
Securing the Cultural Heritage of the West Indies: The Role of the West Indiana and Special Collections, The University of the West Indies, Trinidad and Tobago**Judith Wright**

Library Assistant

The Alma Jordan Library, The University of the West Indies, Trinidad and Tobago

Abstract

Change is a constant but quite often, forced change brings about new evolutions and long-lasting results, some good and some may require a little more convincing to accept. The COVID-19 Pandemic was one of those forced changes that the world over had to accept. Its impact on organisations and libraries was severe and, in some cases, has been the turn of the tide for many. At the West Indiana and Special Collections (WISC), Alma Jordan Library, The University of the West Indies (UWI), St. Augustine Campus we were not spared. This paper will therefore examine the impact of the WISC and our ability to pivot to a virtual environment. Some of the challenges and weaknesses are highlighted as well as several benefits that emerged from the pandemic.

The findings presented are based on policies developed to mitigate challenges and an examination of email responses to research queries. The paper will also put forward a proposal that can be taken by the WISC section to reduce the impact of any future events that will affect access to the library as it did during the period of the COVID-19 Pandemic.

Keywords: digital; digitisation; heritage library; special collections; teleworking; UWISpace; virtual; WISC.

Introduction

The COVID-19 Pandemic has been the most recent game changer for governments and organisations throughout the world, when it comes to services they provide. The Pandemic caused extended shut-down periods for libraries and made it difficult and in some cases unable to adequately respond to the needs of the communities they served. In the end, it was the readiness factor of the libraries to meet their users in virtual spaces that cushioned the impact of the pivot from physical to virtual spaces. The WISC section at the Alma Jordan Library, The UWI St. Augustine Campus had to quickly develop strategies to continue to serve the needs of its users. Departmental meetings were conducted virtually to strategize and plan the way forward.

An exploration of the strategies implemented was conducted for the period of the COVID-19 closures, which began in March 2020 and ended in August 2022 with the full return to face to face work. Annual reports and statistics were reviewed, and a manual tally of emails conducted where every instant of an email was counted, capturing both emails that were received and the responses. Junk emails were deleted and did not form part of the tally.

The history of the WISC of the Alma Jordan Library is intricately infused in the history and development of The University of the West Indies (UWI) St. Augustine Campus and can be traced back to the West Indian Royal Commission of 1897 in Barbados. As a result, the Imperial Department of Agriculture for the West Indies, together with a corresponding collection of books came into being (Rouse-Jones 1998, 3). The establishment of a college in Trinidad was suggested and then developed, leading to the transfer of the Imperial Department of Agriculture from Barbados to Trinidad in 1921 to form the West Indian Agricultural College (ICTA 1951, 3). The College was later renamed The Imperial College of Tropical Agriculture (ICTA) and formed the nucleus of the West Indiana collection with “books and manuscripts belonging to the Historical Society of Trinidad and Tobago” (Rouse-Jones 1998, 3) being filed in its library.

The WISC was relocated several times and between 1970 to 1997, it was relocated three times in the Alma Jordan Library building itself before finding its permanent home in its current location on the second floor of the library. As of January 18, 2023, The University of the West Indies, Alma Jordan Library’s West Indiana and Special Collections webpage stated that the WISC Division (WISCD)

aims to be a repository of international significance for research on West Indian-related topics. Its mission is to acquire, preserve and provide access to material emanating from the West Indies, produced by West Indians, and on the West Indies as well as on the West Indian diaspora.

It houses two sections, a General Collections and a Special Collections; together they are a heritage library of international significance. The Division serves the staff and students at the University as well as external researchers both local and foreign. Librarians and Library Assistants all shared in the management of email queries; however, the Assistants were primarily responsible. The collections in the Division are mainly print and some non-print material such as audio and video recordings; and microforms and therefore requires physical on-site access.

The Government of the Republic Trinidad and Tobago (GORTT) reported its first positive case of COVID-19 on March 12, 2020, and on March 13, 2020, the University informed all staff and students of the suspension of classes from March 14, 2020. The decision was guided by the announcement of the GORTT that all places of learning were to remain closed for one week to stop the spread of COVID-19. This was just the first in a series of

closures at the St. Augustine Campus of The UWI and on March 14, 2020, the Library informed its staff of its closure effective March 16, 2020, until further notice and informed staff of new working arrangements to take effect which included working and reporting virtually. The extended periods of library closure meant strategies had to be developed to facilitate the continuance of the services of the WISCD.

“Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, telework has been adopted extensively as a way to ensure business continuity” (Kramer and Karmer 2020, 620). The World Health Organisation suggested to governments and organisations around the world that teleworking be implemented “as a new work innovation to prevent the spread of the virus as well as a solution so that work can be performed as usual” (Irawanto, Novianti and Roz 2021, 1). Teleworking refers to a flexible working concept not constrained by time, place or even the type of technical communication (Irawanto, Novianti and Roz 2021, 1). Some organisations may have adopted the teleworking concept prior to COVID-19 but it was COVID-19 that compelled governments and organisations worldwide to adopt teleworking as an alternative measure to continue its operations.

The transition from working in traditional office spaces to working from home virtually, required organisations and staff, to be ready technologically, mentally and physically to operate in the virtual environment in the way teleworking demanded. This paper does not intend to explore the mental and physical readiness of the staff of the WISCD to work in virtual spaces but will briefly speak to its impact on staff. Focus will be given to the technological readiness of the Division to continue to operate virtually.

The WISCD Response

During the COVID-19 Pandemic, the WISCD was ready, albeit in a limited way, to respond to queries from our researchers. Most of our communication was done via emails. A colour coded email management system was introduced to ensure all queries were addressed and allowed for easy monitoring of work that was being done by Library Assistants at any time and eliminated the possibility of more than one staff member responding to the same query. It also assisted in identifying queries that might have been missed and facilitated a fair distribution of the work among staff. During the Pandemic, the number of emails received increased significantly (see Figure 1 below).

<u>WISCD EMAILS TALLY</u>				
<u>Year</u>	<u>2019</u>	<u>2020</u>	<u>2021</u>	<u>2022</u>
<u>Amount</u>	123	372	894	1079
<u>Monthly Average</u>	10.3	31.0	74.5	89.9
<u>Percent Increase</u>		202.4	626.8	777.2

Figure 1: *WISCD Emails Tally*

An analysis of Figure 1 above shows an increase of 777.2 percent in the number of email communication in 2022 when compared to email communication in 2019, the year prior to the Pandemic. What was also observed was an increasing trend in emails being processed by staff during the Pandemic. Figure 2 below gives a graphical view of the number of emails and monthly average processed by staff. Regular updates were also provided on our websites using Libguides providing solutions to issues identified. As a working definition, “LibGuides are a content management and information sharing system designed specifically for libraries. The platform allows for easy navigation through and instruction on core and relevant resources in a particular subject field, class, or assignment” (What is a LibGuide? - LibGuides @ Pitt - A Faculty Resource - Guides at University of Pittsburgh).

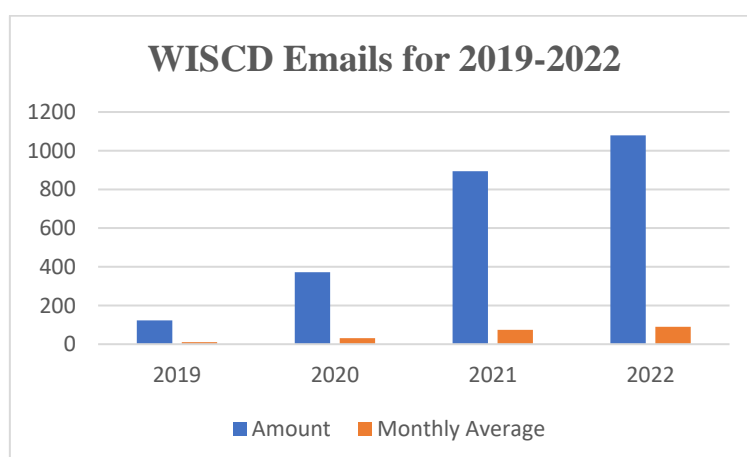


Figure 2: *WISCD Emails for 2019-2022*

In 2008, a project to establish the technical infrastructure to harness, organize, preserve and make accessible digitally born materials of The UWI community was established at the Alma Jordan Library. The platform used to house the digital content is called UWISpace, a repository that serves all campuses of The UWI. The groups that contribute content to UWISpace are called communities and they have autonomy to set their content guidelines and

