

Connecting Past, Present, and Future

Digital archives give people easy access to treasured memories, institutional history

By DAN HANSON

Give alumni a place they can visit anytime, anywhere to recollect and reconnect.

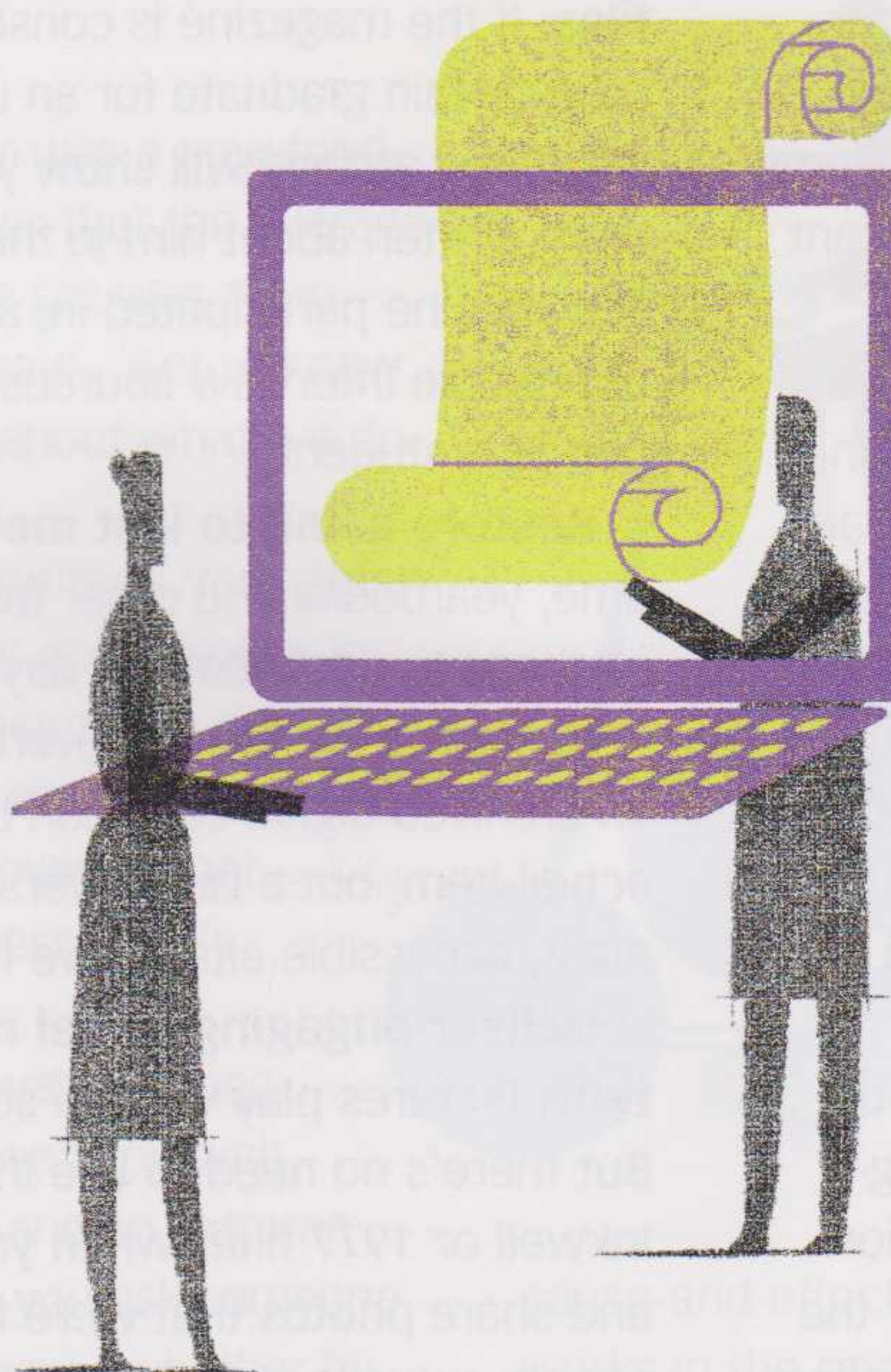
Deep in a dimly lit corner of your college or university library is a secure room crammed with boxes full of forgotten memories. Few people seem to notice it and even fewer enter. This may sound like the suspenseful setting for an Alfred Hitchcock film, but this place is actually a cornucopia of amazing content: your institution's archives.

Visiting the archives used to mean carefully sifting through fragile, yellowing documents or examining files of fading photographs. But as library archives have gone digital in recent years, many institutional treasures are now publicly accessible online, making them a place alumni can visit anytime, anywhere to recollect and reconnect. The material inside also offers new opportunities for engaging your institution's audiences—and it can even make your job as an advancement professional a little bit easier.

DIGITIZING HISTORY

In 2007, archivists at Widener University's Wolfgram Memorial Library began creating a digital archive (bit.ly/WU-Wolfgram) to share the Pennsylvania institution's records with a larger audience. The benefits exceeded expectations. For Widener's Alumni Engagement office, the launch of the library's digital collections in 2008 helped strengthen the university's connection to a group that had felt disenfranchised for more than three decades.

In 1972, during the waning years of the Vietnam War, Pennsylvania Military College disbanded its corps of cadets and changed its name to Widener to honor a longtime board of trustees chair and member of the prominent Philadelphia family with the same surname. For years, many PMC alumni felt no affiliation with Widener; some accused the university of trying



to erase the military legacy from the institution's history. Others even celebrated homecoming at The Citadel, a military college in South Carolina.

