



Utah Connecting to Collections Project

Final Report

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Background

“Utah’s Connecting to Collections Project: A Statewide Preservation Initiative,” a 2009-2010 project funded by the Institute of Museum and Library Services, has been an extremely successful endeavor. The project has so far included a statewide web survey on preservation needs, and a series of Town Hall meetings to discuss key findings of the survey and garner feedback from cultural heritage staff at institutions around the state.

The project is directed by the leaders of a diverse group of heritage repositories, including representatives of the University of Utah Libraries, the Utah State Archives, Utah State Library, Utah State History, Office of Museum Services, Utah Academic Library Consortium, Brigham Young University, and the LDS Church History Department.

The web survey had the highest response rate of any state which has undertaken one of these projects thus far, and the Town Hall Meetings have been a very beneficial feature which differentiated this project from other state projects. Four discussion sessions on Preservation Issues were held throughout the state in order to present the findings of the web survey and gather additional information for preservation planning purposes.

The findings of the online survey and in-person Town Hall Meetings provided a clear picture of the preservation needs in the state. Presented here is an analysis of the web survey findings, a report on each of the Town Hall Meetings, and an Initial Action Plan for Preservation in Utah which can be used in future planning and grant proposals.

Statewide Preservation Web Survey

Preservation Funding

Beginning with funding for preservation, a number of areas for awareness-raising and education arise throughout the survey. Less than one-third of the respondents had submitted a proposal for preservation funding in the past five years. Key reasons for not developing proposals include not knowing enough about the funding sources, and needing additional project planning or preparation before applying for a grant. The high level of need for further information, assistance, and planning to develop preservation grants indicates a strong need for awareness-raising and education on preservation grant writing and fundraising throughout the state. To answer this need in an immediate way, the project consultant and principal investigator developed information on preservation grants which was delivered at the Town Meetings in March-April 2010.

For organizations that have submitted preservation grants, it was interesting to note that most of the proposals have been to state funding organization, private foundations, or private donors. The finding that none of the survey respondents had applied to the National Endowment for the Humanities (especially the NEH Preservation Assistance Grants to Smaller Institutions) or National Endowment for the Arts led to immediate plans to raise awareness of these preservation funding streams, as well as other Federal sources that had not been fully utilized by the state’s institutions.

Preservation Staffing and Education

As with the majority of the states surveyed as part of the Connecting to Collections project, there is always a need for further staff to carry out preservation activities, and further formal training for staff members as appropriate. However, Utah fares better than many other states with the number of staff focused predominantly on preservation or assigned to conservation and preservation duties as needed.

To build the knowledge and capacity of existing and future staff with preservation responsibilities, a program of continuing education is needed. Over 50% of the survey respondents indicated that someone from their repository had attended conservation/preservation/collections care training in the past five years, but that did not quench the thirst for more preservation information and education. Short-term workshops were the

number one method institutions felt was very useful for gaining preservation information, and using this method to get training on the preservation of books and bound volumes and unbound sheets was of high interest. Additionally, there was an urgent need expressed for training in how to deal with the preservation challenges of paintings, photographs, and historic/ethnographic objects. The need to receive training in work with historical and ethnographic objects was most pronounced among historical houses and sites, and those institutions with budgets of \$250,000 and below. A potential method to address these needs would be a traveling workshop on book and paper preservation/conservation that might be held in various regions of the state, and one-time, centrally-held special workshops on photo preservation and fine art and historic/ethnographic object preservation/conservation (including storage and exhibit), to be held soon to address the urgent needs.

Over 50% of the survey respondents expressed interest in workshops on several preservation topics such as disaster preparedness/recovery; conservation; preservation management; care and handling; preservation reformatting; and preservation of digital files. Add to this the urgent interest for education on preservation advocacy/fundraising/grant writing, and a curriculum for preservation training in the State of Utah begins to take shape.

One-day training, priced between \$50-199, was of interest to the survey respondents. High registration costs were seen as a key barrier to people taking advantage of the training, as were travel costs, distance, and unavailability of workshops in the region.

With survey information on preferred training locations, high-interest topics, and the concerns about travel costs, distance, and regional needs for training, one method to deliver training and overcome concerns would be to hold the workshops in a number of regions around the state. The excellent attendance at the Town Hall meetings held around the state in March-April 2010 show a popular interest, and may portend how such preservation education opportunities will be attended in the future.

Preservation Policy Development

The survey also found a number of preservation planning tools and activities lacking throughout the state. Very few survey respondents have yet developed a preservation plan; not many had utilized a conservation/preservation professional to conduct a preservation survey of their collections; and very few of the suggested activities to prolong the life of an institution's collections had been undertaken by the respondents. Lack of space, collections cataloging, preservation knowledge, funding, and staff time were among the top preservation concerns named by survey respondents, and many of these issues can be dealt with through education, consulting, and policy development. Another vital cornerstone of preservation activity – an institutional disaster plan – was missing in a total of 72% of the institutions (56% with no plan, and 16% who are currently preparing a plan but do not have a completed plan available). To develop a “preservation environment” or an infrastructure for preservation activity at institutions statewide, the Task Force and leading institutions in the state should make institutional surveys, disaster plans, and preservation plan development central parts of any statewide implementation program.