parameters for access. One major accomplishment was the successful completion of the digitization project of the UWI St. Augustine theses collection. This collection makes up part of the General Collection of the WISCD that houses theses from three UWI Campuses, namely Cave Hill in Barbados, Mona in Jamaica and St. Augustine in Trinidad. The St. Augustine theses were made accessible to The UWI St. Augustine communities. This achievement demonstrated in one area our readiness to meet the research needs of the UWI communities. Nonetheless, it was surprising the number of queries from staff and students about full text access to our UWI St. Augustine theses collection. These queries pointed to another issue; one of promotion. As a strategy, a *How to Access the UWI Theses Online in 5 Steps* YouTube video was created and added to the WISCD Libguides demonstrating how to access the full text of the St. Augustine theses. As a result of the library closure and limited access during adjusted library opening, request for theses, were generally received from the UWI St. Augustine community and were for the St. Augustine theses which increased our ability to respond.

Other features of work noteworthy of mentioning include the ‘Teaching with Special Collections’ programme offered to undergraduate and graduate level students. Pre Covid-19 pandemic this programme was conducted using the face-to-face modality. The programme was developed and conducted by the WISCD, an initiative that supported the teaching and learning mission of the university and worked to promote the Special Collections. During the COVID-19 pandemic the programme migrated to the virtual platform. (The Alma Jordan Library – Teaching with Special Collections (uwi.edu)). Careful selection of documents for the online environment was conducted ensuring its suitability for its desired purpose, thereby demonstrating the many uses of our Special Collections. The feel and touch feature often desired by researchers in the physical environment using special collections was not available in the online lecture environment but that by no means diminished the quality or the interest that was shown by the level of questioning from the participants. Another lecture was also done by one postgraduate student who worked in the WISCD as an intern Pre COVID-19 Pandemic. During this time the student had access to the Special Collection, and it was possible to do extensive examination and research of the materials. At the end of the internship, an online lecture presentation was done. This was only possible because of the work done prior to COVID-19 making it easy to do a final presentation in the virtual space.

The Division serves the UWI community as well as external researchers, both local and foreign. However, pre COVID-19 external researchers visited the WISCD to conduct research

using the Special Collections. This was no longer possible during the early lock-down phase of the pandemic and scanning services were offered to external researchers. The cost of scanning remained the same for these researchers. However, one major impact of the COVID-19 was the length of time it took to complete research queries, over which we had no control. Generally, the kind of research queries the WISCD received were for items in our Special Collections which were predominantly print and some non-print that had no digital surrogates. It therefore meant that physical interaction with the items was needed which was only possible if access to the collection was permitted. These matters were fully ventilated in our division's online meeting and eventually at the level of the library management. At the earliest convenience with the ease in some of the COVID-19 restrictions, limited access was granted to the WISCD staff to enter the building. A short window of opportunity was provided to allow staff to access the materials requested by our researchers. This however was only half the solution.

Retrieving requested items in response to researchers' queries was made possible when access to the WISCD was allowed. However, other processes were involved, such as the scanning of documents, which meant that the work needed to complete the query was not possible in one visit to the library, as the services of another unit in the library, the Digital Library Services Centre (DLSC), needed to be engaged for scanning of oversized items as well as Special Collection items, a system which was already in place pre COVID-19 Pandemic. Therefore, it meant that queries would be further delayed until additional COVID-19 restrictions were lifted to allow for more staff to access the building. Once the restrictions were lifted, the WISCD coordinated the scanning of requested documents with the DLSC. Selection and identification of materials to be scanned was done on one day and left for the staff of the DLSC unit to scan and make available to us for distribution to our researcher on another day. When researchers had access to the WISCD pre COVID-19, researchers usually opted to requesting photocopies as a cheaper alternative or would take a photograph or they scanned image with their personal devices.

