

CTDA In Context: Addressing Systemic Challenges in the Connecticut Digital Archive (A CTDA White Paper)

Draft: October 22, 2021

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Abstract

The Connecticut Digital Archive (CTDA), a statewide digital preservation and access service, has launched CTDA in Context, a program designed to break down traditional power structures and inspire change in the cultural heritage preservation landscape in Connecticut. The first step in this process was to understand the baseline landscape of digital cultural heritage in the US and in Connecticut in particular. During the summer of 2021 we conducted a self-examination of the CTDA and an analysis of its peers in the Digital Public Library of America Hub network. This paper presents the findings of the research team in terms of general observations on the current state of digital cultural heritage as well as a more specific analysis of the CTDA and offers a four-point action plan for the CTDA to follow in the near term.

Background

The Connecticut Digital Archive is a small organization, with just two full-time staff responsible for managing a 2.7 million object repository system with more than 75 institutional members. Based at the University of Connecticut, the CTDA outsources most of its technology stack to external consultants and University Technology Services, but planning, programming, policy development, standards development, grant writing, member services, and much more is handled by CTDA with help from volunteer advisory group members. The project ahead of us is daunting, but we feel it is necessary. Given the restraints of time, money, and resources, we research potential pathways forward as best we can, and make real-world decisions based on incomplete data, imperfect knowledge, and the best dead reckoning available to us. We are always ready to alter course when the situation demands it. The following white paper is not meant to be an exhaustive review of the subject at hand, we are always learning more, rather it is an example of how we make decisions in the real world, and how we are willing and interested to hear constructive feedback and suggestions.

Introduction

There are these two young fish swimming along and they happen to meet an older fish swimming the **other** way, who nods at them and says “Morning, boys. How’s the water?” And the two young fish swim on for a bit, and then eventually one of them looks over at the other and goes “What the hell is water?”

--David Foster Wallace¹

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¹ “This is Water, by David Foster Wallace, (Full Transcript and Audio), *FS*, April 2021, <https://fs.blog/2012/04/david-forster-wallace-this-is-water>

Social Critic David Foster Wallace’s story about the young fish not knowing that they were swimming in water was meant to illustrate to his audience that the “the most obvious, important realities are often the ones that are hardest to see and talk about” because they are so much a part of the landscape that they become invisible. In Wallace’s opinion even many aspects of self-examination don’t address these deeply held, and often hardwired (in his opinion), aspects of humanity.

According to Wallace, each of us swims in our own bowl of water, or at most in schools of like-minded fish. He believes however, that the greatest progress in human society occurs when one school of fish learns to understand its own water and appreciates the water of another school of fish.⁴ At the CTDA we recognize that the water in which we swim informs our perspective. We hope to broaden this perspective by examining our current practices by working to build cultural humility. Rather than inviting more fish to swim in our water, we want to change the water and invite many different fish to swim in it. Our plan is to understand the obvious and important realities of the customary⁵ approach to documenting Connecticut’s history that are hardest to see, look at them critically, and then move beyond them to inspire systemic change.

Implementing systemic change will be a slow and at times difficult prospect. Historical and cultural heritage preservation in Connecticut has been driven primarily by white Americans united by economic and social power.⁶ They were interested in emphasizing their own contribution to social dominance and ensuring that it continued. This approach has a long tradition in human civilizations, where the so-called “winners” write the history. While this rather cynical interpretation has a solid basis in fact, it is important to note that the historic preservation movement was also populated by people who were sincere in their desire to preserve the historical record but could or would not see beyond their own understanding of the water in which they were swimming. In Connecticut and New England especially, with its founding mythology, the certainty of its beliefs, and its economic power because of industrialization, this approach to cultural memory was especially strong. Ultimately, they built a structure of historical documentation, preservation, and description that placed the white European experience at the center of the story.

When the CTDA launched in 2013, it was built on the foundation of previous digital efforts in Connecticut, including Connecticut History Online (CHO), an early project to digitize significant resources in Connecticut cultural history and make them available to teachers and lifelong learners. The members of CHO represented the customary and expected members of the cultural heritage community in Connecticut, perpetuating the tradition of a white Eurocentric collection of resources. As the CTDA grew to include more than 70 institutions in Connecticut, the institutional make-up of the group remained constant: customary and expected organizations tended to join the CTDA, while others remained outside of our community. Although

⁴ The authors of this paper are white people with college degrees working at the University of Connecticut, or in a Graduate program at Syracuse University. They understand that they have a particular perspective that is not shared by all.

⁵ We use the term “customary” or “customary and expected” to refer to the people or groups that one would expect to be at the center of cultural heritage documentation in Connecticut without imposing any value judgement on, or even trying to explain, how or why they are considered a part of that group. Conversely, we use the term “underrepresented” to indicate all those people and groups you would not expect to find at the center of cultural heritage documentation; again without trying to specifically define who, how, or why these people or groups are not included.

⁶ The story of Old Sturbridge Village (OSV), in Sturbridge, MA, just up the road from UConn, is just one example. Born out of the antiquing hobby of Albert B. Wells of the American Optical Company dynasty, OSV became the labor of love for the Wells family. At the height of the Colonial Revival in the 1930s they began to re-create a farming village of the 1830s at the Wight farmstead on the Quinebaug River by purchasing first the farm itself and then local and far-flung buildings and moving them to the village that they created from their imaginations of what a ‘live village’ would have been like. <https://www.osv.org/about/mission-narrative/>.

individual CTDA members embarked on their own diversity initiatives that did not alter the fact that the CTDA in general was culturally and organizationally one-dimensional. We wanted to understand why that was, and what we could do about it. From these investigations, CTDA in Context was born.

