

## 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.

As for my interpretation of the results, I expected that the report that was submitted to the top administration would:

- \* Focus on the future rather than criticizing past or present practice.
- \* Infer patron service needs from patterns of actual behavior.
- \* Recommend ways to improve service to patrons.
- \* Support change at the National Archives as a direct result of objective data analysis.

In September I met with Don Wilson to obtain guidance on his most important objectives of the study. He made it clear to me that the focus of the research should be on potential improvements in workflow, people flow, and internal reference procedures that could result from the opening of Archives II. He suggested that the study focus on the "reference audit" concept as a start, leaving potential "expert searcher" models and similarly complex projects for later phases.

### **Personal Odyssey through the Project**

In October, when it became clear that this project would be approved and that I would have an opportunity to undertake it, I discussed the study with Trudy Peterson, then head of the Office of the National Archives, to discuss logistics. She assured me that I would have direct and unlimited access to National Archives staff and historical administrative files and be permitted to interview researchers, provided that I kept in mind the Office of Management and Budget's paperwork guidelines that would limit my flexibility in developing and distributing questionnaires.

Other than the submission of the proposals and a sequence of meetings described above, I did not receive a written, publicly releasable charge to undertake the user study. The expectations of the agency's senior administration were conveyed informally. My expectations for the project's outcome were built into my job description, which at the time I assumed gave me the mandate I needed to take a broad view of the agency and its patrons. The position identified six major duties, cited here as they appeared in the official job description.

- 1) Design and implement systematic studies of groups of users (genealogists, historians, federal government employees, and others) who contact the National Archives in person and by telephone or mail, to identify significant background and experience characteristics, the structure of research inquiries, perceptions of reference service needs, and uses of archival records.
- 2) Design and implement a systematic evaluation of reference procedures in the Office of the National Archives to identify important points of contact with user groups, and how user service components relate to each other.
- 3) Coordinate, and provide input to, a working group of archivists who service textual, audio-visual, and electronic records and who staff principal service units.

- 4) Analyze, within a framework of a full professional understanding of archival objectives, functions, and practices, the data gathered in studies. Apply critical judgement to the varied subject matter and numerous considerations which must be taken into account in studying the Office the National Archives reference processes.
- 5) Recommend actions to improve or develop procedures for ongoing information gathering from users, staff and user education programs, and reference processes implemented in Archives II.
- 6) Report the findings of the evaluation in writing to the Assistant Archivist for the National Archives.

I started work on 19 December 1989, with this understanding. In less than two months, I completed the background research in the agency's archives and produced a nine-page memorandum that outlined the design of a sequence of nine studies on current users and use of National Archives historical resources. The memo described the problem and general research focus, presented a framework for approaching the research, and briefly described specific projects to be undertaken in the course of the next nine months. The memo started with the premise that the agency needed to uncover patterns of users and use and apply this knowledge in the development of responsive, user-friendly archival services. "It is an exercise in wishful thinking to assume that we can develop responsive, efficient systems that meet the archival information needs of our actual and potential users without understanding the processes and the people involved more systematically than we do now."

To this end I proposed a multi-faceted study that relied on direct data-gathering from patrons and observation of archivist- patron interactions over time. My project was planned to include five components.

- 1) An assessment of existing information gathered routinely and sporadically on users and reference use, noting kinds of information (data elements) that would be most useful if gathered or reported systematically. The principal sources of information for this project were the forms completed by patrons when they applied for research cards, requested to see records in a research room, or ordered photocopies or other reproductions.
- 2) A series of seven small, narrowly focused data gathering projects on the nature of mail and telephone requests, on the service needs of new walk-in researchers, on the consultation-referral process in the variety of research settings, and on the particular problems of using non-textual records. The responses to these studies, when combined into a single database for analysis, were intended to represent a randomized cross section of patrons over much of a calendar year.
- 3) Systematic interviews with archivists who provide reference service to visitors to understand the variety of ways they assess research needs and to observe the styles of interaction with patrons.

- 4) A special project to track and interview a small group of researchers as they worked their way through the full reference process at the National Archives, interacting with archivists, finding aids, facilities, and collections over a given period of time.
- 5) Systematic, in-depth interviews with selected experienced and novice researchers to assess the process of problem definition and its implications for National Archives reference services.

Ultimately, I was able to complete all of these project components except for the researcher tracking project (#4 above). By the time I turned my attention to the study I had dubbed "A Day in the Life," I was simply reaching the end of the time allotted for information gathering and analysis. Over the course of a twelve-month period, I had interviewed 800 patrons, analyzed 367 reference letters for content and structure, interviewed dozens of staff about their jobs, conducted 25 in-depth interviews with very experienced researchers who had used many different types of records in their time at the agency, observed and recorded the interactions of patrons and archivists in seven different reading rooms in the Washington, D.C., area, and combed the administrative archives of the agency in search of findings from previous user and reference studies.

In spite of gathering all of this interview and observational data, the user studies were necessarily limited in scope and methodology. Among the most significant limitations that I imposed upon the project, with the approval of the agency's management, were:

- \* Presidential libraries were excluded from the study. My earlier study on visitors to four libraries provided basic information in this area.
- \* Archives field branches in eleven regions of the country were also excluded. Reasons for this exclusion, which did not sit particularly well with staff in some of the regions, included lack of resources to carry out a nationwide study in sufficient depth, limitations on the time-frame of the study, and the specialized character of much of the archival documentation in the field archives. More importantly, I felt that the methods used to conduct the study in the Washington, D.C., area could be easily adapted to field branches at some future time.
- \* "Congressionals" were excluded. This special type of information request arrives directly from congressional offices and is handled through a special system. Responses are carefully reviewed for accuracy and completeness and each request for information is logged and thoroughly tracked until complete.
- \* Direct service to federal agency staff was not adequately captured in the study for a number of reasons. First, few federal agency staff who need records that have been formally accessioned by the National Archives visit the facilities. Those who do contact the agency are not necessarily required to go through the access procedures required of the general public. Second, requests for information typically are lodged at high levels and are handled directly by archivists who have custody of the records. Third, service on records not available to the general public, such as security classified records, records in the declassification process, and unaccessioned agency files given courtesy storage, were considered to be outside the scope of the study. Finally, the support activities of the National Archives' White House liaison were not included in the study.

In addition to these self-imposed limitations, which were intended to keep the size and scope of the project manageable, other limitations became evident once the project began. Among the most significant were:

- \* No financial or personnel resources would be available to exploit fully information that might be gathered in focus groups sessions. The literature on this particularly potent form of qualitative research makes it clear that full transcripts of focus group interviews should be analyzed systematically in order to find the most meaningful patterns of patron opinion. Given this constraint, I chose not to conduct focus group interviews.
- \* No financial or personnel resources would be dedicated to data entry and computer analysis. I was able, however, to make use of the sophisticated technological resources of the Archival Research and Evaluation Staff. Given these constraints, I gathered, coded, entered, and analyzed all the data by myself. For those readers who have never had the good fortune to create and analyze a database of interview data, I highly recommend the experience. Nothing quickens the senses for poorly written questionnaires better than the experience of having to interpret the responses to questions that are ambiguously composed.

The next chapter contains information on the design of each of the seven data-gathering projects that together formed the nucleus of the National Archives user study.

## **Review and Submission of the Draft Report**

The final report for the projects was intended to be a summary of the findings from the seven separate studies, interviews with staff, and observations of the ongoing interaction between patrons and archivists. The first study, an analysis of incoming telephone calls to the reference consultants, was undertaken in the third week of January 1990. Data for the final study, an assessment of the nature of written reference inquiries, was gathered in the first week of October 1990. A database of responses to the face-to-face interviews was compiled analyzed in the fall of 1990. Throughout 1990, as the data-gathering and analysis proceeded, I interviewed patrons in depth and discussed the project with National Archives staff.

The drafting of the summary and the formulation of the recommendations began in earnest after all of the data had been analyzed and reported in tabular form. I presented the preliminary findings, along with my interpretation, in a number of forums designed specifically to test reactions to the recommendations and to solicit feedback on the project as a whole.

- \* Early reports on the first several data-gathering projects were circulated to unit heads and other interested parties for comment and to make sure that the level of detail and focus of the interpretations was appropriate and useful.
- \* Presentations of the major findings and early efforts to formulate a comprehensive set of recommendations were carried out in briefings for the Career Intern Development System staff, consisting of new professional recruits to the agency, and for the National Archives Assembly, whose members include professional staff and administrators.

- \* An informal briefing for Page Putnam Miller served as a way of comparing the findings of the user study with the recommendations in the NCC report.
- \* A luncheon talk with a group of federal government historians at the National Archives was an early effort to gauge the reaction of one of many user communities that have vested interests in the reference policies of the agency.
- \* A paper presented at the spring 1991 meeting of the Midwest Archives Conference in Chicago represented an effort to begin communicating the findings and recommendations to the archival profession as a whole.

In late spring 1991, I distributed a preliminary version of the report to my colleagues on the Archival Research and Evaluation Staff, who reviewed it for consistency and commented on the proposed recommendations.<sup>9</sup> In mid-July 1991, I completed a 64- page revised draft that incorporated the comments of those who had read preliminary versions or heard my presentations on the recommendations. As had been determined at the beginning of the project, the report was submitted to Trudy Peterson, who then headed the Office of the National Archives and had responsibility for administering the staff and overseeing the procedures discussed in the user study. This draft is reprinted as Chapter 3 and 4 of this publication.

Trudy Peterson distributed the draft to her unit heads and encouraged comments and criticism from the staff. About six weeks later, an official memorandum from the Office of the National Archives arrived with 69 pages of written responses from 24 National Archives staff attached. The comments and criticisms ranged from the highly constructive to the hysterical. The most useful suggestions concerned ways in which the summary recommendations could be expanded or tied more directly to the information gathered from patrons. At the other end of the spectrum, commentators questioned the need for the study, the basic assumptions of the research design, the quality of the data, and my credentials as a project director.

