



# Connecting the Archival Community

## *Final Report of the Archival Education and Information Web Needs Assessment Project*

Sponsored by the Council of State Historical Records Coordinators, with administrative support from the American Association for State and Local History. Funded by the National Historical Publications and Records Commission.

July 2002 (revised 08/23/02)

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### Background

The Archival Education and Information Web Needs Assessment project has its roots in the Action Agenda developed at the National Forum on Archival Continuing Education (NFACE), held in April 2000. The 120 NFACE participants developed an Action Agenda designed to guide all of the organizations, individually and collectively, as they continue to work to improve the accessibility, content, and quality of education and information services for the historical records community. Among the top priorities in the NFACE Action Agenda were the creation of a nationwide clearinghouse of information to support the development, delivery, and accessibility of archival continuing education, and the pursuit of partnerships, collaboration, and regular communication among professional archival organizations and with organizations serving allied professions. ***Connecting the Archival Community*** is the final report of 16 months of research and analysis on how to address these priorities.

### Findings

The findings of the project's Working Group all come down to **the need for connections**. Individual archivists want to **connect to the Internet** in order to retrieve information and locate educational opportunities. They also rely on **connections with colleagues**—at conferences, by email, on listservs, in person—to answer questions and solve problems. Professional associations play a key role in archival work by facilitating these connections, but **archival associations themselves need to be better connected** to maximize use of scarce resources, enhance services to their members, and ultimately, help everyone in the field work cooperatively to improve the care of historical records.

A remarkable variety of Web-based resources exist to help archivists improve their knowledge and skills. Some are products of individual initiative while others are services provided by a range of organizations including professional associations, repositories, universities, government agencies, and foundations. The variety of providers presents a number of problems:

- Users express great **frustration because resources are scattered all over the Web** and there is no one point of entry.
- There is **not enough connectivity among archival websites**.
- Some of the most useful tools are products of individual initiative with **no guarantee of long-term institutional support**. They could easily disappear.
- Resource providers devote insufficient attention to promoting their sites so that **many users remain unaware of what is available**.
- It can be **difficult to identify which sources of information are most trustworthy**, especially for newcomers to the field.
- Website developers need to pay more attention to best practices for **usability and accessibility**.

At the outset of the project, the Working Group assumed that it would emerge with a plan for a single portal that could provide a central clearinghouse for archival resources on the Internet. However, it became clear early on that no one archival organization was capable of sustaining such a portal on its own and that archival organizations, collectively, were not yet ready to work together on such a substantial cooperative project.

It is easy to enumerate the virtues of collaboration—resource sharing, cost savings, the altruism of the “greater good”—but much harder to implement and sustain a collaborative project. The report presents expert advice from inside the archival profession as well as from sociologists and business strategists to illustrate **what archivists must do to prepare themselves and their organizations for collaborative efforts** now and in the future.

The report **focuses on the roles of the 63 archival professional associations in the U.S.** because earlier COSHRC surveys have established that archivists rely heavily on these associations for assistance and contacts. The report **also**

**touches on the roles of the State Historical Records Advisory Boards** especially as they work with associations in their states and regions to reach out to novice practitioners and community-based organizations. Of course, universities and archival repositories, among others, also have critical roles to play in the delivery of education and information resources to archivists and should be engaged as the report's recommendations are addressed.

## Recommendations

One of the top priorities to emerge from the project is the need to **improve communications among all archival professional associations** in the U.S. Better communications should improve understanding of operations and goals within and among the associations and will make it easier to find partners with similar visions and purposes. Specific recommendations to improve communications include:

- Establish a listserv for leaders of regional, state, and local archival associations.
- Establish an easily updatable contact list for all national, regional, state, and local archival associations.
- Establish an Archival Association Roundtable (or another appropriate type of subgroup) within SAA to encourage representatives from all archival associations to meet in person at least once a year.
- Compile a descriptive directory of all archival associations that would include information about basic operations, who they serve, and what information resources they develop and deliver.
- Test the value of regular electronic newsletters targeted at those who perform similar functions within these associations, e.g., webmasters, education coordinators.
- Look for ways to provide ongoing staff support to facilitate inter-association communication and cooperation.

The Working Group suggests that archivists **take a modular approach to the development of an information clearinghouse** starting with a common calendar of archival events and educational programs. It could be compiled and maintained through a joint effort of the national, regional, state, and local archival professional associations, the SHRABs, and university-based archival education programs. Other modules to consider include a database of archival standards and guidelines, a faculty directory and speakers' bureau, and collections of promotional and public awareness materials for events like Archives Week. Having a specific, narrowly focused project will give the cooperating organizations a chance to test their ability to work together while limiting the initial investment of resources. They will be able to identify both benefits and challenges before attempting a larger project.

While there are many possibilities for developing new resources, the Working Group also believes it will be beneficial to **make existing resources better known, improve their accessibility, and ensure their continued availability**. Toward these ends, we would encourage the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) to expand the already strong collection of information resources now available through ALIC online and promote awareness about the availability of these resources. We also hope that all associations will increase the availability of their newsletters and journals online. In addition, we suggest a number of steps that archival association webmasters can take to optimize searches of their sites and improve accessibility for every type of user.

Finally, the report points to the need to **create a single collection of basic information resources and tools for those who are new to the field or who may be trying to establish an archival program**. This may emerge from the "Basics of Archives" project now underway through a collaboration involving the state archives of New York, Ohio, and Michigan, as well as AASLH. COSHRC is also encouraged to discuss what resources can and should be made available to community-based organizations and allied professions through their SHRABs.

## Follow-up Activities

The report and its recommendations will be transmitted to all of the archival associations in the U.S., associations in closely allied fields, SHRABs, the National Archives and Records Administration, and to grant funding agencies that support archival projects. Members of the project's Working Group, with assistance from COSHRC staff, will facilitate a number of focus groups in 2002 and 2003 to discuss the report's findings and the implementation of its recommendations. SAA will create an Archival Association Leadership Listserv in the fall of 2002, to be managed by COSHRC staff initially, to provide a ready mechanism for communication among all of these associations.

## Additional Information

Copies of the report and related materials are available on the Council of State Historical Records Coordinators' website at <http://www.coshrc.org/reports>. Comments on the report and its recommendations are welcome and should be addressed to Vicki Walch, COSHRC Project Coordinator, [vwalch@coshrc.org](mailto:vwalch@coshrc.org).