One of the catalysts for CTDA in Context was the work of Kayla Hinkson-Grant, an undergraduate intern majoring in Anthropology from Mt. Holyoke College who wanted to study the ideas of representation and power in digital collections and in the field of archives in general. Kayla came to the CTDA in the Summer of 2020 and worked primarily with Repository Manager Mike Kemezis, who showed Kayla where and how historical records were created in the CTDA and the basics of digital library management. Kayla wrote a series of posts in *CTDA Connect*, the CTDA's web publication, where she discussed some of her ideas on the origins, historical purpose, and contemporary purposes of archives.⁷ Significant for us was her assertion that "recognizing [our] biases does not rectify or undo them, they have to be acted on. It is our responsibility in the present to actively disrupt systemic oppression and unlearn the harmful practices and biases integrated into collecting and preserving history."⁸ After much discussion this idea became the basis for CTDA in Context with its goal to break down the traditional power structures and inspire systemic change in the cultural heritage preservation landscape in Connecticut.

Touchstones

Once we identified the general goal of the project in our minds, we wanted to explore and validate the ideas and assumptions that lay behind them. Each of this paper's authors had different backgrounds and life experiences they brought to the conversation. Because of that, our touchstones ranged across a variety of topical areas and included writers and thinkers of social history, sociology, library science, cosmology, and mythology for example. Some were academics, others were popularizers, and still others were pop culture critics. What follows is not an exhaustive review of academic literature, but an accounting of the influences that the writers brought to the project.

Recent work in epistemicide, the action of eliminating another culture's worldview as it relates to knowledge systems,⁹ explains how knowledge systems tend to reflect and reward dominant groups and help them retain their dominance. Information managers have never been innocent bystanders in this activity. As historian and librarian Robert Darnton noted in his examination of French cultural history, "All social actions flow through boundaries determined by classification schemes, whether or not they are elaborated as explicitly as library catalogs, organization charts, and university departments."¹⁰ While archivists and librarians did not invent conquest and colonialism, they were often enthusiastic participants, building information systems that reflected and supported monolithic epistemological schemas that silenced other voices. Library Science professors Beth Patin, et al. agree saying, "It is not that we are unaware of the

⁷ "Kayla Hinkson-Grant," *Medium*, last updated October 2, 2020, <https://medium.com/@hinks22k>

⁸ Hinkson-Grant, Kayla, "Working Within an Oppressive System," Connecticut Digital Archive Connect, last updated August 17, 2020 <https://medium.com/connecticut-digital-archive-connect/working-within-an-oppressive-system-127dc3ba565b>

⁹ Beth Patin et al., "Toward Epistemic Justice: An Approach for Conceptualizing Epistemicide in the Information Professions," *Proceedings of the Association for Information Science and Technology* 57, no. 1 (October 1, 2020): e242, <https://doi.org/10.1002/pra2.242>. Prof. Beth Patin, et al., define epistemicide as "the killing, silencing, annihilation, or devaluing of a knowledge system" <https://doi.org/10.1002/pra2.242>

¹⁰ Darnton, Robert, *The Great Cat Massacre, and Other Episodes in French Cultural History* (New York: Basic Books, 1984), 193.

injustices happening within our field, but rather that we are not in discussion considering the idea that the collective injustices exist and are problematic on individual and systemic levels.”¹¹

Another side of epistemicide is assimilation or acculturation. While the conquerors typically imposed their world views on the conquered, they were just as typically changed as well. The Romans tended to assimilate local gods into their rituals and pantheon, and the Christians routinely appropriated pagan rituals and festival days into their calendar.¹² Remnants of external cultures exist throughout the languages of the world.¹³ Cultures are absorbed, sometimes willfully, other times coercively. They are mixed and come out different than they were before. When we speak of cultural assimilation, we tend to think of one culture being absorbed by another, and while certain ideas and customs change, the systemic worldview tends to remain static. Assimilation itself is a form of cultural death, even if it enhances and enriches the dominant culture. In cultural preservation and historical research this typically means that “underrepresented community” members are brought into cultural preservation systems for their specific subject expertise and but are expected to fit this expertise into the dominant cultural environment, forsaking their own culture for that of their institution. This applies to those who work within institutions as well as the materials within these institutions’ collections, even when the institution in question seeks to support diversity.¹⁴ In this context, many questions remain about how we collect, organize, and access important objects and ideas of another culture. The water in which we swim is a powerful barrier to our ability to understand and collaborate with others.

Astronomer and philosopher Carl Sagan is often quoted as saying “You have to know the past to understand the present”¹⁵ as an encouragement to studying how and why we are the way we are. But understanding other cultures may have to come from letting go of our previous knowledge and assumptions and to put ourselves into the places of those we want to understand. Developing cultural humility requires us to embrace the notion that different nations, cultures, and historical moments have more than “a single story” surrounding them, as author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie argues.¹⁶ Accepting one sole narrative mutes the other voices that provides further viewpoints and contexts for any given subject, especially voices that have long occupied the margins of historical texts rather than the central paragraphs: “Start the story with the arrows of the Native Americans, and not with the arrival of the British, and you have an entirely different story. Start the story with the failure of the African state, and not with the colonial creation of the African state, and you have an entirely different story.”¹⁷ We can (and must) understand the stories of other times and

¹¹ Patin, et al. p.4.

¹² Many articles and books have tied the Christian holiday calendar with pagan rituals, for example: Christmas traditions: pagan roots, invented rites, in Laing, Jennifer, and Warwick Frost, *Rituals and Traditional events in the Modern World*, London: Routledge, 2014) and Philippe Walter, , *Christian Mythology: Revelations of Pagan Origins*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2014).

¹³ Dorren, Gaston *Lingo: Around Europe in Sixty Languages* (New York: Grove Press, 2015). Linguist Gaston Dorren connects 60 European languages with each other through twisting relations of culture, trade, and competition.

¹⁴ Bharat Mehra and LaVerne Gray, “An ‘Owning Up’ of White-IST Trends in LIS to Further Real Transformations,” *The Library Quarterly* 90, no. 2 (April 1, 2020): 189–239, <https://doi.org/10.1086/707674>. Mehra and Gray provide an in-depth history and explanation of how BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and/or people of color) scholars and librarians are expected to change for their institutions rather than the other way around.

