



# ADVANCING INCLUSIVE DIGITAL COLLECTIONS AND STUDENT SCHOLARSHIP THROUGH PARTICIPATORY LEARNING APPROACHES

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## INTRODUCTION

Digitization projects are resource-intensive for many academic libraries, requiring significant time, labor, equipment, and space to support. When considering a collection for digitization, librarians and archivists typically consider a variety of factors, such as the rarity or uniqueness of the collection, potential for use in the curriculum, and significance to a research or user community.<sup>1</sup> Digitizing student-created publications, such as literary magazines, preserves students' unique experiences by including them in the archives. It also sends a message to students that their work is a valuable part of the library's collection. As this paper will discuss, digitizing student work can also support participatory learning opportunities that involve students in the planning, digitization, and use of a collection.

In 2019, the University Library at the California State University, Los Angeles (Cal State LA) began digitizing a student-produced literary magazine, *Statement*. The project was initiated by the Humanities Librarian and the Archivist and Special Collections Librarian. In this paper, we discuss how we actively and meaningfully involved students and department stakeholders in the digitization project. Involving students and stakeholders enabled us to articulate a community-informed need, recruit students for mutually beneficial roles in the project, and plan collaboratively for the collection's use. Our approach reflects the student-centered spirit of *Statement* and has supported the Library in building a collection that includes the experiences and interests of students.

## HISTORY AND SIGNIFICANCE OF STATEMENT MAGAZINE

*Statement* has a long history of publishing creative writing and art by students at Cal State LA, as well as some works by local Los Angeles poets and guest writers. Established in 1950, *Statement Magazine* captures over seventy years of poetry, short stories, personal

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essays, paintings, photography, and more. The 2008 issue won the Program Director's Prize of the Association of Writers and Writing Programs (AWP) for the best contemporary college literary magazine in the nation, competing against 400 college and university literary magazines. With its long history, many works in *Statement* capture students' experiences as college students, their reactions to social and political events, and their cultural perspectives. Preserving this work is particularly important because a majority of Cal State LA's students are and have always been non-traditional college students of color. Approximately 58% are first generation college students and 69% are Latinx.<sup>2</sup> Poets, writers, and artists from our students' demographic are underrepresented in both literary studies and archives. Digitizing and making *Statement* freely available online enables their work to be accessed, read, and studied by anyone.

In addition to its long history and national reputation, *Statement* is at the heart of student creative writing and artistic activities on campus. The magazine is edited and produced by students enrolled in a three-unit, upper-division English Class. The magazine also operates a student club that hosts a variety of extracurricular activities including open mic nights and an annual *Statement* release party that brings together Cal State LA students, staff, and faculty, as well as local writers and artists in Los Angeles. Through its partnerships, extracurricular events, and the magazine editing class, *Statement* provides top-notch engagement and professional development opportunities for students interested in creative writing and publishing. The digitization project discussed in this paper incorporates valuable professional development opportunities for students as well.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Over the past decade, researchers have explored and recommended models of archiving that actively involve community members in the process. Caswell et al. discuss how community members from underrepresented groups are marginalized by mainstream and institutional archives, resulting in a "symbolic annihilation" of individual and community identities.<sup>3</sup> This annihilation manifests in silencing, marginalization, and misportrayal of underrepresented groups.<sup>4</sup> In response to this harmful symbolic annihilation, Caswell et al. propose an alternative framework, which they term "representational belonging" which they define as: "The ways in which community archives enable those who have been left out of mainstream repositories to have the power and authority to establish and enact their presence in archives in complex, meaningful, and substantive ways."<sup>5</sup> Similarly, some scholars have noted the importance of using a participatory archiving model whereby archivists encourage community involvement in the appraisal, arrangement, and description of archival materials.<sup>6,7</sup> In one case study, Christen offers an example of how digital collections can involve the participation of the community members they represent through collaborative content descriptions, metadata, and quality checks.<sup>8</sup>

As Librarians and Archivists that serve non-traditional college students of color, finding meaningful ways to involve students in archiving and use of student-authored content was vital to our approach. The benefits of archival practices that incorporate representational belonging and participatory models include a higher quality collection that accurately reflects the culture and experiences of diverse and marginalized groups. Zavala et al. found that community-member management and ownership of the archives resulted in a culture of trust and an improved ability to meet the needs and values of community members.<sup>9</sup> These community-informed, participatory approaches are not unique to archival studies. More broadly, Librarians and Educators have also emphasized the importance and benefits of student-centered learning approaches,<sup>10</sup> particularly for addressing the harmful effects of deficit-based thinking on instructional with non-traditional students of color.<sup>11</sup>

While there has been a push toward participatory and community-driven models in community and cultural heritage archiving, less attention has been given to projects where students are community members. As a student-authored, student-produced literary magazine, *Statement's* community members are certainly the students themselves. In addition to the gap in archival literature considering students as community-members, the literature on student-run journals focuses on Librarian's roles in journal production,<sup>12</sup> or on debates about the inclusion of student-created content in institutional repositories.<sup>13</sup> The remainder of this paper will be dedicated to describing the methods and results of using a participatory approach for digitizing student-authored collections.

