

**Focus Group Report
June 2020 Sessions
NHPRC Small and Diverse Archives Project
June 29, 2020
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Executive Summary

LYRASIS consultants on the National Historical Publications and Records Commission Small and Diverse Archives project held four focus group sessions during June 2020, and heard from 38 focus participants about their concerns and interests in the work and operations of small archives. The most important findings from the Focus Groups include:

- Small archives were defined or characterized by participants themselves as those with a small number of FTEs, as well as small collection sizes and physical spaces. These archives may be heavily reliant on volunteer help. Several participants noted that smaller archives may not be well-known to the public, and may be less visible.
- Leading characteristics of small archives strengths include a committed staff offering public service and access, relationships with other departments, and support of their parent institution's mission.
- Main challenges noted among the small archives included small staff sizes, which were spread thin; low funding levels, lack of policies, and the need for advocacy for the archives.
- The biggest concern that has surfaced during the pandemic is that many small archives have realized the lack of digital resources they can offer. Other concerns included how archives can best offer reference services during the pandemic and after, and making sure that the archives can preserve the history of COVID-19's effects on the archive, community, or state.
- Materials considered to be most significant by participating archives included African-American related materials, photographs, artwork, newspaper morgue collections, University Catalogs, and Director/Board/Founder materials.
- Collections which the participating archives felt the least-equipped to handle were born-digital and digitized materials; participants noted that this was because of lack of retention guidelines and digital collection development policies. Other problematic collections included audiovisual materials and photographs. These results closely mirror the LYRASIS NHPRC Survey Results.
- A number of organizations have collection policies to help them be selective in their collecting, but fewer had done evaluations of long-term fit of collections to their institution. Some were not able to do this because it was not a priority in comparison to other activities; others said they would be doing these in the near future. Institutions said that this type of work needs to be done at to guide them in their deaccession planning.
- The main areas seen as barriers to long-term sustainability included a lack of succession planning (a result that appeared more in the focus group discussions than the project survey), a lack of digitization and digital preservation solutions, and a lack of budget/funding.

- Most often noted as issues causing building and space concerns were water and leaks in buildings; buildings not being climate controlled; security issues; and issues with offsite storage facilities. Some participants felt their facilities staff does not have a good understanding of archival collections.
- Other “space” issues considered in the discussions was the lack of digital storage space with archives or parent institution IT staff and equipment.
- Many of the participants had collecting or collection development policies, disaster plans, mission statements, and processing policies or manuals. Fewer had digital-related policies.
- A number of focus group participants said that there was good awareness of and commitment to preservation needs at their organizations, a few noting specific positions in administration that had expressed commitment. A number of focus group participants noted a lack of awareness and commitment, or only a vague level of commitment.
- Most of the focus group participant organizations did not have preservation education programs. Some used tours or digital tours to education administrators, boards, and the public about preservation needs and activities.
- The most-mentioned user groups across the four focus groups included staff, students, genealogists, homeowners, historians, and the general public.
- As with the survey results on this question, many organizations reported a small level of users, although a few provided large monthly or annual user statistics. The group decided that it is important to report physical, telephone, e-mail, and virtual online users, and some of the organizations were just beginning to keep and report statistics.
- Digital preservation, working with born-digital materials, web archiving, and grantwriting were mentioned the most as potential workshop/webinar topics; additionally, there was strong interest in developing collaborative approaches to archival issues.
- When asked about opportunities for expansion, engagement, inspiration, and engagement, there was interest expressed in consortial digital platforms and social media approaches for small archives.
- Those who answered a final question on cost and travel distance restrictions for education noted limited or small travel budgets, and especially noted no conference travel during the COVID pandemic.

Background and Methodology

LYRASIS Consulting staff held a total of four Virtual Focus Groups on the NHPRC Small and Diverse Archives project during June 2020. The original plan for the project was to hold two live focus groups at regional archives association conferences and two virtually, but the schedule was modified to holding all virtual sessions when spring archives conferences were cancelled due to the COVID-19 Pandemic.

The discussion questions for the Virtual Focus Groups built on some of the questions posed in the Spring 2020 LYRASIS NHPRC Project Survey. In addition, since the focus group sessions were held at a time when many archival staff were still working at home

due to the pandemic, a question on the effects of the pandemic on archival practice was added.

