



Brown's Dynamic Libraries

By Debra Bradley Ruder '80

The University's world-class libraries have evolved their digital, research and collections services to meet the needs of 21st-century scholars.

Last July, 15 humanities scholars from around the country gathered in the Digital Scholarship Lab in Brown's Rockefeller Library to learn skills for publishing their research in innovative "born-digital" formats. The training was designed for under-resourced faculty, many from historically Black colleges and universities — a reflection of Brown's leadership in academic digital publishing and its membership in the HBCU Library Alliance.

"It's so important that we make digital publishing more inclusive and equitable," says Allison Levy, digital scholarship editor for the Brown University Library, which developed the institute with funding from the National Endowment for the Humanities.

Brown's libraries evolve constantly to meet the teaching and research needs of today's scholars, notes University Librarian Joseph Meisel, helping departments and programs across campus create, acquire, preserve and share knowledge.

The Brown University Library includes the Rockefeller, John Hay, Sciences, Orwig Music and Champlin Memorial (medical) libraries; the Annmary Brown Memorial; and an offsite storage annex. The University library collaborates with numerous Brown entities, such as the John Carter Brown Library — an independently funded and administered research institution — and the Pembroke Center Archives, on issues related to women's history.

Evolving the Libraries' Resources

John Hay, a special collections library with millions of treasures, revised its collection policy in 2021 to diversify its archives and respond to changing scholarship trends. Curators established six core collecting directions: Global Lavender Voices, Ideology and Power, Military and Society, Performance and Entertainment, Popular Literature, and the University and Beyond. They launched a seventh growth area, Voices of Mass Incarceration in the United States, last summer with the arrival of personal materials from Mumia Abu-Jamal, a

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political activist and journalist whose extensive writings while in prison provide insights into the experiences of incarcerated individuals.

Other recent acquisitions include the papers of acclaimed Puerto Rican playwright José Rivera and of the legendary Indigenous Spiderwoman Theater company. Library staff are working with Brown's Center for the Study of Slavery and Justice to house oral histories of descendants of the transatlantic slave trade.

"The Hay has incredible collections built thoughtfully over many decades," says Amanda Strauss, associate University librarian for special collections. "But Brown has transformed in the last decade, and the Hay should transform with it because our collections are active sites of research and engagement for students, faculty and alumni."



Similarly, the John Carter Brown Library (JCB, pictured above), a world-renowned repository of rare books, maps and other items documenting early North and South America, has been highlighting the history of Africans and Indigenous inhabitants in its holdings and making its collections more accessible.

"An example is the Algonquian Bible, the first Bible printed in North America, which has been credited to the Puritan minister John Eliot," says JCB Director and Professor of History Karin Wulf. "It was, in fact, a collaborative endeavor among John Eliot and several Indigenous individuals, including a Nipmuc man, James Printer."

To advance this work, Kimberly Toney, of the Hassanamisco Band of Nipmuc, joined Brown

as coordinating curator for Native American and Indigenous Collections at the JCB and Hay.

Expertise and Engagement

With data-intensive research and teaching soaring, Brown's library experts help faculty and students capture, analyze and disseminate their research data and findings for broader use. Librarians also assist classes across campus, whether teaching students how to harvest Twitter information or hosting them to explore primary sources.

To expand the library's outreach on campus and in the community, Brown established the Center for Library Exploration and Research (CLEAR). It aims to promote high-impact scholarship by enhancing access to the libraries' outstanding resources. Engaging with the Providence community, Brown also contributed to a major renovation of the Providence Public Library and a transformative update of Hope High School's library and media center.

The Brown library's Center for Digital Scholarship, meanwhile, supports Brown faculty who are leading collaborative research on such topics as contaminated industrial sites in Rhode Island, ancient inscriptions from Israel/Palestine, and the effect of COVID-19 on Black women's maternal health.

The center's digital publication arm helped create the online second edition of Brown's Slavery and Justice Report (pictured at far left). It also produces pathbreaking born-digital works by faculty — open-access volumes, intended for publication by university presses, with interactive multimedia features that make scholarship come alive.

And they have impact. The University's first such publication, "Furnace and Fugue" (2020), is a digital version of a 17th-century alchemy book with poems, illustrations, music and essays. Co-edited by history professor Tara Nummedal, it has had 16,000-plus unique visitors and is used in classrooms around the world.

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