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Focus Group Interviews: Findings from the Building a National Finding Aid Network Project

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The views, findings, conclusions or recommendations expressed in this project do not necessarily represent those of the Institute of Museum and Library Services.

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INTRODUCTION

The Building a National Finding Aid Network (NAFAN) project was designed to explore and articulate the necessary groundwork for a national finding aid discovery infrastructure in the United States. For a national aggregation to be successful and sustainable, it must build a community of participating archives and archivists who will contribute records to the system. A national archival aggregation, therefore, must provide value to and address the needs of its community of participants. To investigate the needs of archivists and others who might contribute to a national archival aggregator, OCLC Research conducted a series of focus group interviews with archivists and archives administrators from across the United States.

A national archival aggregation . . . must provide value to and address the needs of its community of participants.

In 2020, IMLS awarded the California Digital Library (CDL) a National Leadership Grant to support Building a National Finding Aid Network, a two-year research and demonstration project to build the foundation for a national archival finding aid network to address the inconsistency and inequity of the current archival discovery landscape (LG-246349-OLS-20).¹ CDL led the project, collaborating with partners at OCLC, University of Virginia Library, Shift Collective, and Chain Bridge Group. Work on the grant was done in parallel across multiple activities:

- Research investigating both end user and contributor needs in relation to finding aid aggregations
- Research evaluating the quality and consistency of existing EAD-encoded finding aid data from regional archival aggregators
- Technical assessments of potential systems to support network functions, and formulating system requirements for a minimum viable product instantiation of the network
- Community building, sustainability planning, and governance modeling to support subsequent phases moving from a project to a program

OCLC Research has lead efforts in the first two areas.

This report details the methods and findings from our focus group interviews and identifies the needs of contributors to archival aggregation. Interviews were conducted with cultural heritage professionals who work in archives and either use, create, or publish archival description, or who oversee programs where these activities occur. All of these professionals are potential contributors of archival description to NAFAN, and some already contribute to extant regional archival aggregators. An analysis and discussion of the findings follows, including a series of recommendations for the NAFAN platform. The findings show that a national archival aggregator has the potential to address concrete needs in the archival community and create value for archival institutions.

Methodology

One of the NAFAN project values is to “support meaningful, inclusive, and low-barrier pathways to participation by cultural heritage institutions across the United States.”² To center this value, OCLC Research selected focus group interviews as the primary method for capturing the voices of individuals working in the archives field. We wanted to include archival practitioners from a wide variety of institution types and sizes that represent different working strategies, professional roles and responsibilities, and geographic distribution.

One of the NAFAN project values is to “support meaningful, inclusive, and low-barrier pathways to participation by cultural heritage institutions across the United States.”

The NAFAN project team shared the open call for participants through several venues to reach potential interviewees. Strategies for outreach included:

- Distribution of the call to participate on national and regional archival organization email lists
- Distribution through regional aggregation partners and their networks
- Social media promotion
- Direct outreach to individuals and organizations who might not otherwise see the call via the networks of the NAFAN project partners

This broad strategy sought to include archives that were based in institutions and in communities. The authors acknowledge that the recruitment was more effective in reaching institutions.

The call for participation directed potential interviewees to a screening questionnaire (See [appendix E for full questionnaires](#)) asking participants to describe:

- Institutional information—state where institution is located, number of employees dedicated to archival work, type of archive where they work

- Details of aggregation participation—whether they work for an institution that currently participates in an archival aggregation, and if so, which aggregator(s)
- Information about the archivist and their job—current job title, current major responsibilities, number of years in that position, number of years in the field

In total, 229 individuals volunteered to participate in the focus group interviews. From this pool, OCLC Research selected 60 participants for 10 groups of six. Invitations were sent to 60 participants and resulted in 52 who accepted and attended, plus one person who attended a group along with their invited coworker. The resulting 10 virtual focus group interviews each included five to six participants.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, all focus group interviews were conducted online. From prior experience with virtual focus group interviews, the number of participants in each group was intentionally kept small to allow each person to be heard and the moderator to successfully manage the dynamics of the conversation. Interviews were conducted in WebEx Personal Room and recorded with the consent of the session participants.

Participants were grouped with others in similar circumstances based on characteristics drawn from questionnaire responses to encourage conversation within groups.

Sampling frame

Participants were grouped with others in similar circumstances based on characteristics drawn from questionnaire responses to encourage conversation within groups. Each group had three distinct characteristics: size of institution (based on the number of archival staff), job responsibilities within the organization, and whether the participant's institution was currently contributing archival description to an aggregator (see [appendix A](#)).

Five broad group types were identified based on organizational size and job responsibilities of the participants. The five group types were:

- **Small archives**—this group included participants who worked in settings with three or fewer positions devoted to archives. The individuals in this group necessarily had a broad set of responsibilities given the size of their archive.
- **Leadership / administrative**—this group included participants who held leadership positions at the department or repository level, such as head of special collections or director of archives, and likely had budgetary and decision-making responsibility.
- **Public services and tech services, 4–7 full-time staff**—these participants worked in settings with between four to seven positions devoted to archives and had responsibilities in reference, teaching, and outreach, or arrangement and description, or both.

- **Public services and tech services, 8 or more full-time staff**—these participants worked in settings with eight or more positions devoted to archives and had responsibilities in reference, teaching, and outreach, or arrangement and description, or both.
- **Technical services and systems responsibilities**—these participants’ primary responsibilities included authority over a collection management system or discovery and/or other systems, along with responsibilities related to arrangement and description.

Next, each of these five group types were subdivided further into one group of participants who work at institutions that currently participate in an archival aggregation and one group of participants whose institution do not. This resulted in a total of 10 focus group interviews. Within each group, participants were selected to include a variety of professional perspectives and experiences. Further selection criteria included the individuals’ time working in the profession, time in their current positions, type of archive in which they work, and region of the US where the archive is located.

Across the archival community, practitioners can work in archives, libraries, museums, universities, corporate offices, or for an online collection. Participants were drawn from a variety of organizations across the US to diversify the data. Academic archives represent a large subgroup within the archives community, and OCLC Research selected focus group interview participants from a range of voices across the academic community representing Doctoral Universities with “high” and “very high” research activity, Doctoral/Professional Universities, and Master’s Colleges and Universities with larger and medium programs, based on Carnegie Classifications of Institutions of Higher Education.³

TABLE 1. NAFAN focus group interview participants by count and organizational affiliation

Organizational affiliation	No. of participants
Academic archive	22
Museum library/archive	11
Government archive	6
Community archive	5
Public library archive	4
Historical society archive	3
Independent research library	2
International organization	1
Performing arts archive	1
Regional archive	1
Total	53

Focus group interview participants represented each census-designated US region:

- Twelve in the Western region
- Eight in the Midwest region
- Thirteen in the Northeast region
- Twenty in the Southern region

The Southern region includes 17 states, making it the largest region and resulting in a slightly higher number of participants (see figure 1).