Addressing Storage and Safety Concerns

Another troubling finding, which can be addressed through a combination of onsite preservation surveys and workshops, was the startling fact that over 56% of the survey participants thought that less than half of their collection was adequately stored. On a more positive note, the majority of the respondents stated that 75-99% of their collection had been cataloged and processed, which is a higher rate than many states have reported in their Connecting to Collections surveys.

Findings in environmental controls, fire protection, and security systems were better than in many other surveyed states, but the need for education and work with facilities personnel to control environmental conditions, and first responders to mitigate the effects of emergencies and disasters, was still quite evident in the survey results.

Potential Statewide Services

Utah cultural heritage institutions were eager to be able to utilize potential preservation services. State-sponsored preservation workshops; preservation grants and the ability to work with experts to gain preservation information; assistance in disaster planning and recovery; and on-site preservation survey visits by professionals were all areas of high interest. Statewide contracting for preservation and disaster supplies, disaster recovery assistance, and electronic data storage were also popular concepts. Finally in this area, collaborative activities including grant projects, disaster mutual assistance agreements, and methods by which institutional staff could learn to mentor other employees and volunteers were defined as areas of interest. Any statewide plan should take these potentially popular services into account.

Digital Preservation

In the areas of digitization and digital preservation, documents and photographs were the most common format of items institutions held in digital form, and the materials most frequently digitized. Other questions in the survey turned to the preservation of those digital assets for the long term (ten years or more). Very few institutions had a digital preservation plan – in fact 71% said they did not, and another 17% said they didn't know if such a plan existed. This is another area where future statewide preservation activity, including workshops, can be focused. While there were positive findings about offsite storage of digital files, and regular backups were created in a majority of institutions, the finding that one-third of the respondents don't know their backup schedule or admit that it is "not (done) on a regular basis" is troubling, and shines a spotlight on another area for awareness-raising and education.

Town Hall Meetings

The series of Town Hall meetings held in late March and early April 2010 provided first-hand information which supported the web survey findings, but also uncovered additional important preservation needs among the state's cultural heritage institutions. The four meetings were held in geographically dispersed parts of the state and gained information which can be used on both a regional and statewide basis. The dates, sites, and attendance for these meetings:

March 29, 2010: Salt Lake City – 38 attendees
March 30, 2010: Cedar City – 8 attendees
March 31, 2010: Vernal – 13 attendees
April 1, 2010: Logan – 24 attendees

At each of the programs, Project Consultant Tom Claerson gave a report on the results of the statewide web survey. In addition, Statewide Project Manager Randy Silverman gave further background on current preservation activities within the state. In addition, representatives of the Utah State Archives reported on their involvement in the Intergovernmental Preparedness for Essential Records or IPER Project, which addresses identification of vital records and protection of records in the case of a disaster.

As with the success of the survey portion of the project, the Town Hall Meetings were successful in part because members of the Project Steering Committee promoted the meetings and assured good attendance at each session. Also, Steering Committee members were in attendance at each of the four Town Hall Meetings, some traveling across the State to attend the sessions and add to the discussion.

There were interesting findings in each city. Some built upon the survey findings; others were new and important topics. Below is a capsule of discussion at each of the Town Hall sessions.

Salt Lake City: At this initial Town Hall Meeting, there was discussion of some statewide preservation activities already underway, as well as ideas for new activities. Representatives of state government agencies mentioned that there is a Statewide Interorganizational Working Group already addressing the State's "Curation Crisis" which includes a lack of space and human resources to manage and preserve the rich

collections within Utah. Small institutions mentioned the difficulty in applying for and managing grants once received; they asked about assistance from preservation resource people to identify, assist in writing, and help in management of “small, easy” preservation grants. Salt Lake City was also the first location where the concept of a “Circuit-Riding Preservation Resource,” who could work with a variety of institutions on a regular basis, was surfaced.

Cedar City: Discussion on grants continued at the second Town Hall Meeting. In Southwestern Utah, there was an interest in developing collaborative preservation grants among a number of smaller institutions, to provide professional assistance, equipment, supplies, and other preservation resources. Another issue raised by smaller institutions was how to care for material that is on permanent display at museums and libraries. Finally, there was awareness of a growing need to preserve digital collections, and a desire to bring together interested institutions such as universities, state agencies, and municipalities, potentially working with existing statewide or regional digitization efforts such as the Mountain West Digital Library Collaborative.

