Society of American Archivists
Council Meeting
November 9 - 12, 2014
Chicago, Illinois

Discussion: Data Gathering and Assessment
(Prepared by Dennis Meissner)

BACKGROUND

During the August 2014 Council meeting we began a discussion about how to gather the data necessary to make more compelling advocacy arguments. It was noted that we have been successful at compiling stories emphasizing the value of archives, but that we lack the hard data that ought to undergird the stories.

One approach to gathering those data has been to undertake some follow-on to the 2006 A*CENSUS survey. The Council has for some time expressed the need to refresh its compendium of data on US archives, archivists, and archival repositories. With the tenth anniversary of A*CENSUS hard upon us, we have approached this need as requiring a replay of that encyclopedic effort. A grant proposal to that end was rejected by the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) in 2013.

Various conversations, especially a recent one with Bob Horton of IMLS, suggest that this approach may be misguided, and that it might be more attractive to funders and related professional communities if, rather than conducting a major self-referential survey, we instead:

- Study the continuing utility of A*CENSUS data and extract a lean subset of useful data points;
- Re-frame the survey to focus on users and user impacts, rather than on archives and archivists (i.e., focus on demand instead of supply);
- Follow the resulting scaled-back survey with an iterative sequence of pop-up surveys to keep teasing out more helpful information; and
- Use this accumulated data to build an evidence-based value proposition about archives and archivists to support our advocacy efforts.

Notes from October 9 Meeting with Bob Horton:

Bob was decidedly lukewarm to the notion that we might refresh the previous planning grant proposal for an A*CENSUS II, emphasizing that many data elements are probably no longer important, and that its whole tone--Who are *we*?--is professionally narcissistic.

It would be much better to pivot the lens to a customer-centric POV. What do archives users want and need? What makes them successful in their projects? What is their awareness of archives (records and institutions) and how they can benefit them? These are not easy questions and, in Bob's opinion, libraries and museums have gained no traction there either.

I was chagrined that pursuing a planning grant now still puts the collection and analysis of data a few years out. Bob thought we might get more IMLS interest and hurry up the data collection by pursuing a two-year project grant that would encompass (1) identifying data points, (2) developing and conducting the survey, and (3) chewing on the data. The idea then emerged that a novel experiment might start with a somewhat scaled-back survey, marrying essential A*CENSUS carryover questions with (1) some new ones bridging the existing self-awareness gaps and (2) a new, more customer-focused set. That leaner survey might enable some faster data analysis--not comprehensive, but one segment at a time. That cumulative analysis could spawn quick pop-up surveys to get data quickly on very focused questions that emerge during analysis. So, an iterative evaluation loop is begun, which could then become part of the fabric of our association going forward. We *always* tease out more and more information about our value and role in society, and other information necessary to keep shaping an evolving strategic plan.

So, February 2015 would be the next deadline to submit a preliminary proposal for a National Leadership Grants for Libraries Project Grant[1] that would allow us to ask up to $250,000 without a required cost share.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

The immediate question for Council to consider is whether it makes sense to pursue a National Leadership Grants for Libraries Project Grant and whether to take an experimental approach like the one that is very roughly outlined above.

The larger related question concerns the purpose for the data to be gathered. Is it simply to understand ourselves better or is it to compile those data that can best help us make our value case for public support, thereby directly supporting our advocacy agenda?

- Should SAA pursue a National Leadership Grants for Libraries Project Grant?
- What are the outcomes that we would want to achieve from such a grant? What do we want to know?
- Is the approach suggested above something that could be worthwhile and achievable?
- Would the resulting data serve our advocacy agenda? Would they help to inform a value proposition about archives and archivists?
- Is 2015-2016 the right time frame?
- How should the ensuing work be organized and carried out?

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[1] http://www.imls.gov/applicants/detail.aspx?GrantId=14