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‘Small & Diverse Archival Organization Needs Assessment Project’ Summary Report

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Project Background

In Summer 2019, the National Historical Publications and Records Commission (NHPRC) selected LYRASIS Consultants Tom Clareson and Leigh Grinstead to manage a research project to assess the needs of small and diverse archival repositories. The LYRASIS approach to the needs assessment was to work with the archival community on both an online survey project and a series of virtual focus groups. The report below provides information on both of those project components, and provides recommendations on both additional research opportunities and potential work to further support the small archives community.

Methodology

The consultants defined and documented target audiences for the survey project and developed a dissemination strategy. Clareson and Grinstead determined that one of the best ways to ensure distribution of the survey to an audience of small and diverse archives was to target distribution to diverse geographic areas of the U.S. and a variety of different types of archives. The consultants reached out to the State Archivists of all U.S. States and Territories, to national, regional, and state associations, and to former clients and personal contacts within the archives field. The results of this outreach during February 2020 were excellent. A total of 18 states and 7 archival organizations agreed to distribute the survey to their constituents and/or members.

The survey was launched from the LYRASIS SurveyMonkey instance on March 4, 2020, with an initial deadline of March 25. Following the suggestions of our State Archives and Archival Association partners, the survey was distributed to those organizations, who then customized a cover message provided by the consultants and distributed it to their constituents. The organizations listed above sent out messages, and many featured articles about the survey, with a link, in their state or association newsletters. By March 22, the survey had received approximately 180 responses, but due to the unprecedented situation caused in the work environment by COVID-19, the consultants decided to offer a deadline extension until March 30 to increase the number and diversity of the respondents. As of March 30, 229 responses were received. These responses came from a variety of states, archives types, and sizes of archives.

During the focus group portion of the project, LYRASIS staff held a total of four Virtual Focus Groups on the NHPRC Small and Diverse Archives project during June 2020. The original plan for the project was to hold two live focus groups at regional archives association conferences and two virtually, but the schedule was modified to holding all virtual sessions when spring archives conferences were cancelled due to the COVID-19 Pandemic. The discussion questions for the Virtual Focus Groups built on some of the questions posed in the Spring 2020 LYRASIS NHPRC Project Survey, and added a question on the effects of the pandemic on archival practice.

Because of the success of working with regional archives associations in survey distribution, invitation e-mails were sent to the Mid-Atlantic Regional Archives Conference, Midwest Archives Conference, Society of Rocky Mountain Archivists, and Society of California Archivists for distribution, and participants registered through LYRASIS. All registrants were sent a Discussion Guide document for review before their focus group session. The focus groups were held on LYRASIS’ Adobe Connect Platform, and the facilitators gathered written remarks only.

Survey and Focus Group Demographics

By the March 30 extended deadline, 229 total survey responses had been received from 39 states and the District of Columbia, with respondent distribution aided by the work of the project partners. Leading states for responses were North Carolina (35), Pennsylvania (33), New York State (16), California and Maryland (10 each), Ohio (9), Tennessee and Colorado (8 each), and Vermont, Georgia, and Virginia (6 responses each). The other responding states had between one and five institutions complete the survey.

There were 16 states represented among the focus group attendees, including: Maryland, Virginia, New Jersey,
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The diversity of the archives types answering the survey was important as well. Leading respondent types included Academic library/archives (24.7% of total), Historical societies (17.5%), Independent non-profit archives (12.1%), Government archives (9%), Historical houses/sites (7.2%), Public library-based archives (5.4%), Religious organization/church archives (4%), General museums (representing 2 or more disciplines -- 4%), Art museums (3.1%) and archives based at Special libraries (2.2%).

Among the 38 virtual focus group participants, there was also a variety of types of archives represented, including: archives in public libraries (6), academic library archives (17), municipal archives (2), museum archives (2), church or religious archives (5), state archives (2), historical society archives (1), and special archives (3).

The survey portion of the project focused on reaching small archives. As part of their definition, the consultants looked at previous survey and report parameters and established that “small archives” are generally defined as those repositories with budgets of $100,000 or less and/or holdings of 1,000 cubic feet or less. However, the consultants emphasized that those were not absolute figures, and repositories should not skip the survey if they have slightly larger budgets or holdings. Seventy-one percent of those who responded to the survey had budgets less than $100,000.

In the focus group meetings, small archives were defined or characterized by the participant themselves as those with a small number of FTEs, as well as small collection sizes and physical spaces. These archives may also be heavily reliant on volunteer help. Several focus group participants noted that smaller archives may not be well-known to the public, and may be less visible.