Vernal: This session, which included two County Commissioners in attendance, included discussion of the use of preservation to assist in generating cultural tourism to the area. Other topics included reviving discussion on the possibility of shared storage arrangements or facilities between multiple institutions. Another shared interest was in disaster preparedness and recovery training; library, records center, and museum staff in attendance are interested in receiving joint training on these topics. The interest in grants – potentially a workshop to help develop grant ideas and proposals – was also strong at this meeting site. Finally, a theme which had been mentioned at the previous two meetings received additional attention here: the writing of collection development policies to allow cultural heritage institutions to control donations and gifts so that they relate to the mission of the institution.

Logan: A large group at the last Town Hall meeting asked about establishing information resource “point people” within the state for questions related to specific cultural heritage formats (film and video were especially mentioned). Additionally, interest in digital preservation and grant writing training was also high with this group.

Overall, then, there was interest in collaborative activity, development of preservation grants, attention to the preservation needs of digital materials, and issues with storage and display of materials. These discussion topics serve to reinforce many of the findings of the web survey, and provide further justification for future statewide preservation activities.

A Statewide Preservation Action Plan for Utah

The interest and energy shown toward the preservation of Utah’s cultural heritage collections is among the highest this consultant has seen in any state in the U.S. Excellent ideas were generated and trends discovered through the web survey and Town Hall Meetings. There are many activities that the Statewide Preservation Steering Committee could consider for future work; listed below are those which became most evident during the planning grant process.

Collaborative Alliances to Support Preservation: The wide range of institutions active on the project Steering Committee, and their tireless promotion of the survey and Town Hall Meetings helped to make Utah’s Connecting to Collections project one of the most successful in the nation. The future of preservation activity in Utah does not rest with just one person or organization – it is this amalgam of interested institutions who can provide a “blanket” or “safety net” of preservation support to the state through collaborative work. Further development of this group, and planning for the group’s future sustainability, can help to sustain the success of this initial planning project.

Preservation Information Assistance: The need for a stable, reliable source of information on a wide variety of preservation activities was heard in a number of the web survey answers and comments, and again in the Town Hall Meetings. Again, it would be difficult for one resource person to serve as this information clearinghouse for the state; the Steering Committee should explore methods to develop a multi-institutional

clearinghouse where a number of experts – perhaps with specialized knowledge on how to deal with certain formats (such as audiovisual) or preservation problems (for instance, pest infestations) could “share their knowledge” with the institutions in the state which need assistance.

Grant Awareness and Assistance: Time and again, through the web survey and certainly in the Town Hall Meetings, the need for assistance in identifying granting organizations, planning and preparing funding proposals, and managing projects once the grants were awarded were heard as needs by many sizes and types of institutions. The project Steering Committee is hoping to initially address this need in 2011 through a series of grant writing workshops throughout the state, and continue with awareness-raising and other grant-related activities.

Preservation Education: In survey results and discussion at the Town Hall Meetings, the need for a “curriculum” of preservation courses was expressed. If a “phased schedule” of workshops, starting with basic information and working its way toward more advanced subjects, can be developed and offered, both in-person and potentially through distance education outlets, it would help to answer the needs of institutions which are geographically dispersed throughout the state. While grant writing was an area where a strong educational need was discovered, many other topics such as disaster planning, storage issues, and other topics must be addressed as well.

Preservation Site Survey Program: Whether in the web survey, at the Town Hall meeting discussions, or in follow-up conversations with the Project Consultant and Project Manager following the meetings, there was a great deal of interest expressed in having preservation professionals make onsite visits to collecting institutions. This can be achieved by expanding awareness of and Utah institutional applications to programs such as the National Endowment for the Humanities’ Preservation Assistance Grant program. However, there are other models, such as State Library Services and Technology Act funding which was used to support almost twenty site surveys in the Washington State through the Washington Preservation Initiative program in the mid 2000s, which could also be implemented to bring this type of service to Utah’s cultural heritage community.

Disaster Planning and Recovery Assistance: In the survey, especially, interest was expressed in information, education, and onsite assistance which could help cultural institutions plan for and recover from emergencies and disasters. While the WESTPAS regional preservation effort is already providing some of this training, there was interest from some of the more rural areas of the state in developing collaborative disaster response capabilities between a number of institutions in towns or counties.

Digital Preservation Collaboration: A growing realization that institutions must proactively plan to preserve their digital collections once they have created them was echoed in all of the Town Meeting sessions. The Mountain West Digital Library initiative is recognized nationwide as a successful project for the creation of digital collections; through that effort or a new initiative, a statewide focus on digital preservation needs to be developed, to provide best practice information and potential shared repository services.

Future Directions

Through the survey findings and comments from the Town Hall Meeting attendees, it is clear that a statewide preservation program that first raises awareness about key issues and solutions, then provides experts and education to help institutions implement these solutions, is of strong interest to the cultural heritage community in Utah. Developing a multi-tiered program to meet institutional preservation needs is an important future outcome of the Utah Connecting to Collections project.