NAFAN Focus Group Interview Participants by Count and Region

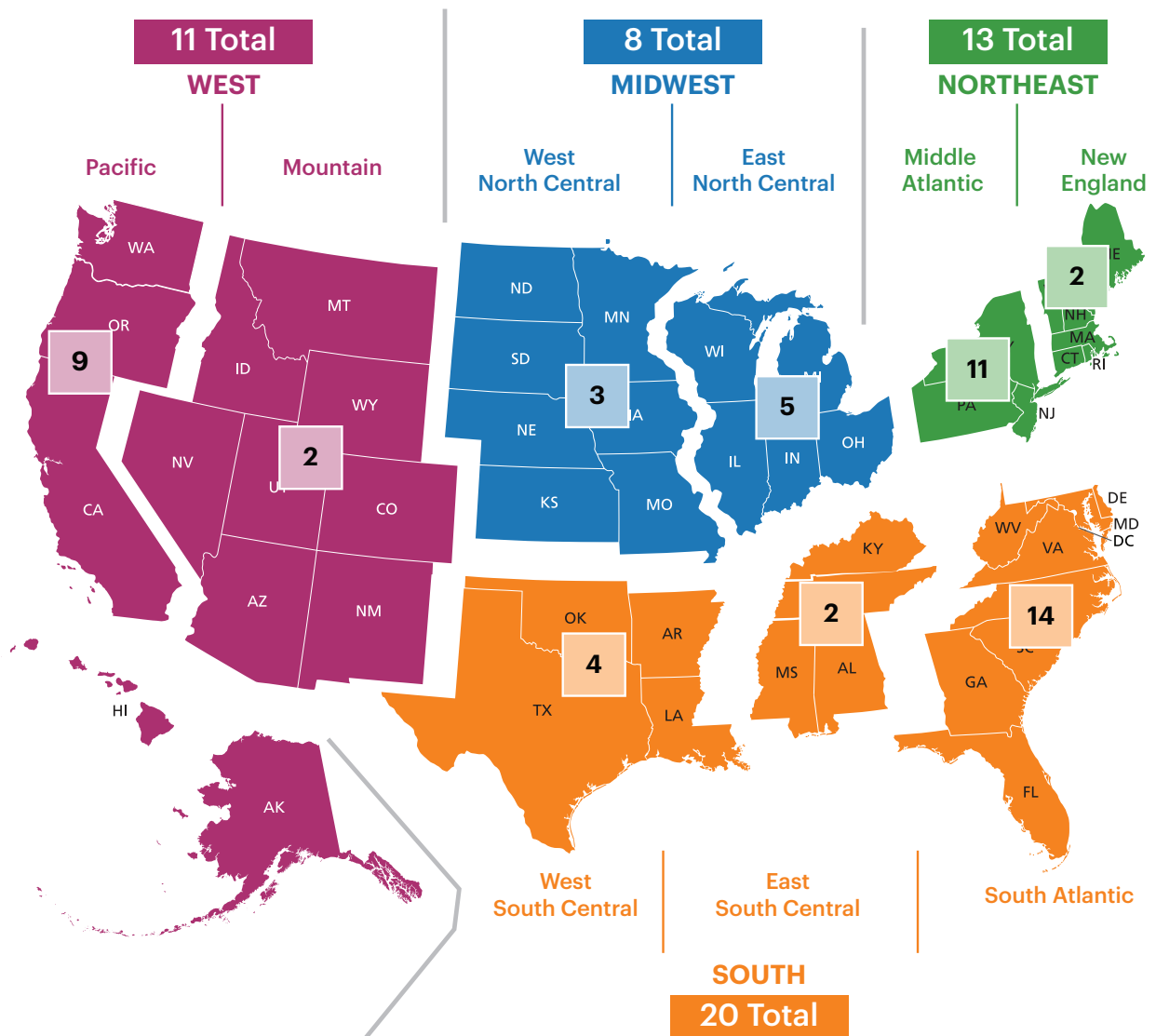


FIGURE 1. NAFAN focus group interview participants by count and region.

Final protocol

Focus group interview participants responded to questions about creating and publishing archival description and archival aggregation. Participants were first asked to describe their work and responsibilities before describing the archival description workflow at their place of work. All participants were asked about the real or perceived benefits and challenges of participating in archival aggregation and what value it brings to their work. Finally, participants were asked to ideate on the ideal national-scale aggregation platform and what features and processes would make it appeal to them. The final protocol for those contributing to aggregation differed slightly from the protocol used for those who do not participate in aggregation. (See [appendices C and D](#) for the full interview protocols.)

Focus group interviews were conducted in June 2021 and were 90 minutes in duration. Each participant was offered a \$50 gift card as an incentive. Each focus group interview included a moderator and notetaker, and discussions were digitally recorded. Participants consented to recording prior to the interview and were reminded of their voluntary participation at the beginning of each interview. Of the nine OCLC Research staff working on NAFAN, seven staff engaged in either moderating or notetaking.

Each digital recording was transcribed to text. Transcripts were analyzed for content analysis of themes and the responses to the questions were coded based on emerging themes. The themes and subthemes were compiled into a codebook and applied to the data. Two researchers coded each of the 10 transcripts independently and then met to discuss each transcription and where disagreement arose in their independent coding. Throughout the meetings, researchers kept notes of their resolutions about each disagreement and finalized their coding into a single codebook. (See [appendix B](#) for the codebook and coding counts for each theme.)

Context of Interviews

This section details several key environmental factors that may have impacted focus group interview participants and their responses to contextualize our findings.

In June 2021, archivists in the US were still dealing with the repercussions of the global COVID-19 pandemic. Many of those interviewed were still working virtually from home or in a hybrid work situation (working a few days a week in the archive and working from a remote location the remainder of the time). Some participants had started new positions during the pandemic and had not yet met all their team members in person. Because of the circumstances of the pandemic, focus group interviews were conducted virtually. In other projects, OCLC Research has conducted focus group interviews in person, coinciding with national or regional conferences. The virtual nature of the focus group interviews made them more inclusive because the inability to travel to a specific location did not preclude participation; however, this also meant that the focus group interviews were a 90-minute video meeting during the regular workday. Focus group interview participants referred to budget cuts and other disruptions to normal operations because of the pandemic.

The focus group interviews also coincided with nationwide protests and reckoning with race-related injustice following the murder of George Floyd in May 2020. Since that time, many

organizations—including libraries and archives—have made statements against racism and harmful practices. Additionally, many individuals are considering their own responsibilities regarding racial and social justice. These themes surfaced in focus group interviews.

Finally, the focus group interviews were conducted amid what has since been characterized as the Great Resignation, when a record number of people voluntarily left their jobs across the US. This, coupled with a wave of generational shift as many employees reached retirement age, resulted in a great deal of additional workplace adjustments. Focus group interview participants made frequent reference to vacant positions that had not yet been filled.

Findings

The findings from the focus group interviews are divided into **four key themes**.

The first two themes address creating and maintaining archival description locally within an institution for the archival collections in their care.

1. Factors that *constrain* creating and maintaining archival description.
2. Factors that *enable* creating and maintaining archival description.

The second two themes deal with sharing descriptive records for archival collections beyond the local institution via participation in an aggregation of archival description.

3. *Incentives* to participate in an aggregation of archival description.
4. *Disincentives* to participating in an aggregation of archival description.

Each theme is discussed in detail below. In writing up the theme findings, the OCLC Research team did look for differences in what topics were raised by aggregators versus non-aggregators, and for differences between large and small institutions as well as between functional areas. Unless otherwise noted, there were no significant differences in topics or issues raised across the different groups. Numbers are indicative of the number of speakers that mentioned a topic or issue in a focus group session. If a speaker mentioned the same topic multiple times, it was counted once. Of note, the focus group interview participants generally agreed with one another during their sessions and non-verbal agreement such as head nodding was not quantified and is not represented in these numbers.

Factors that constrain creating and maintaining archival description

Participants discussed numerous factors that prevent, impede, or otherwise constrain creating, maintaining, and publishing archival description. These factors fall into two broad categories: issues related to systems and workflows, and issues related to access to budgetary, staffing, and IT resources. Insights in this theme primarily draw from responses to questions two and three in the focus group interview protocol. Here, participants were asked to reflect on how archival descriptions are produced and published, as well as what makes creating and maintaining archival description challenging or easier at their home institutions. (See [appendices C and D](#) for full protocols.)

