganza, and provide access to these recordings through STATE-IT. They created a social media collection to collect a record of all the social media posts in the Special Collections departments and archive them in STATE-IT. This provides a central archival storage for documenting the social media presence across platforms. The applications of this website seem limitless and they are working towards a more aggressive promotion of the site in the future.

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## Appendix

### *List of Installed Plugins for STATE-IT*

- Collection Tree - This plugin gives administrators the ability to create a hierarchical tree of their collections.
- Contribution - This plugin allows one to collect items from visitors
- CSV Import - This plugin imports items, tags, and files from CSV files.
- Exhibit Builder - This plugin builds rich exhibits using Omeka.
- Guest Users – This plugin creates guest user role. It can't access the backend, but allows plugins to use an authenticated user.
- Simple Pages – This plugin creates a simple contact form for users to contact the administrator.
- Social Bookmarking – This plugin creates customizable list of social bookmarking sites on each item page.
- Commenting - This plugin allows commenting on Items, Collections, Exhibits, and more.
- Docs Viewer - This plugin embeds a Google document viewer into item show pages. PDF documents, PowerPoint presentations, TIFF files, and some Microsoft Word documents are supported.
- Geolocation - This plugin adds location info and maps to Omeka.
- Item Relations - This plugin allows administrators to define relations between items.
- Digital Object Linker Plugin - This plugin allows one to embed digital images from the external sources to be displayed on the item pages.