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# Online-Request Software Simplifies Access to Special Collections

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University libraries have already pushed to make information more widely available by digitizing their archives and special collections—and now, searching and requesting information from those works may become easier, too.

At least a handful of universities, including the Universities of Chicago and of Texas at Austin, have started using Aeon, an online request and management system developed by Atlas Systems Inc. of Virginia Beach, Va. Librarians say the software eliminates many of the paper forms and records many use to register patrons and keep track of requests.

The new system, which librarians say is the first of its kind, “is going to save a significant amount of time in statistics and filing paperwork,” said Catherine Uecker, rare-books manager at the University of Chicago.

With the software, which is hosted in Virginia Beach and accessed by a Web interface, patrons both on and off campuses can create an account, request items directly from online catalogs and finding aids, and monitor their borrowing history. Library staff members can manage this process online and can also better monitor statistics thanks to histories that track patrons and items and generate analyses, said Stuart W. Miller, a library-systems analyst at Chicago.

Before, Mr. Miller said, users who wanted to request an item from any of the university’s collections had to first register with a paper form and then request each item—even those in the same collection—with additional paper forms. For his library, the system has saved time by streamlining that process in a database, which allows librarians to process requests faster and eliminates the need for paper records, which take up “enormous time and space.”

It also makes it easier for those traveling to the university’s library from another college or university, he said. Instead of faxing or mailing request forms, those users can now file a request online and have materials ready when they arrive.

While the university is only using the system for certain special collections right now, Mr. Miller said he hopes to soon expand the technology to its recently digitized photo archives, so users can order duplicate copies of any picture in the collection.

“Now that we can make it very easy for people to search and request things, this can be a real push for libraries to expose their hidden collections,” Mr. Miller said.