UI develops free, easy-to-use web tool kit for archivists

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Archivists at the University of Illinois Library believe they have built a better tool kit. Their new online collections management program called Archon has more than a few attractive features – not the least of which is that it was developed for "lone archivists with limited technological resources and knowledge," said Scott Schwartz, one of the developers of the software program and the archivist for music and fine arts at Illinois.

The state-of-the-art tool also is free, adaptable to any institutional setting and is easy to download and use.

"We wanted our application to be particularly useful to small, one-person repositories that have been unable to take full advantage of current tools under development," Schwartz said.

According to Chris Prom, assistant university archivist and co-project director, the developers knew the system had to meet staff needs.

"But what really makes it special is that it makes an archives' holdings much more accessible to its users," Prom said. "The program automatically creates its own searchable Web site. It's based on extensive research about how people search for and use archival materials."

Prom said that users can now "browse and search all of our information in one place. They can view photos and other materials we've scanned right alongside descriptions of related materials that are available only in the search room."

"In essence, our primary goal was creating a tool that provides immediate public access to information about various collections of historical documents and records found in archives," Schwartz said, noting that Archon functions in both English and Spanish.

The emphasis in the design was on encouraging efficient work processes.

"We didn't want anyone to become burdened with having to learn complex methods or standards required by the archives profession just to make their collections available to the public in today's online environment," Schwartz said. "We took a minimalist approach, yet didn't sacrifice the standards of the profession. We recognized what people and researchers need to access collections of historical documents preserved in archives, and developed the tools to help put archivists and the public in the driver's seat to meet these important access needs."

As it happens, Archon is one of two major programming efforts that the archives profession is pursuing to enhance the management of libraries', archives' and museums' historical documents and the public's access to the physical and intellectual content contained in these records. The other effort is called the Archivist's Toolkit and is a Mellon Foundation-funded collaboration of several universities.

Schwartz and Prom likened the development of their product to a shoestring
do-it-yourself project in the family garage.

"We knew what we wanted, but every time we added a new feature, we thought of something even better to add on next," Prom said.

To be sure, the archivists had a bit of help building Archon. A couple of "very talented" undergraduate students did much of the programming: Kyle Fox, from Marion, lead developer and graduating senior in

computer science; and Chris Rishel, from Chatham, lead developer prior to 2007, who majored in computer science and chemistry.

Developing Archon was "a very organic process," Prom said. "It wouldn't have happened if we hadn't had such a talented team and the great ideas that Chris and Kyle brought at every step of the development process."

"We provided the vision and a set of expectations and let the students run with it," said Schwartz, who directs the Sousa Archives and Center for American Music at Illinois. Schwartz uses Archon to manage the large Sousa collection database. The archives and center are part of the University Library and the University Archives.

Since Schwartz and Prom presented Archon to a meeting of the Society of American Archivists in August 2006, it has been downloaded nearly 900 times; 117 completed installations of the program have been achieved by a variety of repositories; and some 25 institutions around the world have already committed to Archon. Among those institutions are the College of William and Mary, Purdue University, Southern Illinois University, the University of Houston and the University of West Florida.

"We are a community of users across North America and Europe," Schwartz said, "and our community continues to grow."

Amy Schindler, university archivist in the Special Collections Research Center at the College of William and Mary, is part of the community. She calls the new management program the "Archon miracle."

"This is the first time that users have been able to search more than a token handful of university archives collections outside of a card catalog in the Special Collections Research Center as well as the first time that a

significant number of manuscript collections and university archives collections could be searched through the same interface – whether electronic or card catalog."

Illinois' mammoth University Archives library also is realizing the benefits of getting aboard the Archon express.

"It's a great resource for the University," Prom said, noting that in terms of photographs alone, he has added more than 3,000 of them in the last several months, and that anyone can browse, search and download them from the University Archives Web site. Prom hopes that one day soon the Library will put its important and popular Illinois History and Lincoln Collections into Archon, a Greek word meaning "ruler" or "king." In the Archon's house, the story goes, all the government documents and records were kept.

Source: University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign