

## Origins and Outcomes

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The study I undertook at the National Archives and Records Administration in 1990 and 1991 was actually a series of coordinated studies that evolved from what seemed to me a simple suggestion to the Archivist of the United States: "respond meaningfully to the four recommendations contained in a report from the historical research community which had been published in early 1989."<sup>1</sup> In this chapter, I will recount the origins and development of these studies and describe my experience designing and implementing the project, including what happened when the first full draft of my report was circulated internally for comment. My goal is neither to flog the management of the National Archives for its handling of this project nor to defend my approach to the studies. Instead, I expect that a succinct description of the assumptions that I brought to the research design will provide specific, yet generalizable, guidance to archivists, librarians, and museum administrators who may wish to undertake a comprehensive review of patron needs and research behaviors.

### Origins of the 1990-91 Study

In 1988 Page Putnam Miller, who served as director of the National Coordinating Committee for the Promotion of History (NCC), developed a provocative report on the National Archives that made a series of twelve recommendations for improving access to the agency's extensive and remarkable holdings. The assumption of the title, *Developing a Premier National Institution: A Report from the User Community to the National Archives*, was that the National Archives was not already the nation's premier archival repository. NCC is a consortium of over fifty historical, archival, political science, library, and genealogical organizations that places the welfare of the National Archives among its highest priorities. The organization was instrumental in mobilizing support on Capitol Hill to establish the National Archives as an independent agency. Since federal

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<sup>1</sup> Page Putnam Miller, *Developing a Premier National Institution: A Report from the User Community to the National Archives* (Washington, D.C.: National Coordinating Committee for the Promotion of History, 1989).

agencies are not permitted to lobby Congress directly on their own behalf, NCC served, and continues to serve, as a vocal advocate--and bold critic--of access policies and reference services of the National Archives. Thus any report from NCC that purported to speak on behalf of the user community--even if NCC acted primarily on behalf of academic historians--was something to be taken seriously.

The NCC report called for the National Archives to undertake a broad-based reassessment of its goals. This reassessment was needed, the report declared, because of recent significant reductions in the operating budget in the early years of the Ronald Reagan presidency. Even more importantly, the report pointed toward the potential of a new research and storage facility on the campus of the University of Maryland. The report suggested that "Archives II," as the complex had been dubbed, represented an opportunity to develop a "vision of specific goals as a prerequisite for the pursuit of additional resources."<sup>2</sup>

The report articulated four goals for the National Archives.<sup>3</sup> Goals 1 and 4 addressed planning and resource allocation. The first-listed goal pointed toward the development of the National Archives as a "premier institution for research" and recommended that the agency establish a peer review committee and put together a comprehensive strategic plan for "meeting needs identified in the four categories of quality of holdings, accessibility of holdings, stimulation of intellectual exchange, and capable personnel support." The fourth goal, truly the other side of the planning mandate, urged the agency to develop a funding proposal based on the outcome of the planning process and to hold hearings in Congress on funding needs for basic legislated mandates.

Both planning and adequate funding seemed to have been on the minds of everyone concerned with the National Archives since independence from the General Services Administration had been gained in 1984. Nothing was controversial, or particularly complicated, in goals one and four, even though it was 1993 before the agency moved to develop a long-range strategic plan. Goals two and three, however, seemed to me at the time to present a greater challenge. The second goal called upon the National Archives to "devote increased attention to users and their needs" and made three recommendations toward that end. The first of these recommendations was to undertake a comprehensive survey of the diverse categories of users and their needs. The second recommendation urged the agency to involve users in the evaluation of reference service, including the characteristics of quality reference tools and reference interviews and letters, and to develop strategies for incorporating these findings into management policies. The third recommendation suggested involving users in plans for making electronic records more accessible to users and for developing computerized finding aids. These were (and still are) very realistic and implementable recommendations.

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 6-7.

The third goal identified one possible strategy for meeting as-yet-unarticulated user needs, namely "maximize the staffs' knowledge of the records." The strategy for relying on staff development involved, in the goal's five recommendations: (1) developing career incentives for "enhancing the subject matter knowledge base of the staff"; (2) expanding the mentoring role of senior archivists; (3) providing flexibility for staff to "move easily between the development of reference tools and reference assistance"; (4) building expertise in staff by assigning them for long periods to specific subject domains; and (5) involving subject experts in the development of the agency's archival policies.