¹⁵ Carl Sagan, *Cosmos* (New York: Random House, 1980), 93.

¹⁶ Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, “The Danger of a Single Story,” filmed July 2009 in Oxford, U.K., TED video, 18:25, https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_ngozi_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story?language=en.

¹⁷ Ibid. 10:21-10:43.

people even if we did not experience them personally. If not, the alternative is that we are all prisoners of our own fishbowl.

The CTDA is dedicated to building a digital cultural repository that understands and respects differences but rejects separateness. We believe that we can build information systems that respect and include the worldviews of multiple systems of thought. Working with diverse communities, we can build metadata, indexing, taxonomies, synonyms, and more to bridge the differences. But before we did that, we felt we had to understand the water in which we now swim.

Investigation

During the summer of 2021, building off the work started in the summer and fall of 2020, the research team looked at two aspects of the cultural landscape in Connecticut and the US in general to understand the “water” of customary cultural heritage institutions: CTDA member organizational mission statements and Digital Public Library of America (DPLA) Hub participation requirements. While these two elements don’t tell the complete story of any group of institutions, we felt that the mission statements were the most public expression of an organization’s values, and the requirements for contributor access to the DPLA, a national aggregator of digital cultural content, would tell us something about what kind of organizations are welcome in the digital cultural community. We then examined current CTDA policies and practices to determine where our program fits in the regional and national landscape of digital cultural heritage.

The DPLA and its Hubs

The DPLA is a non-profit, self-funded organization that “empowers people to learn, grow, and contribute to a diverse and better-functioning society by maximizing access to our shared history, culture, and knowledge.”¹⁸ The DPLA aggregates content from a network of Service Hubs and Content Hubs into a dataset that contains more than 40 million individual resources. Content Hubs are typically larger digital repositories, like the David Rumsey Map Collection or the Library of Congress, that offer their content for aggregation. Other content is gathered by Service Hubs like the CTDA, who are grounded in a geographical or political area and collect content from contributors in their areas to pass on to the DPLA. The DPLA is dependent for fulfilling its mission on the policies and activities of the member Hubs. While following general DPLA guidelines for content,¹⁹ Hubs are free to collect content however and from wherever they please. As we will see below, the make-up of the CTDA and other Hub collections are also highly dependent on the collecting activities of their members or participants. We decided look at the policies of different DPLA hubs to understand how the CTDA compares.

We approached this project with the idea that we would be able to determine from their web sites the types of institutions or organizations the Hubs work with, the requirements the organizations are supposed to meet, and the services the Hubs offer to its partners or members. Unfortunately, we were not able to collect this information by examining the websites. Some websites did not include this information, other websites included the information but described it using technical jargon that would be difficult for newcomers to understand, and other websites had information that appeared contradictory.

¹⁸ “About Us,” *DPLA*, <https://dp.la/about>.

¹⁹ “Collection Development Guidelines,” *DPLA*, <https://pro.dp.la/hubs/collection-development-guidelines>.

Information on the websites implies that the Hubs expect to be working with institutions or organizations who are knowledgeable about metadata and digital archiving, and who are used to working within the systems already in place.

After concluding that we could not get all necessary information from the websites, we decided to send out a survey to all 27 DPLA Hubs during August 2021. After giving Hubs two weeks to respond to the survey, we received responses from 14 DPLA Hubs. This 52% response rate helped us better understand the inner workings of different DPLA Hubs.

It is important to keep in mind that DPLA Hubs vary greatly when it comes to size, financial support, experience, and number of contributors/participants/members. For example, 36% of Hubs have less than 50 contributors, 21% have between 50 and 100 contributors, 21% have between 100 and 200 contributors, and 21% have between 200 and 300 contributors. Differences between the Hubs are bound to exist due to necessity, and we are not attempting to claim one Hub's approach is better than another. Instead, we are comparing hubs in order to discover ideas about how to make the CTDA's infrastructure more socially just and encourage other Hubs to examine their own infrastructures.

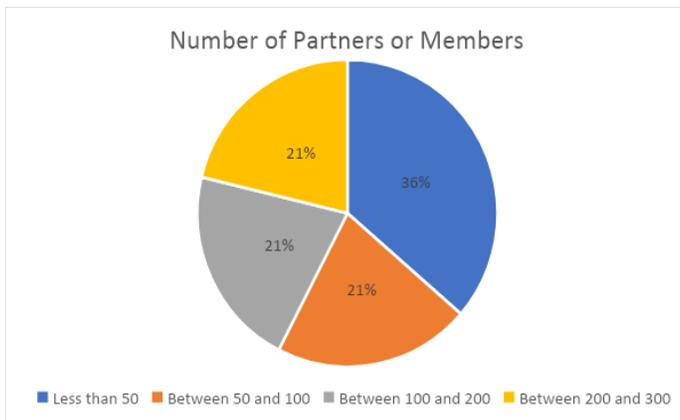


Figure 1: Hub sizes

When we first examined the websites of DPLA Hubs, we were surprised to discover that many Hubs were not very clear about their

application process. Some Hubs simply requested interested groups email them, and other Hubs included a link to an application. This correlates with the results we received from the survey, with 71% of Hubs using an application form, 36% of Hubs using personal inquiry, and 7% using a board meeting to determine eligibility. Further research could help us understand how often and why Hubs turn down interested organizations.

The dependency on application forms and personal inquiry can be a barrier of entry if it is combined with insufficient information. Since many Hub websites don't clearly describe the application process, membership requirements, or hub services they offer, an organization that does not clearly understand the process, may feel intimidated to initiate conversation or be unaware of the value and benefits of participation. Additionally, if the questions on the application form itself presume interested groups come from customary and expected institutions or have a background understanding of Hubs, this can compound the problem. We have not done intensive research in this area, but we believe that there can be a disconnect between what the Hubs believe they are saying to potential members, and what some members may hear.