## METHODOLOGY

We intentionally involved students and stakeholders in all parts of the digitization project, which spanned outside the actual digitization work itself. The project included conducting a needs assessment, identifying support, digitizing the magazine, and planning for use of the collection.

*Understanding the Need.* The need to improve access to *Statement* was first noticed through conversations with the students, the magazine's faculty advisor, and the English Department chair. Conversations with students occurred at *Statement* events and at a department orientation where students shared recent issues of the magazine. The magazine's long history, culture of student involvement, and sense of pride became apparent early on. In addition, students inquired about creating an online archive, which they interpreted to mean preserved and available through one website.

After subsequent scanning of the existing website to assess storage and digital accessibility, we learned the magazine's digital storage was fragmented and incomplete. The department website hosted approximately ten of seventy issues via Photobucket, but unfortunately links to the digital issues were frequently broken, images were poor quality and often illegible, content was difficult to navigate, and there was no metadata. We also learned that managing the website had been an ongoing challenge for the students and the English department, due to difficulty accessing University webpages which are run on Drupal. In addition to the poor condition of digital copies, print copies were somewhat scattered. We learned from department faculty that, except for a handful of print copies in Special Collections and faculty offices, most physical issues were kept in a locked storage room in the English department. Faculty were aware of the print and digital accessibility issues and were eager to discuss options.

Since digitization projects are resource-intensive and preservation decisions must be strategic, it was also important to consider how *Statement* would fit within the library's mission and priorities. Cal State LA is located in East Los Angeles at the heart of several culturally diverse and immigrant communities. Cal State LA's Special Collections and Archives aims to capture the diverse lives and historical narratives reflected in our diverse student body. The collection incorporates materials relating to Cal State LA, local, regional, and state history, and specifically the contributions of immigrants and communities of color. Our students and the work they produce provide valuable knowledge about their experiences and ties to their communities, which has a high impact on preserving the lived experiences of underrepresented communities and on capturing the essence of our library's mission and vision. We also identified preliminary ideas for how the collection would support the curriculum, which included English courses such as Literary Los Angeles and contemporary poetry, as well as Library instruction through primary source and information literacy assignments that could incorporate the collection.

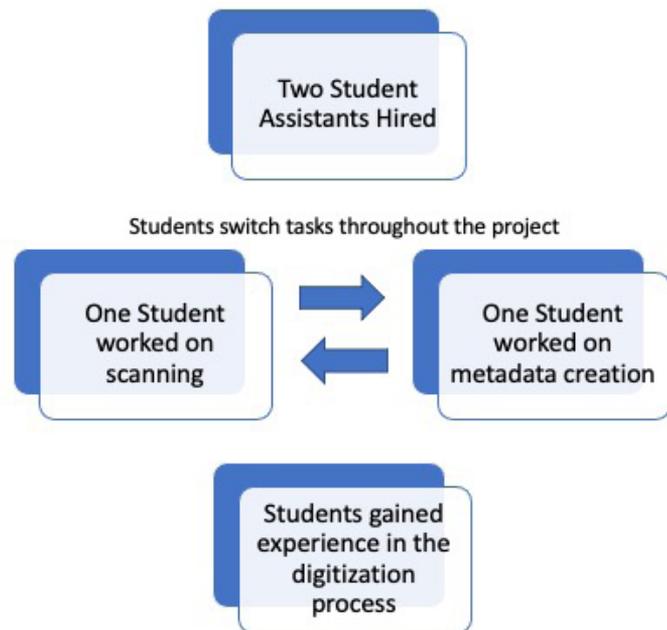
*Supporting the Project.* In September of 2019, the Humanities Librarian and Archivist and Special Collections Librarian applied for a Cal State LA library innovation grant provided by the library Dean. In the grant application, we proposed to recruit two students from either the 3-unit English class (Magazine Editing and Publishing) which produces *Statement* each year, or the magazine's club. The English department was particularly supportive about recruiting English majors as student assistants for the project, because in 2018 the department launched an "Engaged English" requirement for all English majors. The "Engaged English" track requires all English majors to complete at least one course that directly explores careers and transferrable skills for English majors, such as grant writing, magazine publishing, archival science, and narrative as therapy. Offering paid student assistantships was an excellent opportunity to support the English curriculum and students interested in archives, libraries, and publishing. In October of 2019, we were awarded a \$2700 grant to the hire of two student assistants for the digitization project.