In viewing staff development as the solution to a problem that had not yet been defined, the report seemed to make many assumptions about research behavior that needed to be tested and evaluated. I learned much later that a key source of information and strong proponent of the recommendations in the NCC report was the subject expert staff of the National Archives that had watched its own ranks dwindle in recent years through retirement and resignation. The agency's dawdling in rebuilding this expertise, and its failure to capture the expertise of staff in finding aids and other reference tools, underlay NCC's recommendation that the agency should view subject expertise as the anchor of public service. NCC most likely included the subject expertise goal in the report after recognizing the "reality" that the National Archives would probably never develop the necessary tools to provide researchers with better access without the continued intermediation by archivists. This "fact" provided the basis for the major assumption in the report that a user study, if carried out with the involvement of the users themselves, inevitably would point toward the need for increased personnel and subject expertise.<sup>4</sup>

In early fall 1988, Page Miller sent me a draft of the NCC report for comment. Upon reading the draft, which was then called "NCC Information Paper on Reference Service and Personnel Policies at the National Archives," I thought that the recommendations were too important to ignore and that the National Archives had an ethical obligation to respond constructively. If anything, I felt that at the very least the assumptions that were imbedded in the report needed to be tested before they became accepted as fact.

The basis of my critique of the NCC report was my ten years of experience as an archivist in the agency, first in Washington as a member of the Records Declassification Division, and then on the staff of the Gerald R. Ford Library in Ann Arbor. For half of my tenure at the Ford Library, Don Wilson served as director of the library and museum complex. While in Ann Arbor, I carried out a study of users in four presidential libraries, one of the first studies in an archival environment that involved direct interviews with patrons.<sup>5</sup> The year after completing that study, I spent the summer of 1985 developing a user study model as part of the Bentley Library's Research Fellowship Program for Study of Modern Archives.<sup>6</sup> Both projects nurtured in me a clear conviction that patron service

4 Personal communication, Page Putnam Miller, July 1991.

5 Paul Conway, "Research in Presidential Libraries: A User Study," *Midwestern Archivist* 11 (1986): 35-56.

6 Paul Conway, "Facts and Frameworks: An Approach to Studying the Users of Archives," *American Archivist* 49 (Fall 1986): 393-407.

must be at the heart of an archival program, an idea that has been developed strongly in the archival literature (see bibliography). Reinforcing this applied research experience were two years of doctoral research in the School of Information and Library Studies of the University of Michigan, where I had had the opportunity to explore in depth other approaches and methods for understanding user needs and behaviors.

In late March 1989, after the NCC report had been published and widely distributed, I wrote Don Wilson urging him to exercise strong leadership by responding constructively to Page Miller's report. I attached a proposal to my letter suggesting ways in which such a response could be formulated. The following excerpts from this proposal document my notions of how I thought the agency's reference policies should be crafted.

I suggested that the NCC report warranted a creative response-- one that went beyond acknowledging its value as a call to action. "Your response," I wrote Wilson, "is an opportunity for you to demonstrate to your staff and to the archival profession that service to users is the driving force of the organization." I then summarized the recommendations of the report, focusing especially on the user study and subject expert goals.

"I strongly agree with the recommendation to integrate knowledge of user research behaviors into the fabric of each archivist's daily work. As you know, this is an area of increasing interest to archivists nationwide. The issue of enhanced subject expertise in the staff, however, has significant negative implications for the management of the Archives that offset the advantages of the approach for users. The first responsibility of the professional staff of the National Archives is to describe the holdings in systems useful to both archivists and researchers, not to provide personal attention to visitors.

Building a large cadre of subject experts only sidesteps the more important need to imbed the knowledge of archivists in many layers of reference tools. The best direct service to those who visit the building consists primarily of teaching them, with a wide variety of methods, how to define research questions in terms that relate to the record and showing them how to navigate creatively between reference tools and records."

My proposal then went on to describe the lessons learned by those who promote bibliographic instruction as an integral component of effective reference service. Bibliographic Instruction (BI) is an approach to library reference service that takes as its point of departure the view that the most effective access to information is via a process controlled by the information seeker. Rather than providing answers to questions, BI seeks to teach patrons how to use the tools developed by the library and to define, or re-define, their research questions in ways that make sense in terms of the available tools. In some ways, BI is as simple as developing clear signs and maps of the library building. In other, and more complex ways, BI tries to help researchers construct mental maps for navigating complex database structures.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Constance A. Mellon, ed., *Bibliographic Instruction: The Second Generation* (Littleton, CO: Libraries Unlimited, 1987).

