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MARS Speeds Mason's Move to Becoming a Major Research University

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By Fran Rensbarger

The University Libraries is currently piloting a digital archiving program that will enhance Mason's efforts to become a major research institution. Mason Archival Repository Service (MARS) will offer units an opportunity to save information in a digital format that allows it to migrate—to copy or convert data from one technology to another while preserving the essential characteristics of the data—to future technologies.

The system has been installed and is in testing, says Wally Grotophorst, associate university librarian, library systems, who is shepherding the project. The library is also devising policies and procedures for handling a variety of items that the system stores, such as photographs, video, and documents. A digital repository services librarian who will have day-to-day responsibility for the service will be hired, and once that person is on board, the library will begin actively working with specific units within the university to build the service. "Basically, I feel we are very much on track, and MARS will begin to show up on the university community's radar this summer," Grotophorst says.

To check out the MARS web site, click here.

"I believe our MARS service will make an important contribution to Mason's efforts to become a major research university," says Grotophorst. "Most major research institutions are currently developing or operating a system like MARS. At Mason, we're extending that system somewhat to digital archiving.

"As faculty and other researchers develop research materials, there is a need to collect, preserve, index, and distribute them. It is inefficient and unrealistic to expect departments, labs, or centers to provide this service for themselves, so a service like MARS offers professionally maintained repository services and thus increases visibility and accessibility of objects into the future. Simply put, we're leveraging what the library has always done and extending it into the digital realm," he says.

The digital archive will gradually become available for use by the university community, Grotophorst says. "We intend to offer a tier-based service and, given the different character of each level, we'll probably have several availability dates." Plans call for three levels of service and support within MARS:

- Archived files—items of significant and widespread value that will have complex metadata (data that describes a digital object like a catalog entry) and a commitment to future migration as technologies and formats change
- Preserved items—those with enduring value where metadata is provided by the submitter and will be preserved in present form but will not migrate to new technologies
- Stored objects—ones that have long-term value to Mason but will not necessarily be migrated or preserved

"Our initial availability point will center on archived materials—storing digital items from the library's collections—although early on we will work with one or more departments on providing a repository for working papers," says Grotophorst. "We'll begin making our first official digital objects available before the end of this term, and the university will begin seeing MARS-based documents showing up shortly after that."

The libraries are setting up a group that will decide whether material will be archived, preserved, or stored, and later, a faculty advisory group will be set up for the MARS service to help provide guidance when questions arise.

The MARS service offers a menu-driven web site for finding content, says Grotophorst, but users may access it in several additional ways. "For example, the metadata we're attaching to objects in the collection gets 'harvested' by several indexing services expressly configured to process this sort of

information." OAISter, a system based at the University of Michigan, and Google—particularly Google Scholar—are two metadata indexing services that direct the user to objects in the library's archive.

Grotophorst chaired the libraries' task force that looked at how the university might deal with digital preservation needs and related issues. The task force published "Building on Our Strengths: Final Report of the Digital Archiving Task Force" in 2004.

John Zenelis, university librarian and associate vice president of information technology, in his charge to the task force said, "It is generally recognized that a significant measure of the quality and effectiveness of a research library in the future will be its capability for managing, archiving, preserving, and ensuring access to digital information resources. As we move ever closer to research-level library status, we need to begin planning and developing strategies that ensure that our digital collections—current and future holdings—are managed in ways that will assure their availability and accessibility into the future."