SYSTEMS AND WORKFLOWS FACTORS

The primary challenge that archivists face in creating description is contending with complex workflows. The research team coded statements as “complex” when participants referenced using multiple systems and file formats. Participants did not consistently characterize their own situations as complicated, despite describing numerous solutions and workarounds to the use of systems that often were not fit for purpose. Complex workflows were described by 29 separate participants and surfaced in all 10 focus group interviews, making it the most common challenge. Participants frequently referenced utilizing multiple systems, managing description in multiple file formats, taking multiple steps to produce descriptive outputs, and creating bespoke workarounds for the limitations of the systems in which they are creating, encoding, and publishing archival description. This includes not only describing “traditional” archival collections, but also working with digital collections that are often supported through separate systems. Some participants described a complex set of relatively sophisticated systems to address their range of collection management, description, publication, and digital collection needs, but indicated that these did not always work well together. One participant stated, “there’s a lot of noise between systems,” causing a need for regular troubleshooting to address issues and manual interventions in processes that are intended to be automated (Participant 5D, university archivist, academic archive, Northeast).

Multiple participants specifically described complex workflows needed to create both archival and bibliographic forms of description for the same archival collections—especially in archives situated within a library, where there is strong investment in and use of the library catalog system. Participants described both manual processes where description was cut and pasted from a finding aid document into a MARC record, and bespoke systems designed to automate creation of a MARC record from an Encoded Archival Description (EAD) record or an archival collection management system. Even in institutions with automated workflows, these tools do not necessarily alleviate complexity, as indicated by one participant.

I guess I’d like to note, both here at [university] and previously, I worked at [library and archive], that these were very ad hoc add-on systems that only people who were really invested in seeing some form of archival description show up in the library catalog were able to do, and it relies a lot on personal investment in relationships, not infrastructure that’s easy to use (Participant 5B, head archivist, academic archive, Northeast).

In some archives, this complex range of tools and systems was necessary because participants were managing legacy description⁴ across a range of information sources and in multiple differing file formats.

And for our legacy stuff, we really have the entire [Microsoft] Office suite of documents, so it is mostly Word documents, but we also have some spreadsheets, and we also have some Access databases and sometimes we’ll have more than one thing for a given collection, so it’s a real mix. (Participant 4F, head of special collections, academic archive, Midwest)

These complex workflows using multiple systems and tools were described both by participants without archival collection management systems and those with them. In some cases, participants discussed only being able to partially implement an archival collection management system, or implementation being ongoing, because of the work required to transform and import the multiple sources and formats of legacy description into the new system. Participants also described multistep web publication workflows to try to share these multiple sources of descriptive information with online users.

Participants at institutions that do not have archival collection management systems described multistep, multitool, manual workflows designed to produce EAD encoded finding aids, usually using some combination of Word documents, Excel spreadsheets, and an XML encoding tool. Participants that did have archival collections management systems with which to produce EAD still described multistep workflows necessary to transform the EAD produced by that system to meet the requirements of a separate publication or discovery system.

We move things around in our EAD, and I have always worked within an EAD, we use Dreamweaver just to edit our finding aids, and we're in the XML all the time. And it was such a dream, I think, at one point that we would just export it and upload it. We wouldn't have to do all this fine-tuning of that XML document to make it what it needed to be for that aggregator, but also for our own needs. (Participant 3E, special collections archivist, academic archive, West)

Echoing the description of complex workflows designed to produce EAD, eight focus group interview participants specifically identified creating or maintaining EAD as challenging. In some cases, this means that institutions are not creating EAD finding aids because it is too difficult. Working with EAD and XML, or teaching staff members how to work with EAD or XML, was described as painful. One participant explained that this complexity meant that the work was not prioritized, stating, "we're doing a lot of manual encoding, which means that for us, EAD encoding does not happen as a priority" (Participant 1A, curator, public library archive, Northeast).

Adding to this complexity of systems and workflows is the "never done" nature of archival description. In the focus group interviews, 26 participants described their need to revisit and revise descriptions on an ongoing basis. Reasons for this include both revisiting to include new information, such as expanding minimal collection level descriptions, and revising older descriptions to align with modern-day standards, such as bringing descriptions into compliance with *Describing Archives: A Content Standard* (DACS).⁵

Over the past five years, we've done a lot of retroactive conversion of very old finding aids and just getting them into a DACS-compliant format. . . . Some of that has required actually some reprocessing and re-describing [our archival collections]. (Participant 1A, curator, public library archive, Northeast)

Nineteen archivists discussed their challenges with revisiting collection description in legacy descriptive formats. Formats noted by participants that needed to be either maintained or migrated were both digital and analog—interviewees referred to Word, Excel, Access or CSV, and PDF file formats as well as analog typescript or even handwritten collection descriptions.

Seven participants emphasized that they were revisiting archival description to remove racist or otherwise harmful language as part of reparative description projects.

One of the things I haven't heard anybody talk about [in this focus group] that has become really, very important to me recently and probably should have been all along. . . . And part of it is some of our legacy stuff, finding aids from 30 years ago that really aren't what they should be. . . . It's even some of the most simple language that we use. Are we using the correct terms for the [Indigenous] groups in our area? . . . Are we using culturally sensitive language when we should be using culturally sensitive language? And it's figuring out where we've gone awry and correcting that. (Participant 2E, head of archives and special collections, academic archive, West)

RESOURCING FACTORS

Against this backdrop of complicated workflows and the need to revisit descriptions, archivists are challenged to find both staffing and budgetary resources to move descriptive work forward. In the focus group interviews, 18 participants described a lack of resources as being a barrier to describing collections, especially when balanced against other competing priorities at their institutions. This was discussed in all but one focus group.

For me, it's more of time balance and staffing. I have one other person in my department. . . . But I'm the only one focusing on processing and then creating the finding aids. And I work at a museum, so a lot of times the institution is our biggest reference customer, we're also actually in the middle of an exhibition right now as well. So, a lot of times, it's just finding that time to take care of the collection itself, because the collection can't speak up, right? So, for me, it's more of balancing that with all my other duties. (Participant 10B, archives manager, museum archive, South)

Some archivists specifically brought up insufficient resources to address their backlogs of unprocessed and un- or under-described archival collections. Dealing with collection backlogs was discussed by 12 focus group interview participants as an ongoing challenge.

I would say our biggest difficulty for archival description is just staffing. . . . Even under normal circumstances where we've got a full-time reference archivist and full-time processing archivist, and then maybe a project archivist or someone else, it still just doesn't feel like enough to even tackle our backlog and our collection just feels too overwhelming to deal with, with that size of staff. (Participant 6D, supervisory archivist, museum archive, West)

Related to issues of staffing, many organizations rely on contingent labor, student workers, volunteers, or other temporary or non-specialist staff who do not work on a full-time basis. While some participants noted the use of short-term staff in neutral terms, 11 focus group interview participants noted that this practice was detrimental to progress. These participants indicated temporary and volunteer labor impeded progress because new staff repeatedly needs to be trained as they come in, volunteers and short-term staff can only be assigned limited types of work, or work needs to be repeatedly shifted back to full-time staff when temporary positions end.

Most of our processing is done by students. We generally only hire graduate students because of the level of work we're asking them to do, but I have a lot of concern about the kind of work that they were asking. Just like processing a collection from start to finish, I think is asking too much, especially given how much we pay. . . . If we say have a student processing a collection and they graduated, what happens to it? Or if a student finishes processing it, but then they hand it back to a staff member to write collection-level notes or something like that. (Participant 4F, head of special collections, academic archive, Midwest)

Information technology resources, or lack thereof, were another key challenge identified in the focus group interviews. Archivists discussed a lack of agency, support, or control over IT services, software, and systems. Archives are highly reliant on specialized systems, and often are dependent on others outside their department or elsewhere in their larger organization to make purchasing or licensing decisions, to implement and maintain software, and to provide electronic storage solutions. Sixteen participants spoke to this specific challenge, and this was discussed in six out of the 10 focus groups.

In many cases, participants described a lack of control and inability to get needed resources because the archive was not a top priority within the larger organization and IT resources were limited. They also described a lack of understanding of archives-specific systems and technology needs, even within library settings. One participant stated, “our library IT is baffled by our needs” (Participant 3E, special collections archivist, academic archive, West).

Some participants noted the importance of developing and maintaining positive relationships with IT staff to receive help and support. IT support can be crucial for daily operations, and without a positive relationship, the archive and its needs can be pushed aside: “If you don’t have a good relationship with your tech support, or they say at some point, ‘Well, we’re not going to let you have any more server space. You’re out of luck, kid’” (Participant 4C, director, community archive, South).

Many of the software systems that address collection management, preservation, and discovery needs specific to archives are open source. Some participants cited an unwillingness on the part of their IT departments to support open-source software solutions, either as a matter of policy or a matter of limited knowledge and capacity to support open-source systems:

We have a very good relationship with our IT folks, but we’re a small college, so when I talk about, “Well, I want to bring this open-source software on campus,” we get [in response], “Well, we’re happy to install it for you, but we’re not going to support it and we don’t really actually know what we’re doing with it.” (Participant 4E, director, academic archive, Midwest)

In a few cases, participants described being able to sidestep barriers posed by working with internal IT departments by having open source and other needed software hosted outside of the library altogether. This was voiced most strongly in the two “leadership” groups; conversely it was only mentioned by one speaker in the four groups representing small archives: “And because we have so many IT deficits, having a hosted platform has been very helpful for us to be able to publish anything” (Participant 7A, photo archivist, museum archive, Southwest).

Factors that enable creating and maintaining archival description

In the focus group interviews, participants also described factors that enabled, supported, or otherwise made creating, maintaining, and publishing archival description easier. In this theme, participants responded to questions two and three in the interview protocol, reflecting on how archival description is produced and published, as well as what makes archival description work at their home institutions easier. (See [appendices C and D](#) for full protocols.)

The enabling factor most frequently mentioned is the use of archival collection management systems (CMS). This was discussed by 21 participants in nine of the 10 focus group interviews. ArchivesSpace was the archival CMS mentioned most often, along with Access to Memory (AtoM), Archivist’s Toolkit, Archon, and others.

A primary benefit of using a CMS is that it can significantly ease the complexity of creating and publishing EAD, which was noted as a barrier to creating and maintaining archival description.

I would say that [implementing] ArchivesSpace . . . was a huge boon to description, because before that, students and staff were working in XML templates, and nobody was really well trained or versed in XML at that point. So, it was very much using a manual from 2000 and hoping for the best kind of situation. (Participant 6B, manuscript processing archivist, academic archive, Midwest)

One of the aspects of using a CMS that was viewed as being beneficial is the inclusion of tools that support import and conversion of legacy description.

ArchivesSpace makes it easy for us and . . . It's been a sea change for us in terms of time savings. We have a lot of legacy description, so being able to get that into a spreadsheet and then upload it to ArchivesSpace with usually relatively few errors has just changed a lot for us, so that is something that makes it easy. (Participant 5A, supervisory archivist, academic archive, West)

However, CMS appreciation was qualified by pricing and the complexity of the systems, which have a noted learning curve.

ArchivesSpace is interesting. On the one hand, yes, it makes things easier, as any archival content management system should. On the other hand, it is so hard to use, and it is so hard to teach to people and the support out there has been hard to come by. . . . I just find it a very challenging system to manage when you have a small team and you need to rely maybe on volunteers, and you have this system that is not very intuitive. (Participant 10A, special collections manager, museum archive, Northeast)

Another enabling factor for archivists is the use of worksheets or templates to assist the process of creating archival description. While not fully developed CMS solutions, these tools can help staff create descriptions that comply with DACS or General International Standard Archival Description (ISAD(G)) or can be an aid to creating EAD encoded finding aids. These tools were either developed at the institution or borrowed from elsewhere. Fourteen focus group interview participants referenced these tools.

To mitigate some of the training obstacles, we took our spreadsheet and imported the ISAD(G) direction for what each element should state, should reflect. And it's just a pop-up window when you're in Excel. And that seems to have worked well for, again, flattening the curve of training. (Participant 4B, head, academic archive, Northeast)

Similarly, eight participants mentioned other types of documentation as an enabling factor, such as manuals, guidelines, and procedures for creating and maintaining archival description or using specific tools. These tools were often borrowed from or based upon those at another institution and used to support both training and ongoing work.

Incentives to participate in an aggregation of archival description

Participants discussed what they find attractive about contributing to an archival aggregation and what would incentivize or inspire their participation. Half of the focus group interviewees self-identified as not currently contributing to an archival aggregation, and the other half indicated that they were currently contributing to an aggregation. However, some who were not currently participating in an aggregation had participated in an aggregation at a previous point in their

career, so those distinctions were not necessarily clear cut. In all cases, focus group interviewees shared what they value about contributing to an aggregation. Participants also were prompted to imagine how their ideal archival aggregation would work and the value it would bring if they could “wave a magic wand” without any limitations.

Participants broadly described three categories of incentives to participate in an archival aggregation:

- Visibility and discovery of archival collections
- Ease of participation in an aggregation
- Institutional and archival community benefits

VISIBILITY AND DISCOVERY OF ARCHIVAL COLLECTIONS

Increased visibility or awareness of collections in their care were the top factors cited by the focus group interview participants as a motivator or perceived benefit of participating in an aggregation of archival collection descriptions. Twenty-five participants in nine of the 10 focus group interviews expressed that a national aggregation would make collections discoverable in a way that would not be possible for an institution to do on its own.

This visibility was discussed as beneficial for increasing knowledge of and access to their own collections, especially for researchers who may not know about the repository.

[Once records are available through the aggregator] And then people can find us. Because otherwise we’re so small and such a niche thing that we’re not a destination necessarily for a lot of people. (Participant 1B, archivist, independent research library, West)

Key to increasing visibility and discovery of archival materials was the ability of a national aggregation to uncover connections between collections held at different institutions. Twenty-two focus group participants, in eight out of the 10 sessions, mentioned uncovering inter-institutional collection connections as a benefit to contributing collection descriptions to an aggregation. As one participant put it, “I’ll reiterate [that] discoverability is very important . . . and one of the reasons we wanted to get our collections online is because people didn’t know we were here, but also being able to have our researchers be able to find things across institution[s]” (Participant 4C, director, community archive, South).

These inter-institutional connections could be around collection creators, other people or organizations, topics, and places. Archivists highlighted the importance of these connections given the deep interrelatedness of distinct archival collections held across many institutions, and because the sometimes-fractured nature of archival collecting means that not all archival material by a single creator may end up in the same archive. Aggregation can make these connections much more easily visible to users.

For the institution, it makes our resources more discoverable, and it also puts them in a conversation with other resources at other institutions that are similar. Or maybe they’re the same collection—we have one collection that we know that we’ve got one-third of it, a third of is at [institution name] and the third of it’s [at] another institution, and having an aggregator pull all that together so that somebody knows about the existence of all three of these collections . . . is important. And I think from a researcher’s standpoint, they’re looking for the same thing, they’re looking for the ability to find things regardless of where it’s located. (Participant 7D, curator, academic archive, West)

Researchers are not the only ones who find utility in archival aggregations. Archives and library staff are also an important audience for archival descriptions. Participants discussed the benefit of aggregation for reference staff in helping patrons to understand and make connections between their own collections and collections held elsewhere. One participant stated, “I feel like we always think about aggregation in terms of the descriptive needs, but the reference needs are just as big, and a lot of times it is just about being able to know who in this fantastic network of archivists, who’s got that stuff. And that’s so empowering and important” (Participant 10A, special collections manager, museum archive, Northeast).

Eleven of those focus group interviewees stated that they do or would use aggregations as a collection development tool when assessing collections offered by donors. Participants described situations where they would prospect to see what institutions might hold collections in specific subject areas to assess whether their own or another institution might be the best fit for a particular collection.

Related to this increased visibility, six archivists discussed the value of the aggregator to quantify traffic and engagement through analytics or reporting.

I think it is nice to see some statistics about how much traffic is generated from the [aggregation] site to one’s own website or platform, I think that’s always useful to see, . . . “Yes, your stuff is being discovered here.” Because I know a lot of folks think, “Well, people can find it through Google, so why do I need to spend extra time adding my finding aids or metadata to these various other platforms?” (Participant 3B, supervising processing archivist, academic archive, Northeast)

Another important aspect of the discovery system is support for digital objects, both born digital as well as digitized content. Seventeen participants discussed the need for digital objects to be integrated into the aggregation discovery interface; of those 17 mentions, 11 came from institutions participating in aggregations. Frequently, participants discussed the need for digital content to be integrated with the collection description so that the context for those digital objects would not be lost. Seven interviewees discussed the need for special support for those digital objects, including the ability to limit searches to digital objects so that they could be more easily discovered by users, or to support users requesting digital objects for delivery once material of interest was discovered.

For me, it would be . . . this seamless transition between acquiring a collection, arranging and describing it, sharing the finding aid, and then linking out to whatever digital copies are available, just in an absolutely seamless way. (Participant 8B, preservation and access archivist, academic archive, Northeast)

Other features mentioned include support for advanced search or faceting of results, such as the ability to be able to filter or narrow a search to a specific repository or geographic location. Thirteen participants specified this as something they would like or expect to see as part of the discovery system. Five focus group participants said they would want the discovery system to support a simple and direct way to contact an archive, once an end user had located a collection of interest.

Twelve participants said that they expected the system to support discovery by being easy for users to understand, using terms such as “simple” and “intuitive,” as well as expressing that the system should be designed with end users in mind.

I think it’s really important that maybe we flip the script a little and we don’t build systems for archivists so much. We’re an instruction-based institution, we teach primary source literacy, and they [our students] don’t come to our finding aids with this understanding

of our structure and our standards, so maybe just putting their needs first and not ours. . . . I think is really important, especially for accessibility now. (Participant 3C, associate director, museum archive, Northeast)

Participants tied ease of use expectations to their ability to serve their mission and to advocate for participation in an aggregation system. One participant stated, “If [my users] don’t find it easy to use, I’m going to have a hard sell to convince my administration to put either IT resources or special collections resources into making things available via the aggregator” (Participant 7D, curator, academic archive, West).

EASE OF PARTICIPATION IN AGGREGATION

Focus group interview participants made it clear that contributing their descriptive records needed to be easy. In fact, contribution needs to be more than just easy, it needs to be automated as much as possible and reduce time, effort, and redundant work. Participants expressed a desire for the aggregation to harness the other systems being used by archivists, including automatic uploads, crawling or harvesting existing records, or working with the CMS directly.

Just to be able to have a seamless [process], where if I make a change in an ArchivesSpace record, it is automatically made on the finding aid, and there’s no downloading, validating, uploading, and reuploading and testing. (Participant 5A, supervisory archivist, academic archive, West)

Eleven focus group interviewees articulated that participating in an archival aggregation should present a “low barrier to entry.” This phrase was used to articulate concerns both around ease of use and cost. Participants described a need for the systems to be easy for archivists to use, either because of limited time due to many different competing priorities, or due to lack of technical skills (especially in an environment with high staff turnover). Some speakers linked “ease” to automated harvesting while others imagined a simple way to input data. Concerns around a “low barrier to entry” were mentioned by eight participants, most of whom already participate in aggregation, perhaps borne out by direct experiences with current archival aggregation systems.

Exchange from Focus Group 8

Interviewer: “What do you think is the most important thing that a finding aid aggregator can do to enable archives like yours? Small, fairly low-budget, small staff . . . to contribute to that aggregation system?”

Participant 8C, archivist, public library archive, South: “So I’ll start, and I’ll say it’s just to provide a very easy and streamlined system for uploading the material, because I think everyone wants to participate, or at least everyone I know would want to participate. If the system is simple enough and easy enough that the finding aids can be uploaded without a large amount of staff time or technical knowledge, because each one of us has different abilities, so I think if they’re able . . . to make it as easy and as friendly and as standardized to upload it as possible will make the difference.”

Participant 8D, project archivist, performing arts archive, West: “So I think that something that would be helpful is just being able to have a system that is not very high tech, that’s kind of easy to fill in, so that, should something happen by accident, somebody moves on to another job or somebody has to leave for health reasons or whatever, it doesn’t stall your institution’s process in order to be able to continue the work.”

Eight of those included in focus group interviews spoke about the attractiveness of a record creation tool provided by the aggregator; such a tool would make it easy to create description for inclusion on the aggregator. This was mentioned by six participants, all of whom already participated in aggregations. Examples of existing record creation tools mentioned are Online Archive of California's Records Express and the Virginia Heritage fill form.

Seven participants related that they lack a way to publish or otherwise share descriptions of collections. In these cases, archival aggregation sites provided the only reliable means to provide online access to finding aids or collection descriptions.

INSTITUTIONAL AND ARCHIVAL COMMUNITY BENEFITS

Another incentive that might motivate archivists to contribute to an aggregation is if it supports participation from smaller or less well-funded institutions, such as community archives and historical societies. Nineteen participants discussed the need for a more inclusive aggregation, one that was not built to privilege and benefit only large, well-funded, and prestigious institutions.

[P]rioritizing a diverse array of institutions and organizations and community archives be included, which I think should be a very high priority in trying to make this as scalable as possible. Because I don't think we just want this to end up being, it's the same white privileged institutions that are represented here as they're represented everywhere. So I feel like maybe those institutions and their needs shouldn't be prioritized, maybe the smaller organizations and community archives needs should be the priority, or that should be maybe investigated or managed first. (Participant 3E, special collections archivist, academic archive, West)

In contrast, only five participants mentioned the desire to have either peer or prestige institutions contributing to the aggregation.

Eight participants talked about the importance of a national aggregation of collection descriptions to create name brand recognition. There was an expectation that the aggregation would put some effort into marketing itself and also work with search engines to shine a light on collection descriptions represented in the aggregation.

In addition to being a destination for users, focus group interview participants saw an aggregation of archival description as being able to foster a sense of community and connection and to serve as a locus of peer learning for archival practitioners. This was raised by 12 different participants.

I feel like in this scenario, there's also a really big possibility for affinity groups and for people at peer institutions to coalesce around the fact that all of their material is housed in this central location. I think that could be a good community-builder in that way too. So, if there was some level of community management and engagement that was happening from the organizing level to connect people, that could be really valuable. (Participant 10E, archivist, museum archive, South)

Six participants also talked about the value of aggregator-based support staff to facilitate both learning and participation mechanics. This appreciation was mentioned five times by those participating in aggregations and only once by those not participating in aggregation.

[A national aggregation] would come with the most amazing colleagues who are there to care and feed for it and provide leadership and value what we had to say as well, so it would be very collaborative and friendly and supportive. So I'm talking more about the people than the system, but every system needs people right? (Participant 10A, special collections manager, museum archive, Northeast)

Disincentives to participating in an aggregation of archival description

Participants also discussed aspects of aggregation contribution that they were frustrated by, or that they could see as being barriers to contributing to an aggregation. Here, participants were responding to a prompt asking them to identify what is difficult about contributing to an aggregation or to imagine what might cause difficulty in the case of those not currently contributing to an aggregator.

DIFFICULTY OF CONTRIBUTING AND MAINTAINING RECORDS

The primary barriers to contribution to archival aggregations are a range of difficulties in contributing and maintaining records with the aggregator.

The top barrier to contribution is having to comply with the aggregator's data requirements. These might be related to format or structure of the archival description data files, and often required participants to recreate or revise records for the aggregator system that they had already created in their local system. This was mentioned by 19 participants and in all 10 focus group interviews. This sentiment was most strongly expressed in focus group interviews that included those contributing to aggregations.

We joined the [aggregator], and I have not put anything there yet because I have to reformat and redo the data that I have done already so that their system can read it and it's so time-consuming, I have to sort of take all this time to teach myself. . . . Is it worth all the time and energy to put some records on there for a few people to find, which is already on our website? So it's kind of that, again, when we're all working in small . . . departments, it would be great if there was just a way to be able to take the main data that we have and plug it in somewhere without having to re-format and redo. (Participant 2C, archivist, museum archive, Midwest)

In addition to data requirements, 14 participants discussed how difficult it can be to update, edit, or delete records that are represented in an aggregation. Once records are in the aggregation, it can be difficult to alter or delete these records. Participants were frustrated by both their lack of control of their own data in these situations and the repetitive work and wasted time caused by cumbersome processes.

We can't delete things. It is a process for us to delete, we have to put in a request and make sure that it gets taken down, so deaccessioning is a problem. And then things like . . . we're doing an anti-racist descriptive practices deep-dive into all of our finding aids, we're having to do this whole process of uploading and editing over and over again for a bunch of different finding aids. . . . I think about that a lot, how many steps we go through. (Participant 3E, special collections archivist, academic archive, West)

Some participants had difficulty knowing that records had been updated or deleted. A system that lacks confirmation or notification of record updates would be problematic for the four participants who mentioned this as an ongoing need. This was an issue that only came up in groups with aggregators and was not mentioned at all in the four groups with small or very small archives.

Some participants have a more basic problem of having difficulty getting collection description into aggregation systems. Eight participants discussed their difficulty in submitting records altogether.

[Aggregator] requires you to export your EAD from ArchivesSpace and upload it to a server, and then it validates your EAD a second time, according to their validation tool and stylesheet. And then it publishes it. But there are six different servers to connect to. . . . So there's test servers and publication servers. It can be cumbersome to maintain those connections every time and then if an edit, if you want to edit a finding aid, which we do all the time, you have to open your EAD file . . . your XML file, make the change and then reupload that file. So it's not a seamless process. (Participant 5A, supervisory archivist, academic archive, West)

INVESTMENT REQUIRED TO PARTICIPATE

Six participants were hesitant to participate in an aggregation (or multiple aggregations) because of the notion that it might cause redundant work. They would prefer to devote time to only one aggregation to best guard resources and effort. One participant summed this sentiment up succinctly when discussing making choices about participating in multiple aggregators: "We just can't duplicate effort if we can avoid it" (Participant 8B, preservation and access archivist, academic archive, Northeast).

Eight focus group interview participants discussed cost as a potential barrier to participation, either for their own institution or as a perceived barrier for other institutions. Their expectation was that participating in an aggregation would need to be free or "affordable." If it was not, this would limit their ability to participate.

Four participants talked about the need to get buy-in from decision makers. In many institutions, the archivist is not a high-level resource allocator and might have to convince someone else that it is worthwhile to participate in aggregation. Some of this discussion relates to the need for analytics, which may provide an incentive to participate.

We've talked in the past about joining various regional consortia . . . and the question my boss always comes up with, and this is fair is: "Is this really going to increase your outreach? Is this going to actually have an effect on the number of people who find what you have?" And every time I get an approach from a national, anything . . . I say to them, "show me the stats. Show me what it actually did for an institution." Nobody can ever give me those stats. Nobody can give me the stats I can take to my boss. . . . So that's hugely important. (Participant 2E, head of archives and special collections, academic archive, West)

Taken together, those interviewed were concerned for both the investment of time and resources required to participate in aggregation, and a need to show the impact of that investment.

Discussion and Recommendations

Focus group findings point to specific areas of needed attention for the NAFAN project and for the archival profession generally. In this section, key takeaways synthesized from the findings are followed by specific recommendations for a successful national archival aggregation.

1) An archival aggregation should provide multiple types of value

One of the key research questions the focus group interviews sought to address was: What value does participation in an archival aggregation service bring to organizations? Responses gathered from our conversations indicate that a national aggregation platform will need to provide multiple facets of value to multiple audiences.

Participants invoked three distinct stakeholder groups when discussing value:

- Archivists both in their own institution and in other institutions
- Administrators or decision makers for archival programs
- Users of archives

They identified different types of value that a national aggregation program would provide for each audience.

Discussion of the concrete needs related to contribution of records most often focused on archivists in their own institutions and reflected both the resourcing realities and current technical challenges they face. A broader desire for a national aggregator is to have a low barrier to entry focused on both the known needs of archivists in their own contexts and the perceived needs of archivists in other institutions. Similarly, participants discussed that support to enable participation would be valuable, such as trainings, technical assistance, and facilitation of a community of practice. Quality support would be a worthy investment because it could benefit their own organizations as well as smaller and less resourced organizations.

Increased visibility of archival collections and the potential for uncovering connections between collections that a discovery aggregation might support was seen as valuable to both archivists and archival users. For archivists, these visibility and discovery benefits would provide valuable support for both reference and collection development work. For users, it would ease the burdens of searching across many siloed institutional discovery systems. Ease of use was discussed as valuable to all audiences—users and archivists who would directly benefit from an easy-to-use system, and administrators who would value a tool that serves their mission and stakeholders well. Analytics about the use of collection descriptions were seen as valuable to both archivists and administrators.

Recommendations:

- Consider the primary stakeholder audiences when prioritizing NAFAN functionality: archivists, administrators of archival programs, and users of archives.
- Findings from user research should be used in parallel with the findings from this NAFAN research when scoping and prioritizing functionality.
- Consider stakeholder audiences when developing marketing and messaging about the NAFAN system. Develop messaging communicating arguments of value specific for each audience.

2) Contributors need and value control of data in an aggregation environment

The need to regularly edit or update archival description was identified as a constraint to creating and maintaining archival description—whether because of iterative processing practices, reparative description work, or remediating legacy data. This can be tied to frustrations with current aggregator systems identified as disincentives to participate in aggregation. Archivists need control over records once they are in an aggregation system to perform regular revisions to archival description. Control over if and whether data flows from an aggregator out to other systems helps to avoid what one participant called “zombie records” that exist across multiple discovery environments with no clear path for their correction or removal (Participant 10A, special collections manager, museum archive, Northeast). Similarly, the iterative nature of archival description ties tightly to the desire to be able to easily edit and delete records, receive confirmation of record changes or record deletion, and have those revisions reliably presented in the aggregation system.

Recommendations:

- Build functionality to edit and delete records, both for manual and automated workflows, including confirmation of record revision, deletion, uploading, and rewriting.
- Provide transparency regarding data workflows or data enhancement, including the frequency of data refreshment.
- Create the ability for contributors to explicitly opt-in to data contributed to an aggregator being reused in any other systems.
- Provide clarity about the source of records and who controls editing or deleting them if any data from regional aggregators or other union catalogs will flow into a NAFAN system.

3) The constraining factors for archival description mirror the enabling factors for participating in aggregation

Interview participants gave clear and consistent descriptions of the key factors that constrain their ability to create and publish archival description, and to contribute to aggregations. These constraining factors are often mirrored in the desired factors that they described would enable participation in an aggregation. That is, factors that would enable their participation in an aggregation support the current abilities of archives to create and share archival description without requiring significant additional work or are direct solutions to the constraining factors that challenge their current contribution.