Key Findings of the Survey and Focus Groups

When survey respondents were asked what they see as the greatest barriers to the long-term sustainability of collections, the consultants noted a surprising trend. In many past surveys, lack of staff and lack of funding were the top concerns. However, in this survey, there were other important issues which were often mentioned, including strong interest and concerns related to building/facility infrastructure issues, such as space planning/usage, building environment, fire safety, water safety, and security. Space and building concerns were near the top of the list for focus group participants. Most often noted in the four focus group sessions as issues causing building and space concerns were water and leaks in buildings; buildings not being climate controlled; security issues; and issues with offsite storage facilities. Some participants felt their facilities staff does not have a good understanding of archival collections. Other “space” issues considered in the discussions was the lack of digital storage space with archives or parent institution IT staff and equipment.

Public inquiries and collection usage statistics found by the survey were distressingly low. Only 4% of institutions reported 100 inquiries or more per month. By far, the majority reported less than one inquiry per day, 34% reporting only 1-5 inquiries and an additional 26% reporting only 6-15 inquiries per month. Only 14% reported an average of 16-30 per month, or one inquiry per day. When the consultants crosstabulated the number of hours that an institution was open with the number of inquiries they received per month and the question “what do you see as your archives’ greatest strengths,” we found responses that reflect a serious disconnect between the value that many archivists place on their collections and the perceived value within their communities based on the number of public inquiries. As with the survey results on the question about user engagement, many focus group participant organizations reported a small level of users, although a few provided larger monthly or annual user statistics. The focus group respondents decided across all four sessions that it is important to report physical, telephone, e-mail, and virtual online users, and some of the organizations were just beginning to keep and report statistics.
A majority of the responding archives that are creating “electronic finding aids,” are, in fact, creating flat Word or PDF documents, which are not interoperable, unlikely to be standardized in any way, and cannot be searched unless the user has opened the individual document—a point that is frequently overlooked within the field. These “finding aids” are not being widely shared in statewide, regional, or national finding aid repositories. No coherent training need emerged among survey respondents. Through analysis, the consultants believe there is a need for training in three areas:

- Raising the profile of many small institutions, with an emphasis on collaboration, including advocacy for small archives, creating and designing useful websites, and using social media effectively.
- Preservation of materials, also through collaborative activity, including deaccessioning policies and practices, working with oversized materials, and the preservation of audiovisual materials.
- Digital preservation of collections, including collaboration around digitization basics, digital preservation best practices, and digital preservation policy development and advocacy with administration.

In the focus groups, digital preservation, working with born-digital materials, web archiving, and grantwriting were mentioned by the participants as their most desired potential workshop and webinar topics.

An area that the consultants decided to further examine was to see which institutions answered in the negative, or did not have, a deaccessioning policy and compare that with those who said they had issues associated with storage space. There is a strong and direct correlation between those that do not have a deaccessioning policy and those that identified collections storage space as “your archives’ greatest concern.” From this, the consultants feel there is a need for training and/or sample deaccessioning policy documents to be shared widely within the community, through white papers, discussion boards, or case studies with small archives that have deaccessioned successfully.

Two final key findings of the survey related to assessment and policy activities which are important to archival infrastructure, preservation, and sustainability: First, sixty-two percent of respondents said no formal preservation/conservation survey on the condition of their collection had been done, and 7% did not know if one had been done. Whether through self-assessment or assistance from outside experts, assessing the preservation needs of an archival institution can be extremely important in planning for future collection care, growth, work, and expenditures. Secondly, the survey found that the number of archival organizations with disaster plans is still hovering below 40%, which reflects the findings of the 2004 Heritage Health Index and the 2014 Heritage Health Information survey. Through education and assistance in disaster plan development, the small archival community must focus on preparedness for the growing number of man-made and natural disasters we are experiencing.

Additional findings of the focus groups further amplified the survey results, and provided examples of areas of improvement for the small archives community.

The main challenges noted among the small archives in the focus group sessions included small staff sizes, which were spread thin; low funding levels; lack of policies; and the need for advocacy for the archives.

Collections which the focus group participant archives felt the least-equipped to handle were born-digital and digitized materials; participants noted that this was because of lack of retention guidelines and digital collection development policies. Other problematic collections included audiovisual materials and photographs. These results closely mirrored the LYRASIS NHPRC Survey Results.
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Other main areas seen by focus group participants as barriers to long-term sustainability included a lack of succession planning (a result that appeared more in the focus group discussions then the project survey), a lack of digitization and digital preservation solutions, and a lack of budget/funding.

In both the survey results and the focus group discussions, there was a strong interest in collaborating with other archives and types of cultural heritage organizations. When the focus group participants were asked about opportunities for expansion, engagement, inspiration, and engagement, there was specific interest expressed in consortial digital platforms and social media approaches for small archives. Also in the focus groups, there was an interest in education (workshops and webinars) focused on how to work collaboratively.