The sharing of files posed another challenge. This was not easily resolved by the simple email file attachment because there was a 10 megabytes size limits for file sharing via emails. The resolution and quantity of scans requested by researchers quite often meant the files exceeded the size limit allowed for sharing via emails. Engaging once again, the services of another unit in the library, the Information Technology Systems unit upon request explored the

option to develop an in-house system to make possible the sharing of large files. The sharing of large files was compounded by the challenges of serving an external clientele as we were attempting to address another issue, the sharing of digital content to external users and allowing them temporary read-only access. Thus, the web based UWIPress EBook Platform was introduced. We successfully used this platform to share Special Collections documents giving access to it for a limited time. For more straightforward sharing of large files WeTransfer and Sendspace were explored with Sendspace emerging as the preferred option.

Payment for the services offered by the WISCD was made possible via an online credit card facility developed prior to COVID-19 but during this time, its use was increased as this method of payment was adopted by the rest of the library and was extended to the rest of the University community. Pre COVID-19 Pandemic, the UWI community would generally request photocopies of materials at a cost of TT\$0.50 – TT\$1.00 per page. Alternatively, they had the option to scan or take photographs of materials using their phones. During COVID-19 Pandemic, this option was not available due to restricted access. The UWI community was therefore now required to shift to making payments for scanning services. This meant that they were required to pay between TT\$15.00 per scan for materials from the general collection. The Librarians in the WISCD engaged the library management team with the aim of having the price reduced for the UWI community. It was felt that by virtue of the cost they were now required to pay, some of the materials were being made inaccessible to them. This was revisited and a concession reached to make the reprographic services offered to the UWI community more affordable. It was therefore agreed to reduce the price from TT\$15.00 to TT\$2.50 per scanned image.

As a direct result of the COVID-19 Pandemic and the restricted access to researchers, the staff of the WISCD were now required to provide greater reference services to the researchers and greater consultation was needed to help researchers, sometimes causing the staff to do deeper examination of Special Collection materials to determine what the researcher needed and verifying with them the material retrieved was in fact what they wanted. This was not a normal function of the job as the researcher would be the one doing this kind of work if they were able to physically access the WISCD. In some cases, researchers were redirected to access the services of a research assistant from the History Department in the Faculty of Humanities and Education, a system that was already in place pre COVID-19 to assist researchers who were unable to visit the collection themselves.

When some of the COVID-19 restrictions were relaxed, limited access to the WISCD was permitted for faculty staff and postgraduate students. Access was strictly managed by an appointment system as our capacity was reduced to ensure adherence to the COVID-19 regulations of social distancing. The appointment management system began in July 2020 and ended in November 2022. During this time, 874 requests for appointments were received. A roster was developed to manage staffing in the Division and staff worked alternate days ensuring a handover was prepared daily to inform the incoming team of any information of which they needed to be made aware.

Challenges

The teleworking or work from home concept which was new for our staff in the University, was adopted due to COVID-19 Pandemic as a response to allow for the continuity of the services we provide, as far as possible. In the early phase of the pandemic, the library continued to provide its services 100 percent remotely. The WISCD management team was responsible for the creation of projects for support staff to be able to work. Online meetings became the norm and were used to provide information to staff, COVID-19 updates as it related to the library, address challenging queries and to respond to any concerns of staff.

A common trend identified among the staff in the WISCD were challenges to adjust to a new work-life balance. For the purpose of this paper, work-life balance is defined as “the relative allocation of time to professional activity compared with non-professional activity” (Wilcox 2020, 1276). When working in traditional office spaces the hours of operation were clearly defined and mentally allowed for staff to prepare to start and stop work. Teleworking did not have clearly defined hours of operation, which resulted in staff working outside the established work hours from 8:30 a.m. – 4:30 p.m. Monday to Friday except when scheduled to work from 3:00 p.m. to 10:00 p.m. to facilitate the library’s extended opening hours. Occasionally staff may also be required to work a four-hour shift on one Saturday per month. The teleworking arrangement often included working late evenings on Saturdays, Sundays and in some cases even on public holidays with no time boundaries. As an example, one of our academic staff members was so pleased with the speedy response to a query which was sent very late one night, that high commendation was extended to one of the WISCD staff who provided the research assistance. This was by no means an isolated occurrence and in fact seemed quite the new norm for working during the pandemic.