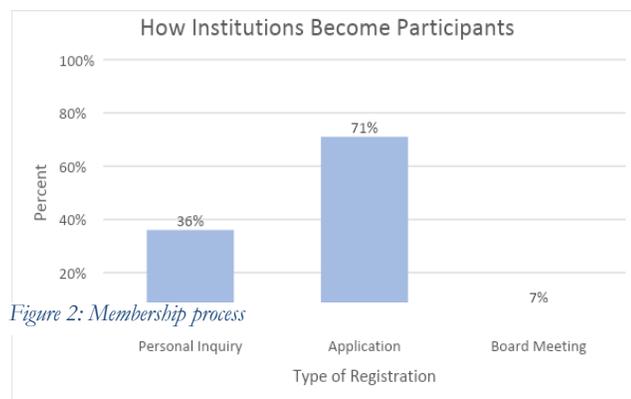


Figure 2: Membership process

The ambiguous nature of the application process is exacerbated by the fact that many Hubs are also not clear regarding membership or participation fees. Some Hubs mentioned they were free, but this information was often hidden in blocks of text. Other Hubs never mentioned their cost at all and since no cost was mentioned we assumed there was no cost. We made this assumption based on our background knowledge and understanding that many Hubs receive external funding or grants, and that Hubs tend to prioritize participation over profit. Groups or organizations without this prior knowledge may assume the cost of participation is expensive along the lines of “If you have to ask, you can’t afford it.”

Utilizing the survey, we were able to verify that our assumption that most Hubs are free was correct. 79% of Hubs allow institutions to join or participate for free, while only 21% have a membership or participation fee. The membership or participation fee varies widely, with one Hub only charging \$10, another Hub charging \$100 or \$200, and a third Hub having different membership levels ranging from \$35 to \$740. While being free does undeniably lower the barrier of entry, Hubs’ failure to properly advertise this fact reduces the benefit this would have. It is also important to note that several Hubs mentioned being uncertain if they could continue being free, due to their dependency on grants.

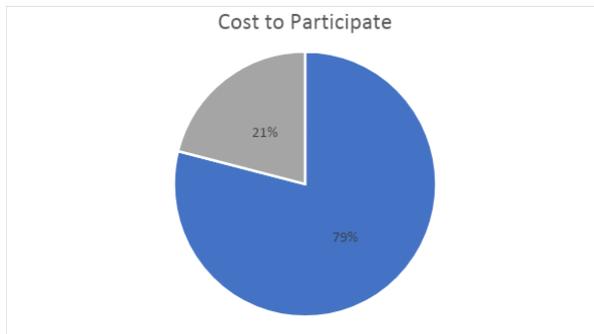


Figure 3: Participation Costs

Beyond the original application process, we considered the requirements Hubs have for contributors/participants/members²⁰. We assumed requirements would differ across Hubs, as Hubs possess different levels of funding and staff support and therefore require contributors to provide varying levels of support themselves. We did, however, assume some requirements would be universal, particularly requirements connected to metadata standards, technology, or institution type. But again, from the web sites alone, we were unable to verify this

assumption. Many websites did not have this information at all, or it was difficult to find. Some websites included the information, but it was worded with technical jargon and was sometimes contradicted on other parts of the website.

²⁰ The term Hubs used to indicate those who participated in Hub business varied widely with contributors, participants, and members being the most common.

After reviewing the results of the survey, we were surprised to discover that no requirement was required by all the Hubs. Some requirements which we expected to see universally required—such as following certain metadata standards or providing rights statements—did have high percentages of respondents sharing that they were required. However, other requirements, such as the necessity of having an OAI-PMH feed, were surprisingly low. This raises an interesting question. If none of the requirements are required by all Hubs, then do they truly need to be required? This point will be addressed later in the paper.

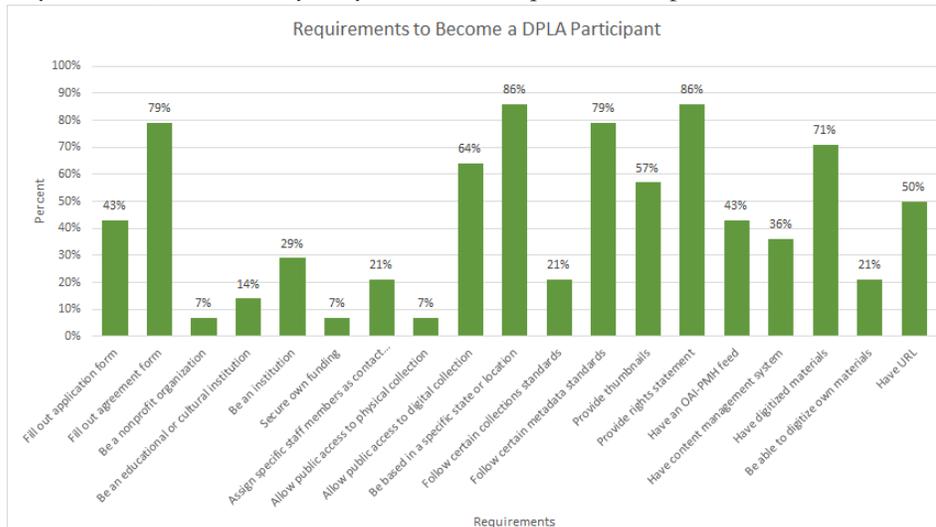


Figure 4 Hub Requirements

Another interesting observation is few Hubs require contributors to be institutions (29%), educational or cultural institutions (14%) or nonprofit organizations (7%). This implies that Hubs are open and willing to work with underrepresented organizations, which undeniably lowers the barrier of entry. However, when we examined the websites of different hubs, we only saw customary and expected organizations being listed, such as libraries, archives, or museums. The failure to market this openness reduces the number of underrepresented organizations that would participate. It also causes one to wonder whether Hubs are as effectively open as they believe themselves to be.