Finally, the timing of the Project Focus Groups (June 2020) allowed the facilitators to ask about the effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic on the archival community. The biggest concern that has surfaced during the pandemic is that many small archives have realized the lack of digital resources they can offer. Other concerns included how archives can best offer reference services during the pandemic and after, and making sure that the archives can preserve the history of COVID-19’s effects on the archive, community, or state.

Recommendations

Many of the findings from the Project Survey and Focus Groups point to practical and achievable recommendations, and others which will need further research and funding. Some initial recommendations for areas of further work to meet the needs of small archival repositories appear below.

Preservation Surveys:
The consultants recommend working with smaller archives to illustrate the benefits of preservation survey findings. Alerting archival organizations to grant programs which fund preservation survey activities, and suggesting tools where they can complete an initial self-survey are important steps for the NHPRC to follow up on the findings of this project.

Disaster Preparedness:
The cultural heritage community must continue to move the needle on emergency planning. Particularly when the number and breadth of natural, manmade, and now pandemic disasters are increasing, it is incumbent upon leadership to develop strategic initiatives to fund and support institutions so that they may take action and put plans and practices in place to make sure more organizations have basic emergency preparedness and disaster recovery guidelines—instutions are simply running out of time.

Building Condition and Space Issues:
These are all areas that can be researched and planned for through institutional preservation surveys. These also are areas where grantmakers (such as the National Endowment for the Humanities in their Preservation Assistance Grant and Sustaining Cultural Heritage Collections grant programs) can continue, and expand, their funding to support building improvements, which were seen as a major concern of both survey and focus group participants.

Policies:
A number of focus group participant organizations have collection policies to help them be selective in their collecting, but fewer had done evaluations of long-term fit of collections to their institution. Some were not able to do this because it was not a priority in comparison to other activities; others said they would be doing these in the near future. Institutions said that this type of work needs to be done at to guide them in their deaccession planning. While many of the participants had collecting or collection development policies, disaster plans, mission statements, and processing policies or manuals, fewer had digital-related policies. Development of all types of archival collection and management policies is important to the survival of these organizations. During the Institute of Museum and Library Services “Connecting to Collections” statewide preservation planning and implementation
programs, many states such as Ohio and Delaware developed websites with vetted sample policies that organizations were free to review and emulate. Can NHPRC and other funders support a program that highlights “best practice policies” for small archives and other cultural heritage organizations to use?

Collaboration:
Time and again, throughout both the survey and focus group results, we saw an interest in collaboration, whether it is education on how to collaborate, or projects based on multiple archival and cultural heritage organizations working together. It is the consultants’ belief that the organizations that will thrive will be those that cooperate, collaborate, and band together. Especially in a post-pandemic environment, we may see collections moving across county and state lines to be centered in new regions or areas. Staff may continue to work remotely in their local communities acting, as always, as local resources for information and expertise. If institutions are willing to explore joint storage opportunities, shared operating agreements, shared policies and procedures, shared staff, joint operating systems, and collaborative infrastructure—all of which offer economies of scale in environmental monitoring, security, fire suppression, safety and access—small archives, their collections, and the communities they serve could be in better shape in 2030 than they are now.

Small archives can also consider banding together to create digitization and digital preservation initiatives, which survey and focus group participants noted as particularly troublesome issues. Other opportunities include pooling resources, such as staff expertise that can be used for virtual reference and to help with cataloging, converting or re-purposing buildings to be used to jointly house and store physical collections, or creating digitization centers that could provide space for socially distanced working conditions. This type of activity may start as a few local institutions banding together and collaborating on a joint project. The NHPRC-funded Athens of the South Nashville Archives Collaborative is an example of three small institutions coming together to address issues that affect them all and to provide collaborative solutions.

Future Research and Continued Data Collection
The consultants are interested in distributing this report, and the survey and focus group report documents, to the state archives and regional/national archival organization partners who were so important in distributing the survey and focus group invitations to their constituents. LYRASIS staff are also looking at developing articles, webinars, and conference presentations based on the findings of the survey.

For continued data collection, there are two major suggestions. First, LYRASIS consultants are willing to share the survey questionnaire and the focus group discussion guide with state and regional organizations that would like to do a more thorough survey distribution in their states or regions, or would like to hold state- or region-specific focus groups online or in-person. There is already interest in this type of activity; several states expressed interest in utilizing parts of the survey tool for more in-depth state projects. For ease of data analysis by future researchers, we suggest some of the open-ended answer categories we discovered in this survey be utilized as multiple-choice answers to some of the questions. Secondly, we would suggest the potential of NHPRC providing funding for states or regions to repeat and expand this process in the next 2-3 years, and strongly advocate that another national survey, focusing on many of the same issues seen as key concerns here, be held in five years, particularly to determine how small archival organizations have recovered from the health, economic, and sustainability impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.