Teleworking for staff with young school-aged children was particularly difficult as they often indicated the need to share devices with their children who were participating in virtual classes. Some even needed greater assistance from parents in the absence of a teacher in the physical classroom. More time being spent in the home automatically resulted in an increase in household chores. This was particularly evident from reports of female staff members in the WISCD and although this paper focuses the WISCD, this was also evident among staff in other divisions of the library. Research has shown that “juggling childcare and paid work has been very challenging for parents... especially for women” (Hjálmsdóttir and Bjarnadóttir 2020, 268). There were also opportunities to be gained from the working from home or telecommuting alternative to work which meant increased flexibility for many employees especially for women.

As a heritage library, the materials in the WISCD are predominantly non-digital. Therefore, operating in a virtual space during the pandemic had inherent weaknesses. There were little opportunities to promote and sensitize the UWI community about digital resources in the WISCD. Additionally, there was an upgrade of the library’s website during the pandemic resulting in the relocation of several links, which directly impacted users’ ability to find resources in its new location. A key factor in the process was the need for greater inter-departmental reliance which lengthened the time to complete tasks. It was therefore difficult to operate with an already established timeline for starting and ending of tasks which ultimately led to new targets being set.

Benefits

The teleworking experience was very new for the WISCD staff and an adjustment period was necessary. However, there were some benefits that were derived. Firstly, COVID-19 allowed us to assess the work we do to determine what could be done remotely which resulted in better management of work processes. As a result, work continued from the back end of ArchiveSpace, a “web-based archives information management system, designed by archivists and supported by diverse archival repositories”. Another benefit from this teleworking experience was the valuable skills competencies that were highlighted and proved to be very effective in the execution of various tasks. Having staff with a research background and strong writing communication skills proved to be an asset and made it possible to meet the needs of the researchers.

The Way Forward

The Pandemic affected the operation of the WISCD, particularly our ability to respond to researchers. Our ability to respond to the research needs of our users, albeit in a limited way, was quite refreshing as we were still able to provide support, guidance and access to our digital content for our researchers both locally and internationally. Having some of the collections accessible digitally was a redeeming feature and could only have been possible because of the work that was done before the COVID-19 Pandemic. The UWI St. Augustine Theses Collection was one of those collections digitized pre COVID-19 Pandemic, a small and growing e-book Caribbean Collection available through our EBSCOhost Database and our Postcard Collection – Thumbnails are available for browsing in UWISpace and request for higher resolution images can be requested. The WISCD, often described as the flagship of the library, provided direction to researchers to find digital resources in the WISCD; conducted virtual teaching sessions; and held lectures among others during the period of adjustment, we must now plan towards the future with an aim to put the WISCD in a position to better respond to crisis situations than what was done in the pandemic. Through the challenges experienced, some of the Division's weaknesses were identified, the main one being the difficulty in meeting the accessibility needs of the researchers. In the 2019/2020 WISCD Annual Report a total of 14 workers, nine regular staff which included three librarians, and five casual workers were recorded. In 2020/2021 staff count dropped to 12 with the temporary staff being reduced to three and in 2021/2022, the staff count saw another decline to seven regular staff losing one librarian and one library assistant and no temporary staff. As I reported earlier in Figure 1, there was a 777.2 percent increase in emails being processed in the WISCD, therefore a reduction in staffing was an obvious strain on the remaining workers. It would therefore be ideal to review the staff compliment if we hope to improve our response in any crisis situations in the future.

Digitisation of library materials and providing digital surrogates to improve access and usage has already been done in many libraries and archives around the world and even in our library. What is required in the WISCD, however, is a strategy to plan the way forward and that should include a wide scale digitisation project of strategically selected materials in the Division. Items that were not digitally born can be identified for digitisation and “with the provision of fair use of copyright protected materials libraries can reproduce its digital surrogates and if possible, license agreements can be followed and access restrictions could be

imposed” (Patra and Sohoo 2022, 24). The digitisation of the UWI St. Augustine theses collection was a good starting point, the benefits of which were observed during the pandemic. The long-term benefits to be gained for the WISCD and the region by extension are numerous and should be explored. Digitisation of archival material has already been done by other libraries and archives and can be used as a model for the architect of our own project.

