Re-imagining The DigitalCommons Collections At The University of Rhode Island: Innovative Approaches Using Technology to Advance the Student Experience

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Proposal Application for 2012
Innovative Approaches Using Technology to Advance the Student Experience

1. Summary of the Proposed Initiative: Indicate the goals and provide a description of the initiative; describe how it is intended or designed to impact the student experience (learning, co-curricular, or nonacademic). Highlight the innovative aspects of the proposed initiative.

At the University thousands of people pass through different areas of the campus and/or attend many events, which may not put them in relation to others who share alternative perspectives. Every day there are countless programs from the Cultural Centers using language or shared perspectives individuals have never been exposed to. What do many people tend to do when they seek information today? They use their smart phones or computers to seek out information from a source directly. While they may find a site informing them on the topic they are seeking, it may not be one directing back to the information in our community. Only from the Digital Commons can a person get what they are searching for in the URI community from a regular search engine, and get an overview of the information they are seeking in relation to all of the work being done on campus in one convenient place, once they have been submitted to the Commons.

The Digital Commons is a searchable database often overlooked by institutions. Utilizing the Commons functions offers the audience the ability to link to data (videos, ebooks, audio, transcripts) stored here or on other sites (YouTube, personal or professional website, University) that may work in collaboration with an author or presenter(s). The information uploaded to these Collections will have the ability to be communicated instantly across multiple platforms (IPad, smartphones, lap tops, other wired devices) and students matriculating as freshman will not have to learn a new system before they can get access to it. All the documents we upload will be search engine optimized and the world outside campus, as well as on, can easily access the wealth of information previously left unconsidered.

Utilizing the Digital Commons informs people and directs them back to the University to work with the information in a collegiate atmosphere, allowing them to recognize the partnership people from the URI community have invested in important issues. It supports open access to information and we can see how many people download and cite the information which lets us see what issues, trends, and topics, the overall community is interested in. Citations are now programed in the system so it will be easier to use the works collected in a professional manner. Having up to date data on what is going on at the University will encourage people to work with the URI community, participating online and in person, with the information on issues that have personal and professional importance. Individuals can expand their social environment, while relating their personal and professional interests to challenges, artistic expression, and bridge the information to professional contacts. Thus facilitating individual’s opportunities to build social presence around issues that matter to them, and allowing them to build a body of works that speaks to their face-to-face and digital identity.
The Digital Commons have the potential to appeal to individuals with different learning styles (audio, visual, and kinesthetic) via a blended environment (online and face-to-face) in which to discover and share information and utilize it through discussion, creation, and synthesis. The Commons has the potential to combine both the informal social aspects of sharing with formal professional interactions and learning that will impact life skills and better prepare people to work together and collaborate in this global information economy. The blending of social and co-curricular aspects, academic and nonacademic, will result in a more connected URI community by establishing a centralized platform where everyone can come together to become informed, share, and develop a piece of the community as a stakeholder. I (Joseph Santiago) believe that when we get together to share and talk about our experiences, we begin to see ourselves as individuals that are part of a constellation of culture and diversity instead of perceiving diversity as something that is separate from us and is acting upon our lives. To me, this is the very definition of a stakeholder for a community, and an important perspective that I want to impart to the leaders of tomorrow. Utilizing the Digital Commons will innovate the student experience and enrich the learning of the community and the understanding of each other.

As people work towards their goals and the causes of importance to them, they will be able to see the progress made and the part they play in the historical record of their times. Once uploaded to the Commons information can be moderated simply if need be, and can extend the community’s reach to inform and encourage people to work with current issues in their classes as well as their social groups. Utilizing the Digital Commons can change the idea of a four to five year memory within the student body, to one spanning generations of students, as new arrivals can discover and work with the information of times past as they seek to discover who they are and what they want through their experiences and questions here at the University.

If only one person from each of the Cultural Centers and Departments began using the Commons in this manner, it could provoke interest in others and spread outwards into the community. To make this project successful we need people out there assisting others with use of the Commons and showing them how simple the system is to use and get the word out. We are proposing two undergraduates and two graduate students to learn the system from Joseph Santiago and be trained with software and hardware that will allow URI to be innovative using these tools for the next five to ten years. These students will create, record, and share what has been done in other areas to provide examples and assist them in capturing many of the events put on in the community but never recorded. When Joseph Santiago presented his work with the Digital Commons to the Equity Council ([Click to check out PDF & movie]) he got feedback that people felt intimidated to take on innovative technology venues because too often they have felt that they are left to learn on their own with the technology or software. For this reason we are seeking to minimize discomfort and irritation as we seek to get this initiative as close to autopilot as possible. Taking this approach will help ensure the Commons are utilized even after this project concludes.

URI can do what famous websites like Ted Talks ([Click to check out site]) does right now because the only difference between us is we do not currently offer information to our community in this way. We have many original programs, speakers, and talent, and if we want to continue to be innovative, we need to take the next step. The Digital Commons software is a subscription to software-as-service that is hosted by BePress. The cost of this service is paid by the library, and they are committed to continuing with this product/service. The subscription price does not depend on the amount of data put in storage, and there is no cost to members of the URI community who seek to create and post content. The library used to pay the cost from the materials budget, but as of this fiscal year, the Provost is providing line-item funding for the digital library initiatives in our budget. So the many programs of the past that were
web streamed and are now stored somewhere that is difficult to access could now be used to attract talent and educate the community that couldn’t be there in person.

Using the Digital Commons as a unifying force for the community will establish a centralized place for the overall community to come together to discover the common elements in all our works so collaboration will be achieved more easily. This desire for a centralized location to get informed is a growing sentiment in the URI community. Utilizing the Digital Commons Cultural Collections allows us to present our community and our works as an active cultural resource. To do this now before more books for student’s classes become eBooks and smart phones become more powerful computers, because the environment will change and we would then have to catch up before there would be another opportunity to stand out in such a way. The Commons can provide a service to the community that will set URI apart in its use of technology to recruit, retain, teach, train, and mentor the global leaders of tomorrow today.

2. Indicate specifically how the initiative will be assessed or evaluated in terms of meeting its goals and determining actual outcomes of impact on the student experience. How will goals and outcomes be measured?

Often there are challenges in measuring the learning outcomes of nonacademic activities because participation can be sporadic, which may give way to misleading conclusions. The Digital Commons records how many hits a project has, as well as how many full downloads and citations it has received. These numbers will give an accurate count of how effective the Commons has been in reaching the community at large.

3. Provide a budget breakdown for specifically how the funds would be utilized to support the initiative goals and the timeframe for how the initiative will proceed, including a clear termination date.

Week 1 Monday Jan 16, 2012, Project Begins Initial Meeting: Software/hardware training and setup  
Week 2 Monday Jan 23, 2012, Practice Projects and Project Planning  
Week 3 Monday Jan 30, 2012, Pairing up with a Cultural Center and developing projects  
Week 5 Monday Feb 13, 2012, Training Cultural Center Staff and getting them Setup with the DC.  
Week 7 Monday Feb 27, 2012, Setting up a date to share projects with public  
Week 9 Monday Mar 12, 2012, Documenting FAQ  
Week 10 Monday Mar 19, 2012, Working on system patches and staff training  
Week 12 Monday Apr 2, 2012, Test procedures and documentation for events at the GLBT Symposium  
Week 14 Monday Apr 16, 2012, Public Release of GLBT Symposium Events  
Week 16 Monday Apr 30, 2012, Supporting Community and Staff concerns using DC.  
Week 17 Monday May 7, 2012, End of Project. Closing Documentation