The challenge of creating EAD, the fact that many institutions lack an archival collection management system, and the prevalence of legacy description in many different file formats can be tied to desire for an aggregator-provided record creation tool as well as for aggregator systems and workflows that will make record contribution easy. Resourcing constraints can be related to the need for automated harvesting of records and elimination of any duplicative work. Lack of IT support can help explain the desire for hosting and publication workflows for finding aids for institutions that lack this capacity locally. Reliance on volunteers, students, and contingent labor can be seen as connected to the desire for aggregator-based support staff and an aggregator-enabled community of practice to support training and learning.

These identified constraints were cited across groups, representing many different roles and types and sizes of archives, regardless of whether those archives currently participate in aggregation. Supporting these enabling factors would help a broad swath of repositories to participate in aggregation more fully.

Recommendations:

- Build and support a basic authoring tool for institutions that don't have means to create description on their own.
- Provide workflows to support data formats other than EAD.
- Create low-friction and automated paths for record contribution including crawling records in other systems and batch upload of records to be hosted by NAFAN.
- Support a workflow for hosting and publishing archival description for institutions that don't have a means to publish on their own, including a landing page scoped to individual institutional holdings where just their collections can be listed and searched.
- Allocate adequate resources to the NAFAN program to address training and community management needs.

4) There is a tension between attitudes around aggregation data requirements and archivists' discovery expectations

Participants described realities related to their archival description resources and practices that do not align easily with their expressed discovery expectations. The top barrier participants identified to contributing to aggregations is having to comply with the aggregator's data requirements, indicating both data format and data structure requirements as challenges. Given other findings about the complexity of archival description and the lack of technical support, along with other limited resources, this is not a surprising finding. Participants cited significant challenges in creating EAD encoded findings aids; EAD is currently the primary—and in many cases only—data format accepted by regional archival aggregators in the US. Many participants described having archival description in multiple non-structured or semi-structured formats, such as Word and PDF documents, and Excel or CSV files. Some participants had limited means to create structured descriptive data and expressed desire for aggregators to provide a basic authoring tool like the Online Archive of California's Records Express tool.

At the same time, participants expressed desires and expectations related to discovery that require structured data. Discovery benefits were the most cited incentives to participation in aggregation. Among the most important was a desire to make it easier to discover connections

between collections held at different repositories based on people, organizations, places, and topical subjects. While a basic attempt at this might be accomplished with keyword searching, structured data in the form of authorities or entities would support more sophisticated and reliable functionality to illuminate connections between collections. Participants expressed a strong desire for digital objects to be seamlessly supported within the aggregation and in relationship with the associated archival description. They also discussed the utility of advanced search, filtering and faceting (including on digital objects), and narrowing searches to specific geographic areas, all of which would rely on structured data.

An aggregator discovery platform that features a simple, intuitive, and easy to use interface was another key expectation, a desire participants tied both to serving users and advocating for participation with administrators. This functionality will be difficult to achieve with variable data structure and formats. Indexing a combination of structured and unstructured data may create challenges for search weighting and relevancy ranking. It will also create challenges for how to display search results, and for creating understandable paths for users navigating from search results to finding aids and other content pages.

Recommendations:

- Prioritize which problems NAFAN will address and communicate with project stakeholders.
- Allocate necessary resources to design and usability activities during minimal viable product and build-out phases.
- Consider desired functionality when defining what minimum data requirements will be—especially for top level records created via an aggregator specific authoring tool—to accompany unstructured documents or for searchable repository level records of collecting scope.
- Consider what support a NAFAN program can offer for building knowledge and capacity related to creating structured data, transforming semi-structured data, and remediating messy legacy data.

5) There is a tension between expectations for a low- or no-cost service and the level of desired contributor support and aggregation features

Focus group participants expressed a desire that on the one hand, an archival aggregation should support low barrier participation to a range of institutions and robust discovery features, while at the same time being low or no cost. The desired features and community support expressed by participants would require a significant level of monetary support, and it is likely that contributors would need to bear a major portion of ongoing costs. Discussion of costs in the focus groups was abstract and occurred organically during the interviews; the interview protocol did not include any questions directly about cost or requests to react to examples of specific fees. Further investigation is required to assess what costs the archival community is willing to bear to participate and how the market might be segmented in order to shape a fee structure that is equitable across many types and sizes of institutions.

Recommendations:

- Pricing structure options should be discussed with stakeholders to get concrete feedback on specific fees and institutional tiers.
- NAFAN should develop a plan to clearly communicate the costs of running the aggregation and the value contributors derive from those investments.

6) There is a desire for the aggregation to support and include small and under-resourced institutions

Throughout the interviews, participants voiced an overarching concern about a national aggregation supporting the contributions from smaller, less-resourced institutions. This aligns with the NAFAN project core value: “The network must support meaningful, inclusive, and low-barrier pathways to participation by cultural heritage institutions across the United States.”⁶

The issue came up organically during the interviews; there was not a specific question in the protocol that prompted discussion on the topic. In some cases, participants voicing these concerns were in small institutions themselves, and others were not. This may point to a need for further investigation into the needs of small and under-resourced institutions to ensure that the NAFAN project addresses true rather than perceived needs. Relatedly, many participants in the interviews spoke about their programs being under-resourced, regardless of program size. NAFAN may need to define what small or under-resourced means in the context of the program and scope the nature and type of support the program can reasonably provide.

The solutions participants identified to address this issue were reflective of the needs of smaller institutions, but in many cases, they would address the needs of many institutions or make participation easier for all potential contributors. Creating workflows for data formats other than EAD and allocating resources to training and community management would benefit the majority of potential NAFAN participants. Creating tools for authoring, hosting, and publishing finding aids for institutions that don't have capacity to do this locally would likely serve a broad swath of potential contributors in small and mid-sized archives.

Recommendations:

- Include further investigation into the needs of small and under-resourced institutions into the next phases of the project.
- Intentionally scope and articulate the nature and type of support NAFAN intends to offer participants. Create an actionable definition of what the program means by small and under-resourced institutions so that the program can make informed decisions about how best to support them.
- When making prioritization decisions, examine potential functionality through a lens of which audiences it will serve. Articulate which audiences the program will prioritize and make resource allocation decisions accordingly.
- Create a workflow for institutional level profiles that include repository level descriptions of collecting scope and collections that can be indexed and discovered alongside descriptive records for individual archival collections.

CONCLUSION

Our findings show that participating in aggregation offers significant value, and there are significant challenges to overcome to build the community of participation a national finding aid aggregation will require to be sustainable. Concrete guidance can be drawn from this research for prioritization of next phases of the NAFAN project for technical requirements as well as for governance, marketing, community building, and further research.

Archivists face significant barriers and challenges in creating and publishing archival description. Inefficiencies in participating in current archival aggregation systems can exacerbate these issues and prevent participation in aggregation. A national archival aggregation could make important interventions to address these challenges and make creating and sharing archival description easier, make archival collections more visible, and bring benefit to individual institutions and the archival community as a whole.

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APPENDIX A: PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

Information in the chart below is drawn from the screening questionnaire filled out by interview participants. Some information was generalized to help preserve anonymity (job title, library type, location). Two participants joined the interviews as replacements for or in addition to colleagues who had filled out the questionnaire; only partial information (indicated by NA in the table) is available for those participants.