This detail is further emphasized by the results we gathered from our question on institution types. Using the institution types we often saw listed on the websites, we were able to determine that Hubs universally do accept customary institutions, such as academic and public libraries, archives, and museums. When we gave Hubs the opportunity to add further organization types, few chose to do so. Only four additional organization types were added—historical societies (which should have been included as a customary institution), state library administrative agencies (SLAA), an LGBTQ+ group, and a theater troupe. It is also important to understand that while a participating organization may be a customary type, it may have a decidedly non-customary

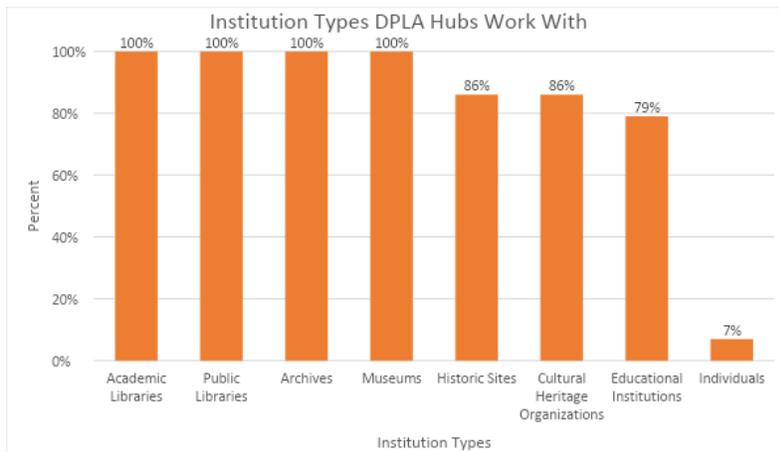


Figure 5: Hub member types

It appears that while Hubs are open to and interested in working with a wider array of organizations, they very rarely do so. However, simply because an institution is a customary type, it does not automatically mean that it has all the characteristics of the white Eurocentric worldview. The survey did not ask detailed questions about the nature, scope, or purpose of the members, and more research would be needed to determine if or to what extent the terms customary and white

Eurocentric are equivalent for each Hub.

The final data we wished to obtain was which services are commonly offered by Hubs. We estimated that this information would range extensively, as Hubs have widely different funding and staff support. This information was difficult to establish by examining the websites, as many websites did not include this information, or presented it in a way that seemed difficult to understand. From the survey we were able to determine that no one service is offered by all Hubs, although 93% of Hubs do offer one-on-one consultations. Overall, the number of services offered is impressive, and more effort should be spent on advertising and marketing these services to interested organizations.

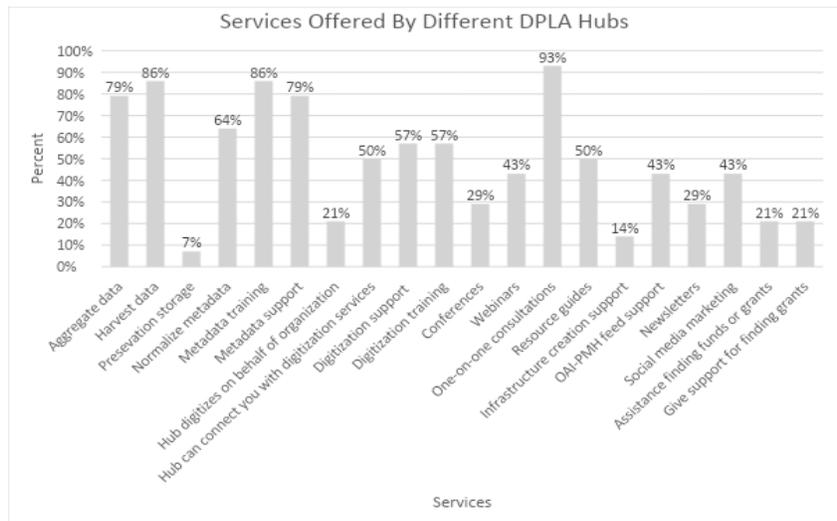


Figure 6: Hub Services

We also noticed that services connected to metadata are particularly high, such as normalizing metadata (64%), metadata training (85%), and metadata support (79%).

Assistance with metadata can be incredibly valuable, as some organizations may be intimidated by metadata. However, metadata support can also be problematic if it does not guarantee agency. Hubs that normalize metadata or provide metadata training may impose the dominant cultural outlook on the metadata and content, possibly making it less available to the contributing institution. While having and advertising metadata services is important, as some organizations would benefit greatly from the assistance, it is important to clearly market it as optional, and ensure the contributing organizations retain ownership and agency over their metadata. Again our research did not examine the nature of metadata assistance, and more research is required to determine if this is indeed a problem.

