

Margaret Webster, Moderator  
When Worlds Collide: the Journey from Here to Where in VR  
Monday, April 20, 2009  
3:30-5:00

**SLIDE 1:** I'm Margaret Webster and am currently the director of the Knight Visual Resources Facility at Cornell University; I will moderate this session. I'll begin by introducing each speaker before presenting an introduction to this session titled *When Change Comes Knocking*. Please hold your questions until each speaker has presented; we will have time for questions and answers afterwards.

**SLIDE 2:** Speakers:

**Jolene de Verges** is the Images Librarian for the Rotch Library of Architecture and Planning where she manages the Visual Collections. Her interests and background include cataloging and access to visual resources in art, architecture and material culture, digital repositories in libraries, metadata standards, and integrated access to visual content. She has managed and participated in various digital imaging initiatives in museum and library environments. Previous to her position at MIT, Jolene was coordinator of the Bridges to Art project at the Worcester Art Museum and the Digital Imaging Specialist at Smith College where she worked on the design of the Snapdragon collection management system which is modeled on VRA Core 4 and CCO. She holds a BA and MA in Art History and an MLS from Simmons College.

The title of Jolene's paper is *The Ying and the Yang: Stand Alone Versus Integrated Visual Resources Collections*. She will compare the experience of working in a standalone visual resources collection to working in a library with an integrated visual resources collection.

**Katie Keller** has been an art librarian for over twenty years with experience in reference and technical services. She has worked at the Avery Architectural and Fine Arts Library, the Ryerson Library at the Art Institute of Chicago, the Research Libraries Group and at the Art & Architecture Library at Stanford University. For the past three years she has held a dual role as a cataloger for the Visual Resources Center and as reference librarian.

The title of Katie's paper is *Changing Course: Navigating in New Terrain*. She will talk about how Stanford is leveraging institutional resources to serve an entire community. She will also describe the development of a center for the instruction in discovery, storage and delivery of images.

**Gary Ginther** has been Head of the Frederick & Kazuko Harris Art Library, located in the Vernon R. Alden Library at Ohio University since 2004. He has degrees from Ohio University and Kent State University. His first library job was in the Archives at Ohio University where he was involved in imaging collections for web publication. Currently, he is actively involved in curricular reform as the university makes a 'quarters-to-semesters' transition.

The title of Gary's paper is *VR Races Back to the Art Library and Makes a Speedy Recovery*. He will discuss the administrative repurposing of a visual resources collection into the library.

Margaret Webster: *When Change Comes Knocking*

Title & affiliation: Director, Knight Visual Resources Facility, Cornell University

**SLIDE 3:** Setting the stage

It is fitting that this session at the end of our conference circles back to some of the topics discussed in our opening plenary—*Convergence and Managing Progressive Change*. These matters have been a *leitmotif* throughout this conference. I'd like to begin by listing some of the issues and concerns that are in the air. They include:

- a. How do we deal with uncertainty when faced with developing new paradigms?
- b. How can we develop reasonable, achievable goals for the continued development of our collections at our institutions?
- c. How do we negotiate the process of achieving our goals when a given solution or solutions will not always work? How do we find or develop a model that is workable and sustainable?
- d. How do we find critical commonalities and establish inventive connections with colleagues within our institutions?
- e. What is the role of the special—meaning the subject or unit—library for the changes that are being made? How do we define special collections? What role will they continue to play in our changing environment?
- f. What are the positive synergies that subject libraries might provide to connect with faculty and students? How can or will mergers create new and different positive relationships? How can we repurpose our established workflows to address our current needs and directions?
- g. How ruthless must we be in shedding legacy collections and services? How much space do we need for our physical collections? How much space do we need for accessible storage?

When I proposed this session last spring, I intended to use a Cornell experience to outline some of these issues that must be understood, discussed and resolved in order to achieve appropriate and orderly change and transformation in the visual resources environment. I wanted to use the approach we were using as an example for fostering effective change; however, as we will see today there are many ways to manage change appropriately and then there is the Cornell way. It seems that the Cornell way is being replicated at the Humanities

VRC at the University of California, Irvine. I'll begin by describing the administrative position of my collection within the institution.

**SLIDE 4:** The Knight Visual Resources Facility is a College level unit that regularly serves the three departments in the College of Architecture, Art & Planning plus the Department of the History of Art and the Classics Department in the College of Arts & Sciences. Faculty and students from a variety of departments and disciplines throughout Cornell regularly use our services.

