

Chapter 9

The Portal to Texas History: Building a Partnership Model for a Statewide Digital Library

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ABSTRACT

The Portal to Texas History serves as a gateway to Texas history materials. The Portal consists of collections hosted by the University of North Texas (UNT) Libraries in partnership and collaboration with over 280 Texas libraries, museums, archives, historical societies, genealogical societies, state agencies, corporations, and private family collections. With a continuously growing collection of over half a million digital resources, The Portal to Texas History stands as an example of a highly successful collaborative digital library which relies heavily on partnerships in order to function at the high level. The proposed book chapter will describe all aspects of establishing the collaborations to create the Portal including the background of the project, marketing the initiative to potential partners, partnership roles and agreements, funding issues and development, technical infrastructure to support partnership models, preservation of all digital master files, research studies to understand user groups and partner benefits, and sustainability issues.

INTRODUCTION

The Portal to Texas HistorySM serves as a gateway to Texas history materials in which users are able to discover anything from an ancestor's picture to a rare historical map. The Portal consists of collections hosted by the University of North Texas (UNT) Libraries in partnership and collaboration with over 280 Texas libraries, museums, archives, historical societies, genealogical societies, state agencies, corporations, and private family collections. With a continuously growing collection of over half a million

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digital resources, The Portal to Texas History stands as an example of a highly successful collaborative digital library which relies heavily on strong, extensive partnerships in order to function at a high level.

This chapter describes all of the aspects of establishing the broad collaborations fueling the Portal, including the background of the project, marketing the initiative to potential partners, partnership roles and agreements, preservation of all digital master files, technical infrastructure to support partnership models, promoting standards and good practice, funding issues and development, research studies to understand partner benefits and user groups, and sustainability issues for a program of this scale.

BACKGROUND

The Portal to Texas History [<http://texashistory.unt.edu>] began in 2002 with a mission of working with institutions in Texas who were interested in digitizing and providing access to their unique resources so users around the world could discover and use these materials for educational efforts, scholarship, personal research, genealogy, or lifelong learning. The original idea for the Portal arose from Cathy Nelson Hartman, a librarian at UNT, who envisioned a robust technological platform to enable collaborators to contribute to and benefit from access to Texas cultural and heritage materials online. Very little of the Texas historical record was available online, and the small number of materials digitized were difficult to locate and use. Hartman convened meetings with stakeholders in seven regional meetings across the state in 2001, visited many individual libraries and museums, and discussed the vision and needs of prospective participants. Face-to-face interactions helped build interest and trust that proved important for the future collaborations and with seeking initial funding. In 2002, Hartman received the Portal's first grant, which was awarded from the State of Texas Telecommunications Infrastructure Fund to create a technical infrastructure for The Portal to Texas History. The grant covered the cost of hardware and software to assist with discovery, preservation and file management for digital collections.

Initially, UNT reached out to potential partners through regional meetings and began conversations about collaboration that resulted in the project going online with two partners. UNT then moved forward in building partnerships by defining thematic grant proposals around either historical events, areas or people. Institutions that held content that fit the scope of the proposals were invited to participate. As the Portal's discoverability and reputation grew, partners often came unsolicited about participating. Selection criteria regarding whether content was worthy of inclusion were very simple: if museums or libraries wanted to make historical content accessible online that was important to their local community, the Portal would add their cultural heritage materials if funding could be identified.

By 2004, The Portal to Texas History was online with a small amount of content, just 191 digital objects. UNT contributed materials from their Special Collections that focused on nineteenth century laws of Texas and the controversy surrounding the annexation of Texas in 1845, and collections from the Portal's first collaborative partner: the Fort Bend Museum and its sister institution the George Ranch Historical Park. The two museums held existing digital images from early projects that they had once placed online. They soon discovered an array of overwhelming technological challenges that caused them to abandon the initiative and pull the images offline. The Portal offered a solution for repurposing these images to make them available to the public again. Other partners arose to join the collaboration, and the amount of content and variety of partners continued to grow. By the end of 2006, the Portal included 20,880 digital objects, and by the end of 2009, there were 77,766. (Statistics for The Portal to Texas History: Items Added, n.d.)

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