Invitation e-mails were sent to the four Regional Archival Associations listed below for distribution, and participants registered through LYRASIS. All registrants were sent a Discussion Guide document for review before their focus group session (please see the Discussion Guide at the end of this document). The focus groups were held on the Adobe Connect Platform, and the facilitators gathered written remarks only.

This report includes raw data and analysis on the sessions held with:

1. Mid-Atlantic Regional Archives Conference, 6/4/20 (17 attendees)
2. Society of Rocky Mountain Archivists, 6/8/20 (6 attendees)
3. Midwest Archives Conference, 6/10/20 (10 attendees)
4. Society of California Archivists, 6/15/20 (5 attendees)

There were 16 states represented among the focus group attendees, including: Maryland (3 participants), Virginia (6), New Jersey (2), District of Columbia (1), Pennsylvania (1), New York (4), Colorado (6), California (5), Ohio (1), Illinois (3), Minnesota (2), Iowa (1), Nebraska (1), Indiana (1), Vermont (1), and Missouri (1).

Among the 38 participants, there were a variety of types of archives represented, including: archives in public libraries (6), academic library archives (17), municipal archives (2), museum archives (2), church or religious archives (5), state archives (2), historical society archives (1), and special archives (3).

Key Comments from Focus Group Raw Data

Analysis of the information, and how NHPRC and the archival community can use it is included after each of the questions.

1. How would you define a small archives?
 - FTE Numbers: 3 or fewer staff – 4 responses
 - Size of collection: 500 linear feet or less – 2 responses
 - Both small staff and collection size
 - Size of parent institution
 - Managed by a Loan Arranger – 2 responses
 - Managed by a part-time or ad-hoc archivist
 - Small Physical Space/Storage area – 2 responses
 - Minimal budget
 - Specialized collections/for specific user community – 2 responses
 - Not well-known to public – less visible – 2 responses
 - Used mostly within institution and not to public
 - Need volunteers to get work done – 2 responses

Analysis: Focus group participants characterized small archives as those with a small number of FTEs, as well as small collection sizes and

physical spaces. These archives may be heavily reliant on volunteer help. An interesting comment from several participants is that smaller archives may not be well-known to the public, and may be less visible.

2. What do you see as your archives' greatest strengths?
 - Committed staff – 2 responses
 - Policies exist
 - Public service – 3 responses
 - We have adapted to minimal staff size and small budget
 - Our connection to the community
 - Access policy – 2 responses
 - Our collections
 - Collection is very focused
 - Our new space is good
 - Our management is open to change and improvement
 - We have deep knowledge on a very specific topic
 - Our organization was 120 years old before they had an archivist; she is the first
 - Short turnaround for requests
 - Relationships with other departments – 2 responses
 - Support of the parent institution's mission/archives supports and enhances our parent institution's overall mission – 2 responses
 - Passionate users
 - Can do what we want – administration supports
 - Volunteer Board includes people with training in archives, marketing, finance, and management
 - Actively engaged in social mission
 - Connection to our founders

Analysis: Characteristics of small archives strengths include a committed staff offering public service and access. Also very important were relationships with other departments and support of their parent institution's mission.

3. What do you see as your archives' greatest challenges?
 - Lack of policies – 2 responses
 - Small staff size – 2 responses
 - Funding – 3 responses
 - Born-digital materials/lack of policies specifically for born-digital – 4 responses
 - “Old-timers who resist change”
 - Capacity – we need to build it up
 - Lack of awareness and enforcement of retention guidelines
 - Collection management practices are inconsistent
 - “Everything”
 - Need to be more proactive
 - “Growing collection and shrinking staff”

- Staff spread thin – 2 responses
- Advocacy/advocating for the archives is a challenge – 3 responses
- Student engagement
- Dealing with third-party software
- Need to collaborate on digital issues
- Need to work more on digital preservation
- Need to educate up
- Lack of institutional support
- Time to work with the collections

Analysis: Four main areas were seen as key challenges among the small archives: small staff sizes, which were spread thin; low funding levels, lack of policies, and the need for advocacy for the archives.