With a staff of 5.25 employees assisted by a number of student assistants, we were able to create and process digital image files, create descriptive metadata using applicable standards, provide technical assistance to faculty in producing image rich presentations and posting images on their course management sites, and provide personalized image reference and instruction for faculty and students. Our digital image instruction assistant was available for one on one instruction and often traveled to faculty offices to provide this service.

**SLIDE 5:** Our institutional collection of instructional digital images is now available online to the entire Cornell community—in Ithaca and beyond--either on Luna Insight which is managed by the library or as a hosted collection in ARTstor. We coordinate collection development to avoid replicating images already available in our institutional collection or in one of our licensed resources. Our development efforts focus local content that is otherwise not available—content that makes a Cornell education unique.

On the other hand, it became clear that this “stand alone” instructional image collection funded by a single college at Cornell needed to find a more appropriate administrative and financial home where it would become a resource for the entire Cornell community. We began this process in a logical way.

In January, 2008, the acting university librarian and the interim dean of the College of Architecture, Art & Planning at Cornell established a task force to assess the advantages and disadvantages of administratively and, perhaps, physically merging the Fine Arts Library and the Knight Visual Resources Facility under the direction of the Cornell University Library system. This task force consisted of librarians including the Fine Arts Librarian, the Director of the Knight Visual Resources Facility, faculty from Classics, Art History, and Architectural History, and the

business managers of both the library and the college. We were asked to submit a recommendation on the process, timeline and costs associated with such a merger.

The primary resource for our deliberations was the report issued in November, 2007, by a team of consultants who had visited Cornell earlier in the semester to evaluate both the Fine Arts Library and the Knight Visual Resources Facility. We conducted two targeted surveys to provide additional information for our discussions.

**SLIDE 6:** The acting director of libraries asked the following questions of the Association of Research Libraries directors:

1. Is the visual resources/slide collection a part of the library?
2. If not, where does it sit administratively?
3. If yes, has it been merged with an art library or has it remained a separate entity under the library system?
4. **SLIDE 7:** What do you see as the pros and cons of such a merger?

**SLIDE 8:** I surveyed selected Visual Resources Association (VRA) members to gain an understanding about the current administrative and support structures for visual resources collections. In particular, they were queried about the physical and administrative location of their collections and how and by whom their image metadata was created and maintained. The idea was to establish a sense of current practice.

While the respondents to both surveys consistently reported change in their institutions, there was no obvious single best way to combine traditional library services with visual resources facilities. Discussions of the advantages and disadvantages of folding visual resources collections into the library seemed to focus on maintaining user satisfaction and control as well as concerns about or desires to embrace new models.

The responses to these surveys included comments such as:

1. "Given the broad interest in images these days, the use by multiple disciplines, it seems to make sense to coordinate, if not consolidate, the creation, storage, and preservation of images". (Mary Case, Illinois Chicago)
2. Time may be ripe—faculty have to a great extent made the shift from analog to digital.

3. It may be time to develop a digital resource collection that would serve as a campus-wide resource including many different disciplines. A digital image commons might be a physical place or might consist of integrated access to virtual collections.
4. “I think it is very important for VR collections to work in concert with other library collections—especially as local production of digital documents becomes a widespread and (almost) normal activity. The collections, rights, metadata, access, and preservations concerns are all similar. The potential for saving resources and providing better services is great”. (Henry Pisciotta, Carnegie Mellon)

The Visual Resources Association’s 2006-2007 Professional Status Survey Report was also helpful in understanding the current state of the visual resources profession.

1. **SLIDE 9:** Over 83 % of visual resources collections are in academic institutions; of those 40% are still administratively located in departments with another 17% placed at the college or school level. The migration of visual resources collections from predominantly departmental or college control to the institutional library is far from complete.
2. **SLIDE 10:** A greater number of VR professionals hold a subject masters although the MLS is becoming more prevalent; some professionals hold both an MLS and a subject masters.
3. **SLIDE 11:** Many active visual resources professionals are reaching retirement age; this might provide a catalyst for change.

Our weekly discussions were lively and wide ranging; they included deliberations on virtually all of the topics relevant to this session. We talked about what we wanted to accomplish and how to negotiate the process of getting “to where”. The faculty members on the committee were particularly vocal in defining and articulating their needs within a changed and changing environment. They were willing to take risks and to think creatively. The following scenarios were discussed:

1. Merge the Knight Visual Resources Facility with the Fine Arts Library into an overarching unit with a subject focus. This solution was favored by the consultants. Adopting this solution would have meant that both image capture and metadata creation

would have been done offsite by the central technical services unit and by the Digital Capture and Processing Center. It would also have limited the institutional digital image collection development mandate to that of the Fine Arts Library.