With the help of the magazine's faculty advisor and the English department chair, we successfully hired two students enrolled involved with *Statement*. Recruitment strategies included tailoring the job description to match transferrable skills for English majors, providing a 15-minute presentation to students enrolled in the magazine editing and publishing class (ENGL 3940), and posting the positions through the Campus job website (HandShake) and social media. The English department posted the positions on their Facebook page which is followed by over 750 people.<sup>14</sup> We received over ten applications, interviewed four candidates, and hired two students who were English majors in fall 2019. One student was enrolled in ENGL 3940 and the other was actively involved in the magazine's club.

*Digitization Experience and Process.* In addition to hiring two student assistants and aligning those positions with the English curriculum, we were fortunate to leverage existing expertise, personnel, and infrastructure in our Archives and Special Collections. In 2014, the Special Collections and Archives began in-house digitization initiatives to broaden the access of archival digital collections and to reduce the impact of frequent handling of fragile materials. Efforts remain underway to develop a robust technical infrastructure and expertise in the management, preservation, and discoverability of Special Collections and Archives' growing digital collections. Currently, all digital objects are stored in DSpace, an open-source repository software, and is centrally managed by the California State University (CSU) Systemwide Digital Library Services (SDLS). Plans are underway to migrate all DSpace content to a digital asset management software, LUNA.

Since 2016, the creation of digital files has been performed by Jamie Zeffery, Digitization Projects Assistant, using digitization equipment and software that meet digital preservation standards. For this project, Zeffery used the specifications for bound volumes and prepared the overhead scanner by creating a customized template to scan materials at 400 dots per inch (dpi) with 16-bit depth. Archival master TIFF files were created from which JPG2000 access files were derived during post-production. Students were trained to scan the *Statement* volumes using the Zeuschel OS 12002 overhead scanner. Once the digital files were created, they were transferred from the scanner to begin post-processing. First, the raw TIFF files were stored uncompressed in long-term redundant array of independent disk storage. Working master files were checked to ensure the quality, accuracy, and integrity of the file. Students were also trained to complete the application of optical character recognition and Dublin Core metadata schema.

In addition to learning fundamental digitization tasks such as scanning and metadata creation, the project allowed students to participate in the overall process of developing a publication from start to finish. The students worked alongside the students in the Special Collections and Archives Student Assistant Program. The program provides opportunities for Cal State LA students to gain awareness and training in the library science, archival, and museum fields. Student assistants are paired with collections and projects related to their area of interest and field of study. Constructivist learning theory informs the program's approach to training student assistants. Constructivism is based on the notion that learners can construct their own meaning from their learning environment by being actively involved in the process of knowledge construction.<sup>15</sup> Students are not viewed merely as trainees, but as partners and collaborators. With this hands-on approach, we created a work environment to support each student's thinking and encourage dialogue and exchange of ideas. The constructivist learning theory allows students to solve problems in authentic and realistic situations.<sup>16</sup> Through this model, students gained confidence in their skills and view the significance of their role within the publication and digitization process.

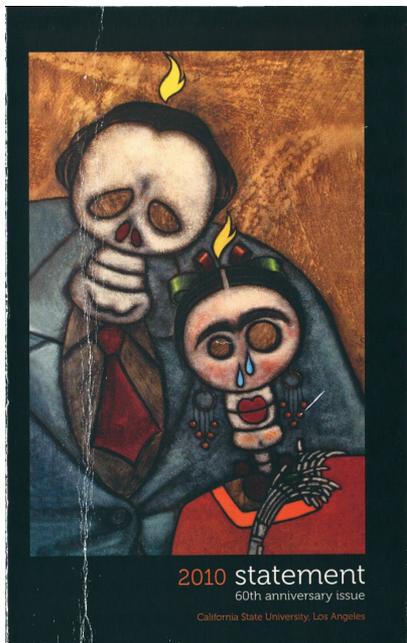


**Figure 1.** Student Assistant Workflow Digitization Project Workflow

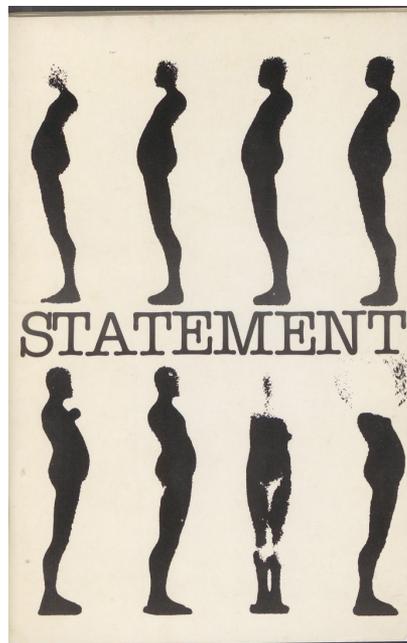
## PRELIMINARY RESULTS & DISCUSSION

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic we were not able to complete the digitization project as planned; the digitization is currently on pause until we can resume in-person work. However, we digitized 40 of 69 volumes and completed the metadata for the entire collection. Once we are back on campus (likely in fall 2021), we will con-