4. Are there concerns related to the COVID-19 Pandemic which are currently affecting your archives?
 - What does reference look like/concerns about how we can best fulfill reference requests for remote researchers – 2 responses
 - Donor pickups – elders don't want staff in their homes
 - Limited access to our building
 - Making sure that our organization's/state's response to COVID is being preserved – 2 responses
 - Our Library and Archives Building remains closed
 - Concerns about fall plans
 - The pandemic has highlighted our archives' lack of digital resources – 5 responses
 - Making sure we are “not just providing white women's documentation
 - Collecting protest materials
 - Doing instruction online or in a hybrid environment – 2 responses
 - Our state is request staff work from home permanently
 - Time and ability to enter ArchivesSpace data
 - Difficulty with records management work during the pandemic
 - Can't bring work home to deal with it
 - Concern about what financial impact will look like
 - People are cleaning out their houses and we are getting a lot of donations
 - We are not reopening our house museum yet; we are providing research services for a fee
 - While we are able to “catch up on digital work,” we have had a dropoff in being able to process physical materials

Analysis: This question was not asked in the Spring 2020 LYRASIS NHPRC Survey, which was in the field beginning in early March. Also, it was one of the later questions in the first Focus Group question, but discussion was so lengthy and intense that the facilitators moved it up until earlier in the session so discussion would not get cut off. The biggest concern that has surfaced during the pandemic is that many small archives have realized the lack of

digital resources they offer. There were also strong concerns about how archives can best offer reference services during the pandemic and after, and making sure that the archives can preserve the history of COVID-19's effects on the archive, community, or state.

5. Which of your holdings do you consider to be the most significant and why?
- Materials on world politics
 - Our backlog has treasures users don't know about
 - Information on orphan homes in the area
 - African-American related materials – 3 responses, including:
 - Information on Deerfield, CO (a nearby historically black community)
 - Blair Caldwell materials
 - Medical artifacts
 - Our photographs (3 responses) – they are used by all kinds of researchers
 - “We could provide a different answer to this question every week”
 - Disability rights information
 - Legal and legislative records
 - University Records
 - Atomic Energy Commission records
 - Water Issues information
 - Artwork Materials – 2 responses, including
 - Collection from Chris Petteys
 - Handmade artist books
 - Building permits
 - Annual Reports
 - Assessor records
 - Morgue of local newspaper (2 responses), including:
 - Rocky Mountain News archives
 - Information on Connie Willis, Science Fiction writer
 - Denver marriage applications
 - Prints and photos
 - University Catalogs – 2 responses
 - Campus yearbooks and newspapers
 - Director and Board records; Founder's materials – 2 responses
 - Historical advertising materials
 - Materials Sisters have written and presented
 - Women's Club/Women's groups records – 3 responses
 - Activism materials
 - Street Directories
 - “Digital publications/university publications that are online are able to answer about 90% of our patron's questions.”
 - TV Script holdings
 - Hollywood blacklist information
 - Doheny Family materials

Analysis: This question produced a huge list of answers, including information on some unique collections held at specific archival repositories. Some of the materials mentioned by several respondents, across the different survey groups, included African-American related materials, photographs, artwork, and newspaper morgue collections. Additionally, University Catalogs, and Director/Board/Founder materials were among the important holdings at a number of archives.

6. Of the collections materials you hold, which types of materials do you feel you are the least equipped to handle properly?
- Born-digital materials – 7 responses
 - Reasons include no storage, policies, access (2 responses)
 - Difficult to accession and process
 - Digital materials difficult to get off of obsolete formats
 - Maps and oversized items
 - “Digital materials of all kinds are difficult to preserve” (3 responses) – and they are difficult to get donated to the archives
 - Photographs – 3 responses
 - Obsolete formats – a number of types
 - Objects
 - Artwork
 - Audiovisual materials (6 responses) – they are expensive to migrate; problem formats include:
 - VHS
 - Beta
 - Reel-to-reel tapes
 - Paper materials
 - Architectural records
 - Software
 - A lack of a retention schedule and digital collection development policy makes dealing with digital collections difficult – 4 responses
 - E-mail
 - Oral histories
 - Temperature/Humidity/Light/Water have damaged dozens of rare books in our collections
 - Religion-related artifacts, costumes
 - Slides

Analysis: Born-digital and digitized materials were cited by the largest number of focus group participants as difficult formats; a number of participants noted that this was because of lack of retention guidelines and digital collection development policies. Other formats that participants felt they were least equipped to deal with included audiovisual materials and photographs. These results closely mirror the LYRasis NHPRC Survey Results.