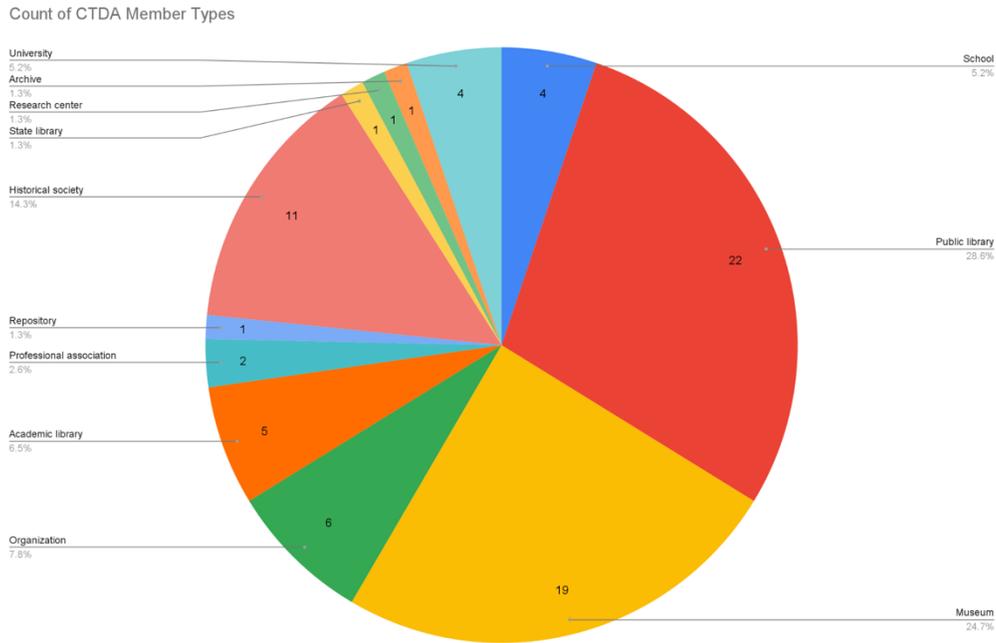


Figure 8: Member Types

Understanding the CTDA’s breakdown of member organization types is crucial for understanding the content of its mission statements. The word “community,” for example, is not surprising given the high concentration of public libraries, and the combination of historical societies and museums in the CTDA member makeup would explain the prevalence of terms such as “art” and “cultural.” Words such as “diversity” or “race” are absent from mission and vision statements, which is unsurprising given that no members include anything race-related as a specific part of their mission. However, it is worth noting that most statements, particularly public libraries and education-related organizations (schools, universities, and academic libraries), emphasize providing resources for “all” residents of their community. These statements imply that equity is a specific organizational goal or value, but their language still does not state so explicitly. Only two institutions--Groton Public Library and Woodbury Public Library--mention the phrase “equitable access” specifically in their mission statement.

Monocultural		Transitional		Multicultural	
Exclusionary	Passive Club	Compliance	Positive Action	Redefining	Multicultural
Committed to the dominance, values, and norms of one group. Actively excludes in its mission and practices those who are not members of the dominant group.	Actively or passively excludes those who are not members of the dominant group. Includes other members only if they “fit” the dominant norms.	Passively committed to including others without making major changes. Includes only a few members of other groups.	Committed to making a special effort to include others, especially those in designated protected groups. Tolerates the differences that those others bring.	Actively works to expand its definition of inclusion, diversity and equity. Tries to examine and change practices that may act as barriers to members of non-dominant groups.	Actively includes a diversity of people representing different groups’ styles and perspectives. Continuously learns and acts to make the systemic changes required to value, include, and be fair to all kinds of people.
Values and promotes the dominant perspective of one group, culture, or style.		Seeks to integrate others into systems created under dominant norms.		Values and integrates the perspectives of diverse identities, cultures, styles and groups into the organization’s work and systems.	

Figure 9: MCOB Continuum

We recognize that mission and vision statements offer only a fleeting glimpse of an organization’s culture and goals, and it would be inaccurate to judge an organization based solely on these short pieces of writing. Because mission and vision statements are meant to summarize the principal aspects of an organization’s identity, however, the lack of language referring to diversity, equity, accessibility, and power is

still striking. We understand that many of these organizations have separate diversity statements, but these diversity statements are not reflected in the larger mission and vision statements. It will take more analysis, but we suspect that we don't see more inclusive language in mission and vision statements because the institutions themselves have not yet progressed very far along the multicultural organization development (MCOOD) continuum (Fig 9).

The MCOOD model is a helpful framework for analysis. This model posits that whether consciously or not, organizations exist on a spectrum based on how inclusive they are to marginalized populations. At the very beginning of the continuum is the “exclusionary” phase, which is “committed to the dominance, values, and norms of one group... actively excludes in its mission and practices those who are not members of the dominant group.”²² Conversely, a fully-developed multicultural organization “actively includes a diversity of people representing different groups' styles and perspectives” and “continuously learns and acts to make the systemic changes required to value, include, and be fair to all kinds of people.”²³ Evangelina Holvino extends this analysis to different aspects of an organization as well, including mission and vision statements, illustrated in Figure 8.

This chart illustrates the hierarchical structure, workflow, and products of a balanced organization. While mission statements are just a part of what identifies and guides an organization, they still play an important role in defining an organization to people both in and out of the organization. Their presence as a factor in the MCOOD continuum is vital. Most CTDA members' mission statements fall under the “transitional” stage of the MCOOD model in that their language passively connects to a desire to foster diversity but does not explicitly state it. This is a step in the right direction, but in order to be a fully multicultural organization, these members would need to use specific language. As mentioned above, some organizations have separate diversity statements, but they are not integrated into the official expression of mission.

Further research on CTDA member organizations would select a broader body of text from their websites in order to create a more complete profile. Text visualization reflecting other pieces of writing from members' “about” pages, including goals, values, and diversity statements, would provide more information on a group's stated identity. Providing a visualization of CTDA members' locations across Connecticut would also be useful in this endeavor, particularly if that data was shown alongside Connecticut demographic information. This would not only illustrate where CTDA members are (and are not), but also who they serve. As with the mission and vision statements, the addition of this



Figure 8: Inputs and outputs of a balanced organization

²² Evangelina Holvino, “Developing Multicultural Organizations—An Application of the Multicultural OD Model,” in *The NTL Handbook of Organization Development and Change*, ed. Brenda B. Jones and Michael Brazzel (San Francisco, CA: Wiley, 2014), 517, <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118836170.ch26>.

²³ Ibid.

analysis still does not form a complete portrait of CTDA members. By including more information, however, we can add a few more brushstrokes.

As noted above, the seventy or so cultural heritage organizations in the CTDA are a sampling of GLAM (Galleries, Libraries, Archives, and Museums) organizations in CT and their mission statements emphasize community and history. When we look more closely at the collections that these organizations hold however, we find, unsurprisingly, that the community and history represented are generally white, upper middle class, or European immigrant groups who arrived in the 19th and early 20th centuries. In fact, being added to the collections of a local historical society could be seen as a way of announcing that a certain group had become part of mainstream culture.