The vehemence with which some commentators wrote suggests either that the report's findings and suggestions hit pretty close to home or that the report was simply a variation on one of Warren G. Harding's speeches, which William McAdoo once characterized as:

"...an army of pompous phrases moving over the landscape in search of an idea. Sometimes these meandering words would find a straggling thought and bear it triumphantly, a prisoner in their midst, until it died of servitude and overwork."

Regardless of the specific character of the response, however, the fact that many professional archivists in the agency took much time out of their busy days to comment in writing or in person, demonstrates to me that a major internal study can serve as a stimulating learning experience for those most deeply affected by the findings. A full assessment of the internal reaction to the entire user study process at the National Archives is a story more appropriately told at another time and place.

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<sup>9</sup> My thanks are extended to Beverly Hacker, Avra Michelson, Charles Dollar, Ted Weir, and Barry Roginski.

## Recommendations for Future Internal Studies

The experience of designing and implementing a complex user study at the National Archives holds many possible lessons for archivists, librarians, and other information professionals who may wish to develop mechanisms for better understanding their patrons. Although it is quite unlikely that archivists in other institutions will encounter the specific set of circumstances that were prevalent at the National Archives in the late 1980s and early 1990s, it seems to me that there is a handful of "universals" that should be kept in mind when planning to undertake a large-scale, systematic user study. Among the most important ones that emerged from this study are:

- \* **Get It In Writing.** The job description or official personnel papers of the principal investigator are not sufficient to document the goals and objectives of a major research project.
- \* **Decide How the Results Will Be Distributed Before Getting Started.** If wide and public dissemination of the results is a goal of the research project, this goal should be an expressed part of the charge. A distribution plan should be a part of the research design so that the final report can be crafted with public release in mind. If the study's findings are intended strictly for internal use, the final report will take different forms depending upon the intended audience and the intended use of the document.
- \* **Co-opt Middle Management in the Project Design.** The most relevant user study for an organization may most likely be the one that is most useful from the perspective of those who must manage staff and interact with the public on a daily basis. Make sure that the questions posed to patrons and the assumptions underlying the ways in which their responses will be interpreted are clearly understood by middle managers.
- \* **Involve Staff in Gathering Information.** The process of interviewing patrons in a systematic fashion is an intensely enlightening experience--one that should be had by as many archives staff as possible. The costs of this approach--most especially the potential for data inconsistency and increased training and supervision--will be more than offset by the benefits to those who have spent hours, days, or even weeks focusing on patron needs and research behaviors.
- \* **Leak Preliminary Findings.** The long-standing government tradition of providing advance notice of findings and recommendations to people in a position to influence the acceptability of the outcome has use in the user study domain. The reaction to "trial balloons" can point to ways of presenting suggested actions to make them less controversial.
- \* **Seek Consensus on Interpretations of the Findings.** Data from patrons, without a political consensus on what that data means, is useless for bringing about service improvements and changes in policies.
- \* **Design with the Final Presentation in Mind.** One of the best ways to determine just what questions to ask and how to ask them in a survey is to decide, in advance of gathering any data, just how this data will be marshalled and presented at the end of the project. Imagine a slide or overhead projection of a table, or chart, or graph. Then answer two questions for each graphic: 1) what problem will this chart help to address? and 2) what information needs to be gathered to construct the graphic that will address the problem? Each and every question in the survey questionnaire should be included only if this analysis of the end result has certified its relevancy.

- \* **Work Quickly.** The internal priorities of an archival or library organization may change before the results of the study are in. It is better to design a study that can be implemented and reported quickly, even if the study raises more questions than it answers, than to agonize over the wording of every question and the phrasing of every recommendation while the management changes its mind on the relevancy of the study itself.

In the process of writing this report and making the findings understandable to archivists and administrators who may not share my view of how archives should function as organizations, I have come to appreciate that effective user studies have little to do with data and a whole lot to do with politics--both institutional and professional. Almost by definition, the business of studying users increases the tension between the investigator's traditional mandate to be a neutral observer and the administrator's often natural resistance to those research findings that point to the need for organizational change. With hindsight, it is clear that the barrier between the objective evaluator and the realistic administrator can be breached if the evaluator enters the political arena consciously. This is the role of a relatively new style of research. "Advocacy evaluation," has been defined as "an independent advocacy of needed change, arrived at through the conduct of an objective, valid, defensible evaluation of a program."<sup>10</sup> This, too, is the challenge now faced by the National Archives, and the one we all face as professionals--to question, to learn, and to change.

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<sup>10</sup> Richard C. Sonnichsen, "Advocacy Evaluation," *Knowledge: Creation, Diffusion, Utilization* 10 (June 1989): 243.