When the alumni office saw the wealth of PMC history in the library's digital collections—from photos of military caps that cadets wore (bit.ly/PMCcaps) to scrapbooks, letters, and newspaper articles showing the important role PMC played during World War II (bit.ly/PMCWWII)—staff members hosted a spring 2011 alumni weekend workshop to teach graduates how to use the

digital archives. The event was a success, attracting military college alumni who were thrilled to see the university's efforts to preserve their history and make it readily available. The session was repeated later in the year during Widener's fall homecoming weekend with similar results.

COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS

For institutions that have encountered town-gown issues, a digital archive can improve community relations. When family members of George Raymond, the longtime president of the Chester, Pa., chapter of the NAACP, donated his papers to Widener in 2009, they knew this history wouldn't be forgotten in a back room. University archivists scanned and digitized the hundreds of documents, letters, newspaper clippings, and photographs chronicling both the civil rights movement and the NAACP chapter in Chester from the 1940s through the 1960s (bit.ly/Raymond-papers).

The university publicly unveiled the papers in December 2009, an event that attracted area civil rights leaders and activists. Other Chester history projects, including a collection of oral histories (bit.ly/WU-Chester), have since joined the Raymond papers in the digital archives. The local NAACP chapter and the county's heritage commission have recognized Widener's archivists for their historical

Dan Hanson is director of public relations at Widener University in Pennsylvania.

preservation efforts. The community goodwill and public relations benefits of both these projects have been immeasurable.

UNCOVERING EARLY SPRINGSTEEN

When people think about archival history, they tend to conjure images of antique photographs and aging documents, but what happened yesterday is history too. Your institutional archives likely hold gems that can shed new light on not-so-distant campus life.

Although Bruce Springsteen and the E Street Band's concerts at Widener in 1974 and 1975 have become part of campus lore, many in the community were surprised to see grainy black-and-white footage of a February 1975 performance surface on YouTube in 2007. I'm a Springsteen fan, and I had never seen earlier concert film of the rocker. I smelled a story for the alumni magazine.

Fan sites had long speculated about the videographer's identity. Some digging in the YouTube comments section led me to the person responsible for the first-known unauthorized video recording of Springsteen in concert, shot six months before the release of the iconic *Born to Run* album that launched The Boss to superstardom.

I searched Widener's digital archives and discovered concert photos in the yearbook as well as student newspaper articles and reviews of the three shows Springsteen played on campus in 1974 and 1975. The archived student newspapers provided some context and names of alumni sources to track down for interviews. The black-and-white photos illustrated a story I wrote for last spring's *Widener Magazine* (*bit.ly/WUmag-Boss*) that I knew would definitely interest our alumni, many of whom have ties to neighboring New Jersey, Springsteen's home state.

GIVING ADVANCEMENT A BOOST

Digital archives can strengthen relationships with institutional audiences and help us do our jobs as advancement professionals. For instance, you can use them to:

Research prospective donors. When you're preparing to contact or visit a donor, a quick search of the archives can reveal references to a prospect in your institution's yearbook, student newspaper, or

alumni magazine. You'll get a fuller picture of the person's campus involvement and interests as a student. Taking along a copy of an article your prospect wrote for the student newspaper or a literary journal is a thoughtful way to break the ice.

Add detail and depth to alumni profiles. If the magazine is considering a story on a certain graduate for an upcoming issue, the archive will show you what's been written about him in the past, the activities he participated in, and the names of possible interview sources who knew him as a student.

Restore a link to lost memories. Over time, yearbooks and other tangible connections to one's college days are often relegated to the attic or even lost. Viewing an archived digital copy can't replace the actual item, but a virtual version is a convenient, accessible alternative for alumni.

Deliver engaging social media content. Pictures play well on social channels. But there's no need to use Instagram's Inkwell or 1977 filter when you can access and share photos that were taken when people actually dipped pens in ink or used Polaroid cameras. In addition to being laden with images tailor-made for Throwback Thursday, your institution's digital archives are likely chock-full of Facebook-worthy fun facts.

THE FUTURE OF OUR HISTORY

A digital archive helps preserve the story that advancement professionals are charged with telling. We foster relationships with our alumni based, in large part, on positive memories of their alma mater. Doing that effectively requires a collaborative relationship between advancement and the library. We need to champion each other's work.

If your institution hasn't already digitized its archive, doing so can be an expensive and time-consuming proposition. At Widener, the initial software purchase and subsequent upgrades cost about \$8,000, but the most significant investment has been human capital. It took the university's two archivists and a student intern about a year to scan and upload more than a century's worth of student newspapers and yearbooks. The digital collections contain thousands of historical photos, documents, and publications, but

the work of maintaining and adding to the archive is never done.

Obtaining the financial and staff resources for a project like this can be challenging, but your library colleagues will want to do it. We support and promote the archivists' efforts by using items from the digital collections across our communications channels. We also let them know that being able to easily access the archives has made our jobs easier. (In turn, the archivists compliment us on the content we create.)

Efforts like this are especially important because digital archives don't just provide a link to the past: They also capture our present and future for the generations to come. Much of the content that institutions now produce is digital, which, ironically, is one of the biggest threats to preserving current history. There are no physical documents or photos to scan. Press releases are posted online. Newsletters are sent electronically. Many student newspapers appear online only. Homecoming photographs go straight to Flickr or Instagram.

We may think of these materials as digital ephemera, but much of it should be saved somewhere too. At Widener, we regularly send digital versions of our press releases, alumni magazines, newsletters, and photos for inclusion in the archives. Unless we work closely with our archivists to preserve the digital content we're creating today, our institutional history may be lost to the ether of the Internet. ■

Share Your Experience

Have you addressed or resolved an advancement challenge facing your office, unit, or institution? Tell us about it! Contact Senior Editor Theresa Walker at twalker@case.org to discuss your idea for an "Office Space" column.