This attitude is changing, however. Cultural awareness and the desire to broaden the scope of interpretation and integration in Connecticut organizations is growing and most individual CTDA members are actively doing something to encourage and foster inclusivity. For the past 15 years or more, social justice has been a high priority for archival collecting institutions as archives sought to become more active in advocating for social justice and other GLAM institutions have followed suit.²⁴ However, at the larger Statewide level, where the CTDA operates, there is no collective or collaborative push for change.

Review and Analysis

Our review and analysis of the CTDA membership and DPLA participation is not meant to accuse the current cultural heritage community of malicious intent with regards to cultural documentation. Rather, we want to call attention to the biases that are built into the system in which we work and by raising awareness of those biases, begin to create systemic change and build a truly diverse and representative digital cultural heritage landscape.

We saw some significant trends common to both the DPLA Hubs and the CTDA. Barriers to entry remain high for groups that are not already part of the customary cultural heritage community. Public information about Hubs and the CTDA is understandable only to those who already are acquainted with the norms and vocabulary of the discipline. Instead of being an open and welcoming opportunity for first contact, informational websites are poorly organized for the uninitiated, and it is difficult to learn from them what a potential participant would want to know. Although all Hubs, including the CTDA, profess a warm welcome to anyone interested, participant lists are almost exclusively customary and expected organizations.²⁵ Hub organizations are typically connected to large academic institutions or State organizations, and in the CTDA's case, are staffed by white, academically connected, and economically privileged individuals, which can lead to suspicion and distrust from many potential participants.

While these trends can seem daunting, and even prohibitive, there is still much we can do. The CTDA occupies a unique space in the landscape of digital collections and digital cultural heritage in the state. We own no content ourselves, yet we have been influencing and advising members on best practices for digital collections for almost a decade. We work with members both large (universities, the State Library and a statewide historical society) and small (local public libraries, town historical societies, schools, and historic houses) across the entire state. Our unique position gives us unique responsibilities. The first is to lead by example, both in our policies, and our activities as a statewide program. The second responsibility is to

²⁴Jimmerson, Randall C., and Western Washington University, "Archives for All: Professional Responsibility and Social Justice," *History Faculty and Staff Publications*, 66 (2007), https://cedar.wvu.edu/history_facpubs/66.

²⁵ While we cannot speak for the makeup of the organizations in other DPLA Hubs, in the CTDA's case at least, we know that these customary organizations have their origins in the white Eurocentric cultural tradition.

remove as many barriers to entry as possible by re-examining the way we define a “member” and how we introduce and explain the CTDA to others. Reviewing existing requirements and documentation may identify barriers to access that effectively maintains the status quo in the membership and impedes diverse representation. The final responsibility is to actively reach beyond our customary and expected set of members to add to the CTDA community groups or individuals who will provide previously unrepresented views on all parts of the CTDA.

When we examine our program and founding ideas, we return to the idea of agency. From the very beginning, we made it a point that all members who join the CTDA retain complete agency over their collections, including description, arrangement, selection, appraisal, management, metadata, and disposition. Each member has full control over what they feel is best for their digital collections and objects. Having agency is more work for the member, and may impact interoperability with other systems at times, but we feel the significance of retaining ownership and to be able to decide how their history is preserved and presented is undeniable and positive. However, if the systems and environment in which these agents work forces a particular cultural or epistemological outlook on them, the agency they have is clearly diminished.

Technology

While each CTDA member has agency over their collections, they still must work within a relatively monolithic technology system. We wondered how much the system itself imposes a certain epistemological framework upon users. We know that coding is done by coders, and system design is done by system architects, and this work then is never wholly neutral but can carry and reflect the same implicit or explicit biases as individuals themselves. Understanding this we are consciously working towards eliminating organizational and epistemological requirements in system implementation.

For example, relationship mapping and content modeling for digital objects are highly flexible and can be organized around any intellectual principle or schema. Objects may belong to multiple groupings simultaneously or belong to no grouping at all beyond ownership by a particular member. Objects themselves may be constructed in any number of ways, from atomistic, stand-alone items with little context beyond descriptive metadata, to large, complex, compound objects with built-in relationships based on relationship metadata. The system still requires a basic understanding of and familiarity with digital content management concepts, but we have found that these concepts are teachable, and do not force organizational or epistemological structures upon the data. But these ideas and opportunities need to be communicated in ways that are far less jargon-filled than this paragraph.

We often hear about particular needs in terms of access to content and respect requests for restrictions on access based on underrepresented criteria. These access control issues are not easy to implement, but the tools exist to allow members to restrict access based on many different user and content types. We recognize it as an area where we have to do better.

At the CTDA at least, metadata is open, no particular metadata vocabulary or taxonomy is required, and users are free to make up their own if they like. The normalized metadata schema is MODS, but users are free to extend that structure with user defined local fields. We realize that this can lead to difficulties in discovery and access, but we feel that this is necessary so that members retain agency and flexibility over how their collections are described. However, we know now that it isn't enough to recognize that the system could accommodate multiple vocabularies. Offering or pointing users to an expanded list of taxonomies or vocabularies that cover multiple epistemologies and cultural outlooks allows our users to choose which ones (if any) to use. Current CTDA supported taxonomies and vocabularies come from typically white-dominated organizations, such as the Library of Congress and the Getty Art and Architecture Thesaurus. The CTDA

currently does not offer or point to any taxonomies that help describe indigenous peoples or culture for example, nor are we involved in any of the ongoing projects developing such vocabularies. This is an obvious shortcoming and needs to be addressed.

Another technology area that sorely needs examination is discovery and indexing. Currently in the CTDA if you type a word into the general search box, the default search result is ordered by “relevance.” This relevance is created by the Solr search engine algorithm.²⁶ The CTDA staff has little experience in Solr configuration, and so we expect that the “out of the box” relevance configurations are biased in ways we do not know or understand. This is an issue that the CTDA needs to address, especially since we do not strictly manage and prescribe vocabularies or taxonomies in our descriptive metadata.