7. Have the collection(s) been evaluated to determine that everything in the collection(s) is of long-term value to the institution? How was this done?
 - We have not been able to do this due to other higher work priorities – 2 responses
 - This type of activity is ongoing
 - We need to do a more comprehensive evaluation
 - We are inventorying a collection of 90,000 boxes
 - We have not done this in the past
 - We review donations as they come in
 - We are going to be doing this in the near future – 2 responses
 - We have a collection policy – 4 responses (helps us to narrow our collecting)
 - We evaluate at the time of processing
 - Have only done for our physical art collection
 - Have a retention schedule which helps with this
 - Only collect materials appropriate to scope
 - Need to do this and consolidate the collections
 - Need to do this because unsure of what we are able to deaccession – 2 responses
 - Awards and plaques are difficult to keep and need to be evaluated – 2 responses
 - Collection follows mission statement

Analysis: While a number of organizations have collection policies to help them be selective in their collection, fewer had done evaluations of long-term fit to their institution. Some were not able to do this because it was not a priority in comparison to other activities; others said they would be doing these in the near future. This type of work needs to be done at institutions to guide them in their deaccession planning. Some of the focus group participants especially noted awards and plaques as difficult formats to evaluate for long-term retention.

8. What do you see as the greatest barriers to the long-term sustainability of collections?
 - Reliable funding/Budget – 3 responses
 - Lack of Care
 - Competitors
 - Lack of succession/continuity planning – 4 responses, including:
 - Cannot hire assistant
 - Staff issues – 3 responses, including:
 - Turnover in staff and need for education in dealing with digital issues
 - General staff turnover
 - Generally short-staffed
 - Declining budget and potential loss of staff due to COVID and economic downturn

- Having a digital preservation open on a statewide basis (Preservica mentioned)
- The lack of and need for a consistently applied solution for digitization and digital preservation – 3 responses
- We have a long-term plan to move our collection
- Equitable ways to form relationships and trust
- HVAC issues
- Lack of space
- The long-term fit with our organization’s mission
- Commitment to archives ebbs and flows
- Visibility and buy-in from above
- An evaluation might help
- Archives is personality-driven vs. institutionally-stable
- Privacy issues for the sisters who are the subject of the collection

Analysis: Three main areas were seen by focus group participants as barriers to long-term sustainability. These included a lack of succession planning, a lack of digitization and digital preservation solutions, and a lack of budget/funding. Comments on succession planning appeared quite a bit more in focus group discussion than in the project survey.

9. Are there building and space issues which are affecting your collections?
- We are out of room/space for our archives
 - We have collections under pipes
 - We are in the midst of renovation
 - Offsite storage issues (3 responses), including:
 - Our offsite storage is bad; especially location
 - “It is just a big shed”
 - Running out of digital space
 - Water and leak issues – 5 responses, including:
 - Roof leaks
 - Archives not climate-controlled (5 responses), including:
 - High temperatures in archives
 - Low humidity affecting archives
 - Our HVAC has to cover multiple spaces
 - We do not have good security for our archival collections – 4 responses
 - Facilities does not have a good understanding of archival collections – 3 responses
 - IT – we have lack of digital space – 3 responses
 - Lack of a reading room – 2 responses
 - Lack of policies
 - Pests including silverfish
 - Need a purpose-designed space instead of what we have now

Analysis: There were a variety of issues which were causing building and space concerns for collection storage. Most often noted were

water and leaks in buildings; buildings not being climate controlled; security issues; and issues with offsite storage facilities. Additionally, some participants felt their facilities staff does not have a good understanding of archival collections, and another “space” issue considered in the discussions was the lack of digital storage space with archives or parent institution IT staff and equipment.

10. What type of written policies and procedures does your organization have?

- Collecting/Collection development policy – 10 responses
- Mission Statement – 7 responses
- Disaster Plan – 8 responses
- Succession Plan
- Deaccession Plan
- Digital policies/standards – 2 policies
- Donor and acquisition guidelines
- Web archiving policies
- A formal retention policy
- Vision Statement
- Processing Manual – 4 responses
- Accession forms and processes
- Policy for formats not accepted
- Deed of Gift
- No collection or deaccession plan

Analysis: The focus group facilitators were pleased to see how many of the participants said they had collecting or collection development policies, disaster plans, mission statements, and processing policies or manuals. Only some had digital-related policies.

