

Multi-Institutional Approach to Technical Report Literature: Development of the Technical Report Archive & Image Library (TRAIL)

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Abstract

While availability and access to more recent technical report literature has greatly improved through electronic delivery, older technical report literature still remains elusive to users. The challenges posed by these collections are two-fold: 1) the diverse nature of distribution and collection building practices across institutions; and, 2) the variability in the selection and acquisition methods used, resulting in incomplete series, confusion in depository and non-depository status, lack of awareness and definition of a "complete collection," and a host of other inconsistencies.

Through a national dialogue among academic librarians led by University of Arizona Libraries (UAL) beginning in 2005, common discoveries were made about the various barriers libraries were experiencing in managing and making accessible legacy technical report collections, and the urgent need to address these issues. The positive response to these dialogues and preliminary assessment results led to an extraordinary opportunity to resolve a difficult challenge in academic and special libraries. These problems created a strong case for establishing the Technical Report Archive & Image Library (TRAIL) collectively maintained by the library community.

The Technical Report Archive & Image Library (TRAIL) aims to identify, digitize, archive, and provide persistent and unrestricted access to federal technical reports issued prior to 1975. TRAIL is a Greater Western Library Alliance initiative led by the University of Arizona in collaboration with the Center for Research Libraries. TRAIL is funded by the member institutions of the Greater Western Library Alliance with an estimated annual budget of \$128,000. To date, TRAIL has scanned more than one million pages of technical reports issued by the US federal government agencies and has involved participation and contribution from more than twenty universities. This paper will describe TRAIL, including the need for its development, current structure, and future directions.

Why a focus on federally funded technical reports?

In 2004, the University of Arizona Libraries (UAL) focused efforts on eliminating backlogs of purchased materials needing to be processed and cataloged. One of the results of this focused effort was the recognition that our library had collections of materials, sitting on the shelves available to users, that were deemed valuable, but with little or no title level cataloging, or other finding aids available. These collections were virtually "hidden" from our users. While available, most of these collections required that users employ some form of mediation or assistance from the library, which was the exact opposite direction from the Library's strategic direction at the time for creating "self-sufficient users" who could access the library "anytime, anyplace". One of the identified collections was a large collection of print technical research report series from various US federal agencies. The collection was housed in our Science-Engineering Library, separate from our other government document collections. These collections were purchased prior to UAL's establishment as a selective depository library and/or were purchased directly from the agencies and hence were not part of our official government documents depository collection. In addition to our print collection, there were also many thousands of reports that we owned issued either in micro-opaque or micro-card format and microfiche format. To further the complexity, these collections were full of gaps in the numbering sequences of the report series. These gaps were caused by reports that weren't publicly issued, reports that were not available at the time of the purchase of our collections and never filled in as the reports may later have been released, and also likely to natural theft and loss over time.

The UAL spent considerable time trying to locate shipping and/or receiving lists to get an item level inventory for all the technical reports we'd received in our collection. It was hoped that we might be able to create some form of inventory of items that could be added to our local OPAC. However, it didn't take us long to realize that we weren't going to be able to find records of what items had been shipped and/or received, and hiring students to manually inventory our collection was going to be time-consuming and costly. Providing better access to these collections wasn't a project that could realistically be undertaken by any one institution. And UAL temporarily ceased its project until funding and or technologies to help with the project could be secured.