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The Collaborative Federal Depository Program: ASERL’s Plan for Managing FDLP Collections in the Southeast

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In 2011, Association of Southeastern Research Libraries (ASERL) members unanimously approved the ASERL Southeast Region Guidelines for Management and Disposition of Federal Depository Library Collections, a common set of collection management and disposition policies, procedures and best practices that form ASERL’s Collaborative Federal Depository Program (CFDP). This plan represents the product of a process that first began in 2006 through the collaborative efforts of ASERL library deans and directors and documents librarians. In 2009, ASERL was awarded a grant from the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) to support ongoing development of the model, testing three pilot sites: the University of Florida, the University of Kentucky, and the University of South Carolina. Today, 222 Federal Depository Library Program (FDLP) participating libraries in the southeast actively address the increasing cost of managing, preserving, and providing print and digital access to these critical collections through the CFDP.

Founded in 1956, ASERL is the largest regional research library cooperative in the country, with thirty-eight members in eleven states. The FDLP holds a prominent place in the southeast: thirty-seven of ASERL’s thirty-eight members are FDLP libraries, including twelve regional depositories. That these collections are seen as a regional asset was an important factor in the decision to establish a collaborative stewardship model within the region.

It is generally recognized that no FDLP collection is one hundred percent complete: whether due to previous retention policies, damage, or theft, some degree of loss for publications is inevitable. Core to the CFDP is the “Center of Excellence” (COE), whereby a library seeks to construct a comprehensive tangible collection of U.S. government information for an agency, a subject area, or format. To date, forty depository libraries in the southeast serve Centers of Excellence: eleven regional depository libraries and twenty-nine selective depository libraries. The CFDP program is not limited to ASERL libraries: in fact, 20% of COEs are depositories outside ASERL’s membership. Together, these libraries have established 219 COE collections, including 215 collections based upon the issuing agency, three subject collections, and one collection based on format.

The processes for the disposition of government publications that are being deaccessioned by a selective depository have long been recognized as challenging and time-consuming for both selective and regional depository libraries. One of the more innovative and popular resources of the CFDP is the ASERL Disposition Database, which is a software tool developed by the University of Florida to streamline the disposition process and to fill gaps in holdings. Today, 72% of the depository libraries in the ASERL region use the database to manage their disposition process. Since it was launched in 2012, more than 66,450 documents posted for disposal have been claimed by another library, further strengthening FDLP collections in the region. The FDLP eXchange database under development by the Government Publishing Office (GPO) was inspired in part by the ASERL Disposition Database. ASERL is working with GPO to coordinate functionality in order to streamline data transfer between the two systems.

In addition to building comprehensive collections, COE libraries commit to promoting use of the collection while ensuring its preservation. ASERL members agree that the best means of providing broad public access to these collections is through online access to digital copies, and the management of tangible collections should support initiatives to create a comprehensive digital collection of federal documents in the public domain. Digitization is optional for Centers of Excellence; however, COEs are encouraged to digitize items within their areas of responsibility when a stable public domain source is not available. Digital copies not only enhance access to the collection but also serve as a surrogate where no print copy is currently available.

Real-World Leadership: University of Florida & University of Kentucky

Two of the initial IMLS grant libraries, the University of Florida and the University of Kentucky, have extensively digitized their COE collections. Moreover, both libraries have signed agreements to serve as Preservation Stewards, a program established by GPO as part of its Federal Information Preservation Network (FIPNet) to support efficient government documents stewardship in the digital era.

The University of Florida (UF) has established more than 35 COE collections, including collections for twenty-one USDA offices, Congressional Hearings, the Code of Federal Regulations, and the Federal Register, along with a comprehensive subject and format collection for Panama and the Canal. From the onset, the University of Florida committed to digitizing a significant portion of its COE collections. Many of these UF-digitized copies are “official” publications that are digitally signed by GPO and represent the first publications accepted by GPO as official publications from a depository library, and authenticated with a digital signature.

Since 2008, UF Libraries have cataloged over 660,000 volumes, with 15,252 original cataloging records contributed to OCLC and available in WorldCat. The UF Libraries COE collections are treated as special collections, undergoing a stringent review process including page-level validation. In addition to preserving the print copies, digital copies are available in the UF Digital Collections online portal (http://UFDC.ufl.edu), and preservation masters are sent to the Florida Digital Archives (http://fclaweb.fcla.edu/fda). Also, all academic libraries in Florida and all selective depositories in Florida, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands can deposit government documents being withdrawn from their collections into FLARE (the FLorida Academic Repository) for preservation and access, if it is the last copy held in the region.

The University of Kentucky (UK) Libraries began digitizing its Center of Excellence collection for the Works Progress/Work Projects Administration (WPA) in 2011. Given the age and fragile condition of WPA print publications, and in order to facilitate in-house digitization efforts, UK Libraries established a dual copy collection: where possible, one print copy is retained for access and digitization and one copy for preservation.

To facilitate its collection development activities, the UK Libraries maintain an exhaustive bibliography of all known WPA publications, both owned and not owned, that is checked against online sources such as Internet Archive and HathiTrust to identify digital copies in the public domain. Once identified, digital copies are cataloged and added to the library’s online catalog. In-house digitization activities are limited to those titles for which no digital copy is available in the public domain. As digital content is created and cataloged, the best tangible copy is then placed in storage for permanent retention, and the digital and second tangible copy are used for access.

Real-world experiences confirm that the CFDP is a successful and innovative program that works within the legal framework of Title 44 to improve access while lessening the administrative burdens on depository libraries. Accomplishments achieved at the state and regional level have positioned ASERL Centers of Excellence libraries favorably to engage in national collaborative initiatives to ensure FDLP collections are cataloged, inventoried, digitized, preserved and accessible—core values of the FDLP. 🌱