"Researchers need user-friendly tools, openly available in a hospitable building, with enthusiastic archivists willing to teach them how to best benefit from their visits. A research-skills approach to reference service, rather than a subject-expertise approach, must be supported by an integrated system of reference tools, building signs, an understanding of how researchers use archives and archival information. Systematic study of users will support your ongoing effort to describe records to be relocated to Archives II."

My proposal suggested that it would not be necessary to "undertake a full-blown, expensive user study along the lines of the one conducted at the National Archives of Canada in 1984."<sup>8</sup> Instead, I recommended a series of small, tightly focused studies to address specific administrative needs of the agency, all the while incrementally adding to our knowledge of the research communities who use the holdings. "Some projects could be highly visible and involve users directly, while others could be low-key internal reviews." I offered four examples, including:

- 1) a study of "researcher data elements" that can and should be included in an automated patron registration system;
- 2) a modest survey of how users perceive the National Archives;
- 3) focus group studies on how archival research is actually carried out; and,
- 4) a project to understand the characteristics of the "expert searcher" to complement the work done to define the "expert archivist" for purposes of building computer-assisted, artificial intelligence retrieval tools.

I also suggested that, given the volume of use at the National Archives, "careful studies of very small samples of the total user population should yield truly striking findings." I concluded by observing that "small studies of user groups, when grounded within the administrative realities of the Archives, hold promise of improving the delivery of user services, enhancing the image of the National Archives among user publics, providing genuine leadership to the archival profession, and gaining the Archives additional ammunition in its appeal to Congress for a more generous budget." In re-stating these assumptions, goals, and approaches nearly four years after I originally proposed them, I am reminded of their continuing relevance to the National Archives, as well as to other archival institutions in the United States.

At Don Wilson's request, in June 1989 I followed-up on my earlier recommendations with a brief description of two possible projects that might be undertaken in a year or so with minimal resources. The first possible project would involve assembling a series of focus groups with at least three categories of users: genealogists, professional historians, and federal government staff. "We need to know the questions that these researchers bring with them to the archives, how they modify their searches as they use the records and finding aids, and how they apply the information in their actual cases; we need to know how researchers define their service requirements, including ways in which

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<sup>8</sup> National Archives of Canada, *Major Findings, Conclusions and Recommendations of the Researcher and Public Service Component Evaluation Study* (Ottawa: Public Archives of Canada, 1985).

archivists can educate them in the research process; and we need to know how environmental factors, such as lighting and the placement of equipment, effect the search process," I wrote.

For a second and closely related project, I recommended a close look at the research process itself. "Components to be included in such a 'reference audit' are users (background, experience, and purpose of visit); archivists (orientation process, consultation procedures, and other direct interaction with researchers); finding aid systems; and frequently consulted holdings. Primary sources of information for such a study are interviews with the staff, procedures documentation, observation of the physical setting, and forms completed during the reference process, including researcher applications, paging slips, and photocopy requests." I suggested that it may also be feasible to factor in an analysis of mail and telephone reference requests.

With these two proposals, I laid out the beginnings of a conceptual and methodological framework for approaching the understanding of users and use at the National Archives. In the next chapter I will describe the base of research literature that underlay the specific "pre-conceived notions" that I brought to the project. In summary, research on information-seeking behavior had suggested that:

- \* All research in archives is "historical" in the classic sense of the term.
- \* All researchers call, write, or visit an archives in search of answers to historical questions.
- \* Historical questions may be defined more or less specifically.
- \* Archival records provide evidence to address these questions.
- \* Researchers would just as soon find the evidence to answers independently than have to rely on archivists for continuing guidance.

To find out more about how researchers approach a complicated agency like the National Archives, the best technique was simple and straightforward. The project methodology would involve:

- \* Undertaking many direct interviews with patrons rather than a studying the by-products of their work, such as registration forms.
- \* Concentrating on actual research activity rather than on the perceptions of researchers about their needs or service expectations.
- \* Asking simple questions that generate relatively unambiguous answers rather than asking complex questions that demand high levels of either memory recall or emotion.
- \* Building understanding of complex issues through a combination of answers to these simple questions.
- \* Using more than one source of information to investigate an issue.
- \* Doing a series of small studies with small populations which together would approximate a random sample of the full researcher population in a given period of time.













