

**Society of American Archivists
Council Meeting
August 1, 2019
Austin, Texas**

Toward a National Archival Finding Aid Network (NAFAN)

Project: Summary and Future

**(Prepared by Jodi Allison-Bunnell, AB Consulting, and
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BACKGROUND

This discussion item is being submitted to the SAA Council in order to:

- Ensure that the Society’s leadership is fully aware of this project’s findings and proposed future direction;
- Ask if the Council would consider a near-term in-depth discussion of the role that the Society’s standards apparatus could play in future endeavors.

As part of the Toward a National Archival Finding Aid Network (NAFAN) project, the following individuals attended a full-day symposium on June 17, 2019, at the University of California Riverside:

Name	Organization	Role in Project
Jen Palmentiero	Empire Archival Discovery Cooperative (EADC)	Core Partner Primary
Elizabeth Joffrion	ArchivesWest	Core Partner Primary
Chela Weber	ArchiveGrid	Core Partner Primary
Bradley Daigle	Virginia Heritage	Core Partner Primary
Carla O. Alvarez	Texas Archival Resources Online (TARO)	Core Partner Primary
Roger Schonfeld [part of day, remotely]	Ithaka S+R	Adviser
John Reese [part of day, remotely]	National Library of Medicine	Core Partner Primary
Lisa Schiff	CDL	CDL Admin

Jerry Simmons	National Archives and Records Administration	Adviser
Christine Di Bella [unable to attend b/c of travel issues]	ArchivesSpace	Adviser
Daniel Pitti	Social Networks and Archival Context	Core Partner Primary
Kevin Comerford	UCR Library	
Elizabeth Dunham	Arizona Archives Online (AAO)	Core Partner Primary
Michele Kimpton	Digital Public Library of America	Adviser
Alison Bridger	Archival Resources in Wisconsin	Core Partner Primary
Mary Lacy	Library of Congress	Adviser
Steve Mandeville-Gamble	UCR Library	CDL Admin
Celia Caust-Ellenbogen	Philadelphia Area Consortium of Special Collections Libraries (PACSCL)	Core Partner Co-Primary
Holly Mengel	(PACSCL)	Core Partner Co-Primary
Raym Crow	SPARC	Adviser
Leigh Grinstead	LYRASIS	Adviser
Janet Coles	California State Library / LSTA	Funder
Adrian Turner	California Digital Library	Core Partner Primary (and staff)
Donald Waters	Mellon Foundation	Adviser
Mark Matienzo	ArcLight Project	Adviser
Karen Eberhart	Rhode Island Archives and Manuscripts Online (RIAMCO)	Core Partner Co-Primary
Jason Clingerman [unable to attend b/c of travel issues]	National Archives and Records Administration	Adviser (secondary)
Sue Perdue	SNAC	Adviser (secondary)
Brian Tingle	California Digital Library	Core Partner Secondary
Kate Flynn	Chicago Collections Consortium	Core Partner Primary
Cliff Lynch	Coalition for Networked Information	Adviser
Kathryn McNally	Rhode Island Archives and Manuscripts Online (RIAMCO)	Core Partner Co-Primary
Jodi Allison-Bunnell	AB Consulting	Facilitator

In the "[Toward a National Archival Finding Aid Network](#)" planning initiative, coordinated by the California Digital Library, we are developing a collective understanding of the current landscape of archival description -- and in particular, finding aid aggregations -- as background for an exploration of how best to provide access to archival collections, ensure the long-term sustainability of that access, and plan for future developments in this space.

Finding aid aggregations formed at the state and regional level over the last two decades in an effort to solve a problem internal to libraries and archives: overcoming barriers to creating and presenting structured, consistent, and interoperable archival description (largely Encoded Archival Description (EAD) Version 2002). Thanks to early investment by institutions, states, and funders, this aggregation project made significant progress and spawned sixteen aggregators across the country. But now these aggregators are struggling to find sufficient resources to update their infrastructure, meet user needs for access to archival collections, and engage with some of the most promising advances in the field.

This planning initiative asks our community to consider what the future of creating, presenting, and sustaining archival descriptions should look like. To date, the project has completed two major portions of its work. First, [Finding Aid Aggregation at a Crossroads](#) provides an overview of and context for the current archival description landscape. In it, we find that the current approach to finding aid aggregation (which is, in turn, key to finding aid production and access for institutions in half of U.S. states) is unsustainable and delivers insufficient value for end users. Additionally, the current approach, including reliance on Encoded Archival Description (EAD), erects barriers for both institutions and end users. Second, [the project's Core Partners and Expert Advisers held a full-day symposium](#) and unanimously agreed to take long-term transformative action to aggregation, specifically to:

- Provide entry points to resources in libraries, archives, and museums in the United States that integrate collection descriptions with related content and context, ultimately encompassing all possible levels: repository, collection, series, file, and item.
- Develop shared infrastructure. This may be centralized or distributed, subject to findings from the research agenda.
- Retain the strengths of existing state/regional networks, and understand that their roles may change.

By the end of September 2019, the project will complete an Action Plan that outlines near- and longer-term plans to advance an inclusive approach to archival description access that provides value for stakeholders.