11. Are the institution's senior administrators and trustees aware of preservation needs and committed to the protection of the collections?

- Generally Yes, we have awareness, prioritization, and commitment – 2 responses
- Yes, Fully aware – 2 responses
- Dean or Interim Dean is aware and committed – 2 responses
- Our academic VP is aware and committed
- Our Chief Operations Office is aware, but others are not
- No, they are paying attention to other needs – 2 responses
- Internal and external awareness and commitment exists
- “We do have high-level support, but when it comes to details and dollars, the situation can be different”
- “It depends”
- Strong leadership is needed
- Unsure about support from administration above
- Need advocacy
- “It would be nice to have”
- “It is hard to know if this is beyond lip service”

- We need an institutional repository and collection management system
- Need support for digital preservation
- We have issues with support due to institutional turnover
- Board is in support
- Our board has a “vague commitment” – we need to educate them more
- Our board is “blissfully clueless” about the archives

Analysis: A number of focus group participants said that there was good awareness of and commitment to preservation needs at their organizations. A few noted specific positions in administration that had expressed commitment. There were a number that noted a lack of awareness and commitment or only a vague level of commitment.

12. Is there a program of preservation education for trustees, administrators, staff, and/or the public? What does it include?
- No – 12 responses, including:
 - Not enough time
 - Not for administration yet
 - “I wish”
 - Informal only
 - We do an annual program
 - Did program on caring for family documents
 - Yes for External preservation education
 - Yes for staff and public
 - Do tours to educate – 5 responses
 - Answer general questions about the archives
 - Did program on home archiving
 - Do ad hoc programming at alumni and annual galas
 - Do displays and faculty talks
 - Have started virtual tours
 - “People thing once something is in the database it is fine forever.”

Analysis: This was an area of relatively strong agreement across the focus groups. Most did not have preservation education programs. Some organizations used tours and more recently digital tours to education administrators, boards, and the public about preservation needs and activities.

13. What type (e.g., staff, historians, genealogists, students) of people use your collections?
- Art collectors
 - Staff – 5 responses
 - Publishers (including Arcadia)
 - Homeowners – 2 responses
 - Visitors
 - Those doing research on our institution
 - Those who need local images

- Citizens/General Public – 2 responses
- Elected officials
- Genealogists – 4 responses
- Lobbyists (oil and gas industry)
- Lawyers
- “Our users span from Beginners to Experts”
- Historians – 2 responses
- Scholars
- Staff of allied organizations
- Students – 4 responses
- Faculty
- Ours is a corporate archives so not open to the public
- University Communications Department staff
- Screenwriters

Analysis: This was another area where there was a wide variety of answers. The most-mentioned user groups across the four focus groups included staff, students, genealogists, homeowners, historians, and the general public.

14. How frequently are the collections used by staff members and by the public? Provide us with an average number (e.g., per month or year).
- 85 separate research requests a year/internal and Sisters
 - 1 public patron request per month; most by e-mail
 - Staff usage low – 2 per month
 - 15 public users/mo
 - 10-15/mo
 - 500-1000/year
 - Daily
 - More virtual interactions:
 - Inquiry via e-mail or digital vs. physical
 - Count walk-in, phone, and digital separately – 2 responses
 - 3800 official requests a year
 - 5 requests per month for students-staff-faculty
 - Organization just started collecting stats
 - Predecessor did not keep records
 - 194 reference requests last year
 - Public – 20 requests
 - 10-15 per month; COVID has caused a drop
 - Staff 5-7 requests; public 3-5
 - Average 5 requests per month
 - 170 researchers last year

Analysis: As with the survey results on this of question, many organizations reported a small level of users, although a few provided large monthly or annual user statistics. The group decided that it is important to report

physical, telephone, e-mail, and virtual online users, and some of the organizations were just beginning to keep and report statistics.