2. Incorporate many of the KVRF activities into the Division of Library Information Technologies or DLIT. This choice would have allowed the visual resources staff to work closely with those responsible for image capture and to fully participate in the creation of the descriptive metadata. The main stumbling block was that DLIT is a cost recovery unit and does not currently have a funded public services component.
3. Create a Cornell-wide Media Center or Digital Learning Commons building on DLIT, KVRF, Fine Arts Library (FAL), and Cornell Information Technologies (CIT) expertise. This option was seen as the ultimate goal of any merger because it alone had the potential to meet the majority of Cornell's needs for providing and delivering digital images across many disciplines as well as providing a mechanism for providing excellent, targeted service and instruction to a wide cross section of Cornell patrons. This was both the most creative and the most costly proposal.

The overriding consideration in preferring any of these options was our assessment of potential user satisfaction and the quality of service that would be provided. The faculty on the task force expressed concern that merging FAL and KVRF could compromise the quality of service they currently receive. They eloquently stated that they viewed working with instructional images as distinctly different from other activities. They preferred to come to KVRF for instructional imaging needs and to the Fine Arts Library or another Cornell library for their research needs. They also pointed out that they and their colleagues use many different libraries not only—or maybe not even—the Fine Arts Library. They were more receptive to considering a merger of KVRF with DLIT because DLIT currently assists with image production and is not focused on a particular discipline.

In the end the task force was unable to reach consensus around a single set of recommendations in part because we were unable to develop a viable plan, staffing solution, and budget for any of our three options. We agreed to defer a decision until a new dean of the College of AAP was in place. The members of the task force believed that the discussion would continue and that we would be able to focus on a workable plan for a transition.

**SLIDE 12:** Then on March 4, 2009, our new dean made the following announcement:

“Effective June 1, 2009, AAP's Knight Visual Resources Facility (KVRF) will close. It goes without saying that this decision has not been made without considerable thought. Advances in digital technology have outstripped some of the KVRF mandate, and a redistribution of visual resource services is consistent with both an external consultant's report of 2007 and a university Task Force report of 2008. But it is also true that the fiscal pressure on the College has increased the urgency for enacting structural changes.” [Kent Kleinman]

The motivations for this action include very real financial pressure on both the College and the University, a perceived urgent need to shift the burden of providing visual resources from the College to a University level unit, and a lack of understanding about the value of the Knight Visual Resources Collection for the academic programs of the College.

The dean who acted without prior consultation with his faculty and without negotiating a transition plan with the library took the following steps:

1. He returned a substantial portion of our funding to the College of Arts & Sciences; they in turn will contract with the Cornell Digital Library for image production and metadata services. AAP faculty members are excluded from this service.
2. He is providing AAP faculty members with scanners so that they can create their own images for teaching and research. Image management and metadata creation will be the responsibility of the faculty member, and this material will almost certainly not be contributed to the institutional image collection.
3. The physical slide collection will remain available for use probably most frequently as a scanning resource.

**Slide 13:** Needless to say the reaction to this announcement was rapid and intense; faculty and students were outraged. It included newspaper articles and editorials, meetings of the faculty and students with the dean, letters of support from concerned individuals and professional organizations. Everybody acknowledged the current real economic crisis which necessitates

hard fiscal choices; however, they consistently urged the dean to negotiate a transition to the library rather than to lose a valuable collection and a valued resource.

The library remains reluctant to assume additional responsibilities particularly those that come without budgetary or staffing resources. They, too, are forced to do “less with less” or “more with less” and are eliminating services and downsizing their staff. They are simply not in a position to assume a service that they will be unable to sustain. The library has agreed to provide image capture and metadata services on a cost recovery basis for the Art History Department and the Classics Department. So, I am now trying to determine if we will be able to transfer our most vulnerable and valuable asset—our image management database that supports the institutional instructional image collection—to the digital library. If they will accept and support it, it can continue to be used to manage those images contributed by Art History and Classics.

The dean believes that he will be able within a year to negotiate a new way of providing image resources at Cornell by establishing a centrally funded, interdisciplinary imaging center. The Phoenix may rise. Unfortunately, this scenario is not unique; the Knight Visual Resources Facility at Cornell University is not the first and will almost certainly not be the last to close its doors. Stay tuned.