

*"If the information community is to meet the challenge of the 'information society' successfully, it is essential that it focus on helping end users do information work more efficiently...The criterion of success for [a new generation of user studies] will not be how well they describe user behavior, but rather how much impact they have on the reformulation of information policies."*

Colin Mick, 1980

## Preface

This is the story of a failed user study--failed according to the criteria spelled out by Colin Mick in the epigraph at the front of this volume. The document you are holding includes the penultimate draft of a report on the findings of a unified series of user studies that I designed and carried out at the National Archives and Records Administration from January 1990 to July 1991. The report was never completed, never approved, and never released publicly by the National Archives. Furthermore, the recommendations and suggestions included in the report were neither accepted nor implemented. Following wide-spread review by the staff of the National Archives, I re-wrote the document to report separately on the individual studies without making recommendations about agency policies and practices. These revised reports were never formally released by the National Archives and are only available upon request. Few visible changes in policies or procedures for serving patrons can be attributed directly to this research project.

So why am I making this report available now, after a delay of nearly three years? I have two goals in mind. First, interest remains high in the process of undertaking user studies in archival repositories. The methodology of the studies and the data reported in the appendices should be of use to archivists, librarians, curators of special collections, and others who wish to understand the purposes and behaviors of people who seek historical information in the nation's archival repositories. Over the years, there have been many persuasive recommendations on the questions that should be asked of users but very few published studies that report on the answers. This document, in part, addresses the need for field-tested questionnaires that will allow archivists to gather information systematically from their research clientele.

A second goal of publication is to widen the discussion of the reference and access procedures of the National Archives that had begun, *sub rosa*, when the report was circulated internally for comment. Large and significant issues that bear upon access to the public's trove of historical documentation housed in the National Archives should concern people who value the personal freedoms that are embodied in public archives. Among the more important issues that need to be explored are the nature of archival reference practices, the professional identity of practicing archivists, the priority that archival agencies place on making their records available, and the capabilities, skill requirements, and training needs of the personnel who serve the public. Discussion of these and many more relevant professional issues could benefit from a deeper understanding of the ways in which researchers approach the primary materials that they hope will address their historical questions.

With the completion of the new research facility, Archives II, on the campus of the University of Maryland, the National Archives is at a crucial cross-roads in its history. It stands to reason that the dramatic improvement in the public service potential represented by the new building will raise the service expectations of both the public and the staff who serve them. Information obtained directly from patrons is an important component in a fresh assessment of assumptions that have governed