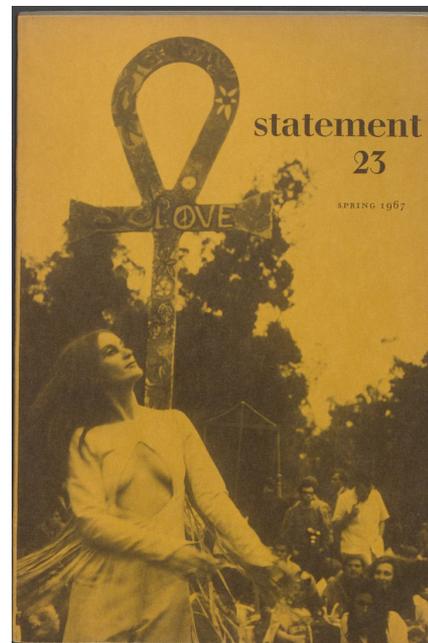
tinue to digitize the remaining 29 volumes and host them on the digital repository or open journal systems as an open access collection. The collection includes high-quality cover images, searchable textual content made possible through optical character recognition, and high-quality scans of visual art including photographs, hand paintings/drawing, and virtual art.



**Image 1.** Cover Art, *Statement* 2010



**Image 2.** Cover Art, *Statement* 1975



**Image 3.** Cover Art, *Statement* 1967



**Image 4.** McCain vs. Obama, *Statement* 2009, by Charles Kerper

The digitization project has opened new opportunities to move beyond the digitization and further collaborate with *Statement*. In Spring 2022, we plan on launching the collection during the annual *Statement* release event. For the event, we plan to curate a virtual exhibition chronicling the history of the magazine. The curation of the exhibition will follow the inclusive model we have utilized throughout the digitization project by providing opportunities for students to be involved in the overall process. While metadata capture for digitization has been relatively basic thus far, exhibit creation using the Omeka platform allows for students to make decisions about which materials to include and how to describe them through labels and summaries. Curating an exhibit with students on *Statement* history will enable us to teach critical thinking about information, display, labelling, and privilege. Involving students in the design will also produce a higher quality exhibit that truly reflects the spirit of the student-run magazine.

The project will also inspire collaborations between librarians, archivists, and humanities faculty on primary source literacy instruction. With hands-on, active-learning-based lesson plans, students and faculty will critically analyze materials from various perspectives and develop digital projects. For example, the Librarians leading this digitization project have collaborated with one English Professor to develop a small-scale, course integrated assignment where students work in groups to create digital collections in HistoryPin.<sup>17</sup> The assignment requires that students explore and use primary sources from Cal State LA's digital archives. Collaboration between Librarians and Archivists has been shown to not only increase usage of archival materials, but also improve student confidence with primary source analysis, increase student engagement with library resources and course assignments, and improve student comfort-level contacting librarians and archivists for help.<sup>18</sup> It also demystifies and personalizes the archives and related primary source and information literacy instruction, by showing students that their peers created the artifacts being studied and used. Students and faculty in the English department are also eager to use digital humanities methods with the *Statement* collection, such text mining and computer-generated visualizations to do distant reading and to identify patterns over time.

Finally, the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the limitations of print publication to many student-generated publications on campus. *Statement* is flipping to a digital format and is publishing its first born-digital issue in spring 2021. Students will be sharing the born-digital issue through CSU Open Journal Systems (OJS).<sup>19</sup> To take the launch slowly, the class has spent time designing the website's appearance and we will upload the fully-reviewed PDF directly onto the platform. Next year, the course may opt to use the platform for submission and open review as well, whereby each student fulfills a role that interests them, such as reviewer, copyeditor, or designer. The CSU OJS platform also provides an option to archive back issues of the journal should there be any delays or unforeseen issues in our institutional repository system migration. At the very least, sharing born-digital magazines from 2021 onward in OJS will prevent the need for future digitization.

## CONCLUSION

Through this project, we have strengthened our commitment toward expanding the scope and diversity of digital initiatives and have increased the inclusiveness of digital resources at the Cal State LA Library. When the digitization project is complete, students will be able to see the fruits of their labor included in the archives and being used in classes, research projects, library outreach, and more. The project has strengthened the library's partnership with the English department, and it has opened many doors for collaborating with students and faculty on assignments and events. The project has also strongly supported our goal to foster student-centered approaches in digitization and teaching projects, by providing paid opportunities for students to learn about key archival concepts and by working with students to create a collection that supports literary studies, primary source instruction, and information literacy instruction. The digital *Statement* collection will honor the voices of Cal State LA students and will enable their work to be shared online with family, employers, literary and other scholars, and more.

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