SAA's Nancy Beaumont is an informal adviser to the project because of SAA's role in standards creation and maintenance. To that end, we'd like to ensure that SAA is aware of the project and to ask if the Council would consider a near-term in-depth discussion of the role that the Society's standards apparatus could play in future endeavors.

DISCUSSION

We propose that the SAA Council consider a near-term in-depth discussion of the role that the Society's standards apparatus could play in a national-level collective effort to foster inclusive, end user-centered approaches to archival description access.

Our collective aspiration is based on the project's report and a one-day symposium. A high-level summary of our findings from the [Finding Aid Aggregation at a Crossroads](#) report:

- **Aggregators have helped increase the visibility and exposure of their contributors' finding aids**, and expose connections between collections for researchers. Aggregators strongly perceive the continued value of aggregation, and are committed to exposing collections from a broad array of institutions, and enabling access to collections for all researchers.
- **Current aggregations and meta-aggregations are not comprehensive in scope.** Many institutions' finding aids are not represented because they do not participate, and institutions that do not create finding aids aren't included. Additionally, our current meta-aggregations are fragile: They are based on links back to finding aids that must be persistently maintained by aggregators and individual institutions.
- **Aggregations are in many cases an add-on to local hosting.** Thus, they do not alleviate a local cost and labor burden.
- **The development and launching of most aggregations has been enabled through initial grant funding.** Organizations have faced subsequent challenges in resourcing, sustaining, and updating aging infrastructure.
- **The organizational structures and limited resources of current aggregators and meta-aggregators reveal a landscape ripe for evolution:** a third of the current aggregators are evaluating their activities with the possibility of re-forming, merging, spinning off, or spinning down the service. Only a few aggregators are actively adding contributors or content.
- **Aggregators have implemented systems that are highly optimized for hosting, indexing, and displaying EAD finding aids**, with no obvious choices for successor systems to replace aging infrastructure. These systems are generally siloed from other platforms with related content (e.g., digital collections)--and hence, end user access to finding aids and related content is siloed. The systems are also not well-integrated with tools that institutions use to create EAD finding aids, such as archival collection management systems (e.g., ArchivesSpace).
- **EAD Version 2002 is the predominant finding aid format supported by aggregators;** a small number support finding aids in MARC, PDF, and other formats. No statewide or regional aggregators currently support EAD3, and reasons for moving to the new standard are few.
- **Most aggregators do not have stringent requirements for EAD files.** The resulting heterogeneity constrains connecting collections programmatically, most notably with subject metadata.

- **Few aggregators have invested significantly in understanding the needs of their users, who have expanded far beyond the category of academic researchers.** Most have not worked to identify diverse use cases or shape functional designs accordingly; and instead, they have focused on the needs of internal users (archivists and librarians).

The data collected in the report suggest that it is time for a new phase of development focused on rethinking aggregation and scale, providing users with more comprehensive and richer access to archival descriptions, and transitioning away from outmoded, legacy technologies -- all in a more sustainable way than we have managed in the past. Our community can view the past twenty years of aggregation projects with a sense of achievement. But we must also build on those early efforts to achieve a next-phase solution with even greater value. If we do not, our existing statewide and regional aggregations may be substantially at risk, resulting in a return to institution-based solutions that often serve users less well, require duplication of effort, and leave less-resourced institutions largely unable to expose their collections.

During the June 17 symposium, [participants unanimously concluded](#) that the status quo is unsustainable, and expressed the following aspirations:

Near Term: Sustain the value that archival description aggregation currently provides by promoting inter-aggregator collaboration.

- Aggregators will share existing solutions for community management, infrastructure, and metadata management.
- By working together in the near term, aggregators will ensure that existing metadata is available for long-term transformative action.

Long Term: Take transformative action to provide the value that the current approach does not provide.

- Provide entry points to resources in libraries, archives, and museums in the United States that integrate collection descriptions with related content and context, ultimately encompassing all possible levels: repository, collection, series, file, and item.
- Develop shared infrastructure. This may be centralized or distributed, subject to findings from the research agenda.
- Retain the strengths of existing state/regional networks, and understand that their roles may change.

Operating Principles

- We will increase usable access to unique resources to support the public good, truth-seeking, and understanding.
- We will scale discovery and access to a national level that is as comprehensive as possible.
- We understand that a sustainable collaboration is one that is supported with time, expertise, and resources, and that we will need contributing institutions to be part of supporting the whole.
- We will base our long-term actions on our research agenda rather than current assumptions.

- We will support a broad range of contributing institutions and minimize barriers to participation.

We understand that perfection is the enemy of the good and will abandon it in service to focused and logical investment.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

1. Would the SAA Council consider holding a near-term discussion of the role that the Society's standards apparatus could play in building a national-scale, inclusive, and end user-centered infrastructure for archival description?
2. What additional information or input would the Council need in order to have such a discussion?

Impact on Strategic Priorities: This discussion is consistent with strategic Goal 3 (Advancing the Field), specifically Strategy 3.1. (Identify the need for new standards, guidelines, and best practices and lead or participate in their development).