15. Is there a particular archival topic you feel would be most valuable for a workshop or webinar focused around the needs of small archives?
- Grantwriting – 4 responses
 - Discussions of equipment for digitization
 - Reopening Scenarios
 - Born digital issues – 7 responses, including:
 - Born digital on a shoestring
 - Web archiving issues – 6 responses
 - Advocacy & Awareness-building – 3 responses
 - Time Management
 - Basic Preservation topics
 - Digital preservation issues (10 responses), including:
 - Digital preservation systems
 - Consortial digital preservation strategies (Kansas model mentioned)
 - “Digital Preservation for Bosses” (2)
 - Digital preservation issues for IT staff (2)
 - Helping people understand the need for digital preservation (4)
 - Community Outreach
 - “Access-minded collection management”
 - Regional Archival Association/SAA/AASLH/LYRASIS-offered classes
 - Developing collaboration – 4 responses (mentioned Balboa Park model)

Analysis: Digital preservation, working with born-digital materials, web archiving, and grantwriting were mentioned the most as potential workshop/webinar topics; additionally, there was strong interest in developing collaborative approaches to archival issues.

16. For small archival organizations such as yours, what do you see as the greatest opportunities for expansion, collaboration, inspiration and engagement with the public?
- Social media to promote collections – 3 responses
 - Archives Bazaars
 - Engagements, including looking at the changing needs of the community
 - Connecting with non-archival organizations
 - Sharing online
 - Digitize and share
 - “Make history relevant to today”
 - Partnering with community organizations, larger archives, and community leaders
 - Work with local history groups
 - Blogging cheap and easy
 - Document the pandemic
 - Collaboration with public library, genealogy, and museum

- Permanent area in museum for archival materials
- Connecting more deeply with faculty and curriculum
- Strengthen relationships with Libraries, Archives, and Museums
- Virtual exhibits
- Departments outside of library for collaboration
- Classes – making the business case for digitization
- How to apply teaching with primary resources
- Reach non-traditional and non-academic users
- Digital repository platform – consortial – 4 responses
- Sharing digital images
- Community archives
- “Small archives are often ignored in tools, programs, and grants”

Analysis: This focus group question had the largest variety of answers. There was interest expressed in consortial digital platforms and social media approaches for small archives. Other than the COVID-related questions, this question generated the largest amount of discussion across all of the focus group sessions.

17. Do you have cost and travel distance restrictions for education? If so, can you describe those for us?
- Travel money will go away
 - No travel during COVID – 4 responses
 - Faculty grant can pay for this type of travel
 - Difficult to travel because based in a rural area
 - In a normal year, able to go to 2 out-of-state conferences
 - No budget for training and education – 3 responses
 - Attending online only
 - Usually has to pay out of pocket

Analysis: The facilitators listed this question to be asked if time allowed. Only three of the focus groups had time to address this question. Those who answered noted limited or small travel budgets, and especially noted no conference travel during the COVID pandemic.

**LYRASIS NHPRC Project
Virtual Focus Group
Discussion Guide**

Introductory information:

- Background information on purpose of focus groups
 - Introductions: participants and facilitators
 - Agenda review
 - Process Agreement
1. How would you define a small archives?
 2. What do you see as your archives' greatest strengths?
 3. What do you see as your archives' greatest challenges?
 4. Are there concerns related to the COVID-19 Pandemic which are currently affecting your archives?
 5. Which of your holdings do you consider to be the most significant and why?
 6. Of the collections materials you hold, which types of materials do you feel you are the least equipped to handle properly?
 7. Have the collection(s) been evaluated to determine that everything in the collection(s) is of long-term value to the institution? How was this done?
 8. What do you see as the greatest barriers to the long-term sustainability of collections?
 9. Are there building and space issues which are affecting your collections?
 10. What type of written policies and procedures does your organization have?
 11. Are the institution's senior administrators and trustees aware of preservation needs and committed to the protection of the collections?
 12. Is there a program of preservation education for trustees, administrators, staff, and/or the public? What does it include?
 13. What type (e.g., staff, historians, genealogists, students) of people use your collections?
 14. How frequently are the collections used by staff members and by the public? Provide us with an average number (e.g., per month or year).
 15. Is there a particular archival topic you feel would be most valuable for a workshop or webinar focused around the needs of small archives?
 16. For small archival organizations such as yours, what do you see as the greatest opportunities for expansion, collaboration, inspiration and engagement with the public?
 17. (If time allows) Do you have cost and travel distance restrictions for education? If so, can you describe those for us?