Writing History: Editing Departmental Descriptions and Histories in the Digital Repository

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Writing History
Editing Departmental Descriptions and Histories in the Digital Repository

Benjamin Spick
September 19, 2013

When I began working under Harrison last fall, one of my first projects was to edit and create and update departmental profiles for the Digital Repository’s “Colleges and Departments” section. My work involved researching the departments’ histories—mergers and divisions, name changes, function, etcetera. My primary resources for this project were the University Catalogs (available for public viewing in the lobby of Iowa State University Library’s Special Collections Department).

Figure 1. Screenshot of the Department of Physics and Astronomy, showing Description, History, Dates of Existence, Historical Names, and Related Units

1 This paper is adapted from the blog post, “Writing History: Editing Departmental Descriptions and Histories in the Digital Repository,” Digital Repository @ Iowa State University: Resources and Information (blog), May 7, 2013, http://drisu.wordpress.com/2013/05/07/writing-history-editing-departmental-descriptions-and-histories-in-the-digital-repository/
In Iowa State University’s 155 years of service to the state’s academic environment, numerous departments have been created, discontinued, merged together and divided. By and large, the departments we have today all possess intricate histories. Some departments, such as the **Department of Mechanical Engineering**, are nearly as old as the university, and have changed very little in name or function in the span of their history. Other departments have moved from one College to another, such as the **Department of Physics and Astronomy**, which at its conception in the 1890s was found in the Division of Engineering and was associated with Electrical Engineering. And still other departments which exist today are the result of a merger between two or more departments, such as the **Department of Human Development and Family Studies (HD FS)**, which was formed in 1991 with the merger of the departments of Child Development and Family Environment.

When a department has been formerly known by another name, it can be a challenge for researchers to find documents from a particular department. For depositors adding to the Library’s collection, it can be similarly difficult to know where to deposit a digitized document when its current related department was known by another name in the past. Given the complex pasts of some departments, mapping out the life-history of a department and any metamorphoses it has undergone becomes crucial, and when done properly it makes the task of research or of depositing documents easier. This fact brings to light the importance of the small task I performed when I started my work last semester.

Where might a person even begin in revising and assessing the currency of this information? Under the “Colleges and Departments” section of the Digital Repository site, existing profiles for each current department provided a good starting point. From this point, I made many trips to the Special Collections lobby of our library, where the course catalogues of each academic year in Iowa State’s history are kept. As mentioned before, some departments have changed very little in regard to their names and their associated divisions (or “colleges” after 1959, when Iowa State became a “university”). With departments such as these, the greatest challenge was discovering when they were first organized. Oftentimes, departmental websites already contained the information I needed as far as year of organization was concerned, and in this case all I needed to do was verify the date. In other cases, sometimes I only had a “ballpark estimate” to work from, a general idea of when the department might have formed, and in this case I would work either forward or backward through the annual catalogues until I found the first year to acknowledge a department’s existence.

Many other departments, however, had histories which were far less tidy. These departments might have gone through several mergers and dissolutions over the course of their histories, or changes in the name of the department or even of their college. Again, departmental websites with preexisting histories were most helpful; but as is often the case, these neatly recorded histories hardly existed for every department. Often in researching one department, I would notice information about other departments. In this way I could pick up clues to their history, and verify my hunches by sifting through the catalogues. In other cases however, I often had to work backwards, starting from the most recent information on a department and turning back the clock year by year. In the cases where I was feeling my way backwards through a department’s history, or in a situation where a department had undergone numerous name-changes, mergers and dissolutions, cross-referencing the name of
Once I had the vital statistics on a department’s history, I organized this information into a digital archive document, making documents for both extant and dissolved departments. After this, I then uploaded the relevant information on extant departments (their individual history, function, historical names, and related units) onto the department’s page in the Digital Repository. I repeated this process for each department on the Repository until the project was finished.

This project lasted from the time of my hiring in November 2012 through the first half of the following spring semester. In addition to clarifying the histories of our departments and putting this information in an easily accessible place, this project has taken on a more personal interest as well. For the length of this project, I discovered the histories and functions of many departments I would have never taken an interest in otherwise. As an undergraduate student, possessing this information can give me a better understanding of the people I meet from other departments and their significance.

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