Studies have shown there are barriers to digital preservation in special collections such as workflow and procedural obstacles, resource limitations, human and financial resources, lack of buy-in (Fisher 2017, 180) and copyright. Proper understanding of the country’s copyright laws is imperative if a digitisation project is to be successful. Some of the discussions would have already started but the pandemic has shown us that systems can be put into place very quickly if the opportunity arises. However, if we wait for another occasion like the pandemic, our response may yet again be one of an ad hoc nature. The WISCD has already started securing the heritage of the Caribbean by its selective digitisation exercise and is in a good position to be the forerunner in such a project. Visitors from around the world come to the Division every year to access its Special Collections. A digitisation exercise of other special collection has greater potential to reach a wider audience and can begin with the technological infrastructure currently in place.

Conclusion

The WISCD showed its agility during the COVID-19 Pandemic to respond to the needs of our researchers albeit in a limit way and it highlighted the benefits of having a digital collection. Staff learned to operate in a teleworking environment. It can be argued that both employer and employee benefitted in this new environment, and this can be explored in future research as it was not the focus of this research paper. It was also clear, the workload increased by 777.2 percent in emails and at the same time, the staff complement was reduced. This must be examined if we truly want to prepare ourselves to meet the access needs of our researchers in the future.

It is very easy to fall back into the old way of doing things once things return to normal, but it is when what we do is tested, that we see the need to implement some of the much talked about plans. Digitisation of selected Special Collections is the place to start if we are to achieve *Access* as outlined in the UWI Triple A Strategy in its 2017-2022 Strategic Plan. The nucleus for a digital West Indian collection is already in place at the WISCD and can therefore be the

driving force to securing the digital heritage of the West Indies. It is an opportunity for The UWI and Library Management teams as well as our UWI campuses to work together to secure the heritage of the Caribbean.

REFERENCES

- Fisher, Katherine. 2017. "Barriers to Digital Preservation in Special Collections Departments." *Preservation, Digital Technology & Culture* 45, no. 4: 180–85. doi.org/10.1515/pdte-2016-0027
- Imperial College of Tropical Agriculture. 1951. *The Imperial College of Tropical Agriculture : Silver Jubilee, 1951 / Imperial College of Tropical Agriculture* (I.C.T.A.). London]: I.C.T.A.
- Irawanto, Dodi, Khusnul Novianti, and Kenny Roz. 2021. "Work from Home: Measuring Satisfaction Between Work–Life Balance and Work Stress During the COVID-19 Pandemic in Indonesia." *Economies* 9, no.3: 96. doi.org/10.3390/economies9030096
- Mission and Guiding Principles. n.d. ArchivesSpace, Accessed January 30, 2023. <https://archivesspace.org/about/mission>
- Patra, Sasmita, and Jyotshna Sahoo. 2022. "A Literature Review on Digitization in Libraries and Digital Libraries." *Preservation, Digital Technology & Culture* 51, no.1: 17–26. doi.org/10.1515/pdte-2021-0023
- Romani, Laurence, Patrizia Zanoni, Lotte Holck, Andrea Hjalmsdottir, and Valger[eth]ur S Bjarnadottir. 2021. "I Have Turned into a Foreman Here at Home": Families and Work–life Balance in Times of COVID-19 in a Gender Equality Paradise." *Gender, Work, and Organization* 28, no.1: 268–83. doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12552
- Rouse-Jones, Margaret Deanne, and Seminar on the Acquisition of Latin American Library Materials, Inc. 1998. *The Development of West Indiana and Special Collections at the University of the West Indies, St. Augustine Library / Margaret D. Rouse-Jones*. St. Augustine: U.W.I.
- UWISpace The University of the West Indies Institutional Repository: Home. n.d. The University of the West Indies at St. Augustine Campus, Trinidad and Tobago West Indies (Website) Accessed January 30, 2023. <https://libguides.uwi.edu/c.php?g=11305>
- West Indiana and Special Collections: Overview. n.d. The University of the West Indies at St. Augustine Campus, Trinidad and Tobago West Indies (Website) Accessed January 30, 2023. <https://libraries.sta.uwi.edu/ajl/index.php/caribbean-resources/west-indiana>
- Wilcox, Joshua. "Work–life Balance." *Heart (British Cardiac Society)* 106, no.16 (2020): 1276–77. <https://doi.org/10.1136/heartjnl-2020-316549>