Policy and Practice

Beyond the technical aspects, we believe that there are policy and procedural areas that need significant reexamination. Currently CTDA members are required to be a “memory institution,” which we loosely define as any “educational, cultural, and memory institution based in the state of Connecticut that [has] a mission to preserve and make available historically valuable resources and records.”²⁷ This definition certainly privileges customary historical entities, and either drives collections from underrepresented groups to them, or drives these collections away from the CTDA. This is a dilemma we are hoping to solve by using the CTDA In Context Working Group to examine the definition of eligibility. Being “eligible” confers a stamp of legitimacy onto a CTDA member. This raises the questions of how the CTDA should define a legitimate “memory institution” and the more important question of why the CTDA should stand as arbiter of inclusion. Perhaps memory institution is too exclusionary, and the CTDA might allow participation to anyone or any group willing to take on the burdens and responsibility of agency over their own collections. Instead of judging the so-called qualifications of potential members, we could simply ask members to conform to collection development guidelines similar to the DPLA’s, that says among other things: “The key factor for decision-making is whether the content will be discoverable and make sense within the context of DPLA.”²⁸ This could lead to interesting and thought provoking conversations about the nature and origins of historical source material, and keep the collecting community alive and vibrant.

Raising these questions can seem threatening to the customary keepers of cultural heritage, who prize their knowledge, training, and understanding of best practices as the key to turning a mass of amorphous data into information and of being able to differentiate between historical content and dreck. Yet, these practices may in fact be a means of retaining hegemony over the cultural heritage landscape. Already the CTDA cedes collection development decisions to the individual members; it would seem logical to extend that openness to any person or group who will accept responsibility for the content they manage in terms of ownership and appropriateness for a digital cultural heritage repository.

A separate but related problem is how to bring into the CTDA underrepresented participants with new perspectives to our collective work. This will be a key element as we move forward. We will use the CTDA In Context program to ensure that we will not force underrepresented groups to assimilate but that we will expand and improve the system to meet the needs of these underrepresented groups. We will look to

²⁶ For one study of how search engines reinforce racism see: Noble, S. U. (2018). *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism*. NYU Press.

²⁷ *CTDA Policies*, p. 5

https://confluence.uconn.edu/display/CTDA/Policies?preview=/70943138/236814499/CTDA_Policies_March_2021.pdf,

²⁸ <https://pro.dp.la/hubs/collection-development-guidelines>

successful programs from other areas as models and use our contacts within Connecticut to seek out and interest new communities in the CTDA, and in participating in making the CTDA truly representational of Connecticut's history and culture.

Finally, like many of our DPLA colleagues, we do a poor job of explaining the CTDA and its workings to those not already familiar with the customary landscape of cultural heritage preservation in Connecticut. Our website is filled with assumptions about how cultural heritage digital collection building is done and about who is doing it. We need to do a thorough overhaul of the way we present ourselves to the public and potential members that starts from a position of cultural humility, while at the same time highlighting the value of participation in the CTDA and its programs to underrepresented groups.

Final Thoughts

Our research has shown us that many aspects of digital library preservation systems are inherently biased, and that policies also are often biased toward customary activities and organizations. This first phase of CTDA in Context, understanding ourselves, gave us a basis for learning how to understand others, and for building a foundation for a new CTDA to evolve, one that is systemically inclusive in its policies, practices, and collections. The next phase, to act upon what we have learned about ourselves is ahead of us. We are confident and eager to start the journey.

Appendix: DPLA Participation Requirements Research Survey

Note: This survey was sent electronically to each of the DPLA Hubs to gather general information about participation and requirements.

This survey contains three (3) required short-answer questions, four (4) required multiple choice questions, and one (1) optional short-answer question. Each question has the option to write additional answers as needed. The survey should take about three to five minutes to complete.

Thank you for your participation!

1. What is the name of your DPLA hub?

Open text field

2. How many members/partners/participants do you have?

Open text field

3. Which of the following organization types are your target audience as potential hub participants? Check all that apply.

Academic libraries

Public libraries

Archives

Museums

Historic Sites

Cultural heritage organizations

Educational institutions

Individuals

Other (Can add more)

4. How does the hub decide which institutions or collections to allow to participate? Check all that apply.

Collection/institution meets requirements, determined through application

Collection/institution meets requirements, determined through personal inquiry

A board will determine if collection/institution is suitable and/or valuable to hub

Other (Can add more)

5. What requirements must collections/institutions meet to become a participant? Check all that apply.

Fill out application form

Fill out agreement form

Be a nonprofit organization

Be an educational or cultural institution

Be an institution

Secure own funding

Assign specific staff member as contact point with hub

Allow public access to physical collection

Allow public access to digital collection

Be based in a specific state or location

Follow certain collections standards

Follow certain metadata standards

Provide thumbnails

Provide rights statement

- o Have an OAI-PMH feed
- o Have content management system
- o Have digitized materials
- o Be able to digitize own materials
- o Have URL
- o Other (Can add more)

6. What services does the hub offer its participants? Please check all that apply.

- o Aggregate data
- o Harvest data
- o Preservation storage
- o Normalize metadata
- o Metadata training
- o Metadata support
- o Hub digitizes on behalf of organization
- o Hub can connect you with digitization services/institutions
- o Digitization support
- o Digitization training
- o Conferences
- o Webinars
- o One-on-one consultations
- o Resource guides
- o Infrastructure creation support
- o OAI-PMH feed support
- o Newsletters
- o Social media marketing
- o Assistance finding funds or grants
- o Give support for writing grants
- o Other (Can add more)

7. What costs, if any, are associated with membership/participation? Please include annual membership fees, startup fees, and extra fees for specialized services. Please specify the amount required.

Open text field

8. Please share any additional comments below.

Open text field