Group no.	Group description and participation	Code	Participant description	Lib, archives, or cultural heritage field (yrs)	Major responsibilities in current position	Current position (yrs)
1	Small archives, participating in aggregation	1A	Curator, public library archive, northeast	15+	Reference; teaching and/or outreach; collection development; collection stewardship; supervision	5-10
1	Small archives, participating in aggregation	1B	Archivist, independent research library, west	5-10	Reference; collection development; collection stewardship; supervision	5-10
1	Small archives, participating in aggregation	1C	Director of archives, historical society, northeast	15+	Reference; collection development; collection stewardship; collection systems it administration; supervision	5-10
1	Small archives, participating in aggregation	1D	Associate archivist, community archive, west	0-3	Reference; collection development; collection stewardship	0-3
1	Small archives, participating in aggregation	1E	Archivist, academic library, midwest	15+	Reference; teaching and/or outreach; collection development; collection stewardship; supervision	15+
1	Small archives, participating in aggregation	1F	Archivist, community archive, west	Na	Na	Na

Group no.	Group description and participation	Code	Participant description	Lib, archives, or cultural heritage field (yrs)	Major responsibilities in current position	Current position (yrs)
2	Small archives, not participating in aggregation	2A	Processing archivist, academic archive, south	15+	Reference; teaching and/or outreach; collection development; collection stewardship	15+
2	Small archives, not participating in aggregation	2B	Archivist, historical society archive, midwest	15+	Reference; collection stewardship; supervision	10-15
2	Small archives, not participating in aggregation	2C	Archivist, museum archive, midwest	5-10	Reference; collection stewardship; collection systems it administration	0-3
2	Small archives, not participating in aggregation	2D	Archivist, public library archive, south	15+	Reference; teaching and/or outreach; collection development; collection stewardship; supervision	3-5
2	Small archives, not participating in aggregation	2E	Head of archives and special collections, academic archive, west	15+	Reference; teaching and/or outreach; collection development; collection stewardship; collection systems it administration; leadership and administration; supervision	10-15
2	Small archives, not participating in aggregation	2F	Historian, government archive, northeast	10-15	Reference; collection development; collection stewardship	5-10
2	Small archives, not participating in aggregation	2G	Collections coordinator, museum archive, northeast	3-5	Reference; collection stewardship; collection systems it administration	3-5

Group no.	Group description and participation	Code	Participant description	Lib, archives, or cultural heritage field (yrs)	Major responsibilities in current position	Current position (yrs)
3	Leadership / administrative, participating in aggregation	3A	Head of archives & special collections, academic archive, northeast	5-10	Reference; teaching and/or outreach; collection development; collection stewardship; leadership and administration; supervision	0-3
3	Leadership / administrative, participating in aggregation	3B	Supervising processing archivist, academic archive, northeast	Na	Na	NA
3	Leadership / administrative, participating in aggregation	3C	Associate director, museum archive, northeast	15+	Reference; teaching and/or outreach; collection development; collection stewardship; leadership and administration; supervision	15+
3	Leadership / administrative, participating in aggregation	3D	Director, special library, northeast	15+	Reference; teaching and/or outreach; collection development; collection stewardship; collection systems it administration; leadership and administration	15+
3	Leadership / administrative, participating in aggregation	3E	Special collections archivist, academic archive, west	10-15	Collection stewardship; collection systems it administration; leadership and administration; supervision	3-5

Group no.	Group description and participation	Code	Participant description	Lib, archives, or cultural heritage field (yrs)	Major responsibilities in current position	Current position (yrs)
4	Leadership / administrative, not participating in aggregation	4A	College archivist, academic archive, south	10-15	Reference; teaching and/or outreach; collection development; collection stewardship; leadership and administration; supervision	5-10
4	Leadership / administrative, not participating in aggregation	4B	Head, academic archive, northeast	15+	Reference; teaching and/or outreach; collection development; collection stewardship; leadership and administration; supervision	10-15
4	Leadership / administrative, not participating in aggregation	4C	Director, community archive, south	15+	Collection development; collection stewardship; collection systems it administration; leadership and administration; supervision	3-5
4	Leadership / administrative, not participating in aggregation	4D	Director, academic archive, south	15+	Reference; teaching and/or outreach; collection development; collection stewardship; collection systems it administration; leadership and administration; supervision	15+
4	Leadership / administrative, not participating in aggregation	4E	Director, academic archive, midwest	10-15	Reference; teaching and/or outreach; collection development; collection stewardship; leadership and administration; supervision	0-3
4	Leadership / administrative, not participating in aggregation	4F	Head of special collections, academic archive, midwest	10-15	Reference; teaching and/or outreach; collection stewardship; leadership and administration; supervision	0-3

Group no.	Group description and participation	Code	Participant description	Lib, archives, or cultural heritage field (yrs)	Major responsibilities in current position	Current position (yrs)
5	Technical services and systems responsibilities, participating in aggregation	5A	Supervisory archivist, academic archive, west	10-15	Collection stewardship; collection systems it administration; supervision	5-10
5	Technical services and systems responsibilities, participating in aggregation	5B	Head archivist, academic archive, northeast	10-15	Collection stewardship; collection systems it administration; leadership and administration; supervision	5-10
5	Technical services and systems responsibilities, participating in aggregation	5C	Digital archivist, government archive, south	15+	Collection stewardship; collection systems it administration	5-10
5	Technical services and systems responsibilities, participating in aggregation	5D	University archivist, academic archive, northeast	10-15	Reference; collection development; collection stewardship; collection systems it administration	5-10

Group no.	Group description and participation	Code	Participant description	Lib, archives, or cultural heritage field (yrs)	Major responsibilities in current position	Current position (yrs)
6	Technical services and systems responsibilities, not participating in aggregation	6A	Head of access and outreach services, academic archive, south	15+	Collection stewardship; collection systems it administration; supervision	5-10
6	Technical services and systems responsibilities, not participating in aggregation	6B	Processing archivist, academic archive, midwest	10-15	Collection stewardship; collection systems it administration; supervision	5-10
6	Technical services and systems responsibilities, not participating in aggregation	6C	It coordinator, government archive, midwest	15+	Collection development; collection stewardship; collection systems it administration	15+
6	Technical services and systems responsibilities, not participating in aggregation	6D	Supervisory archivist, museum archive, west	10-15	Reference; teaching and/or outreach; collection development; collection stewardship; collection systems it administration; leadership and administration; supervision	3-5

Group no.	Group description and participation	Code	Participant description	Lib, archives, or cultural heritage field (yrs)	Major responsibilities in current position	Current position (yrs)
7	Public and technical service, 8 or more ft staff, participating in aggregation	7A	Photo archivist, museum archive, west	5-10	Reference; teaching and/or outreach; collection development; collection stewardship; collection systems it administration; leadership and administration; supervision	0-3
7	Public and technical service, 8 or more ft staff, participating in aggregation	7B	Curator, museum archive, midwest	15+	Reference; teaching and/or outreach; collection development; collection stewardship; leadership and administration; supervision	15+
7	Public and technical service, 8 or more ft staff, participating in aggregation	7C	Project archivist, academic archive, south	5-10	Reference; collection stewardship; collection systems it administration	0-3
7	Public and technical service, 8 or more ft staff, participating in aggregation	7D	Curator, academic archive, west	15+	Reference; teaching and/or outreach; collection development; leadership and administration; supervision	5-10
7	Public and technical service, 8 or more ft staff, participating in aggregation	7E	Instruction librarian, academic archive, northeast	10-15	Teaching and/or outreach	3-5

Group no.	Group description and participation	Code	Participant description	Lib, archives, or cultural heritage field (yrs)	Major responsibilities in current position	Current position (yrs)
8	Public and technical service, 8 or more ft staff, not participating in aggregation	8A	Special collections librarian, academic archive, west	15+	Reference; teaching and/or outreach; collection development; collection stewardship; collection systems it administration; leadership and administration; supervision	5-10
8	Public and technical service, 8 or more ft staff, not participating in aggregation	8B	Archivist, academic archive, northeast	15+	Reference; teaching and/or outreach; collection development; collection stewardship; collection systems it administration; supervision	15+
8	Public and technical service, 8 or more ft staff, not participating in aggregation	8C	Archivist, public library archive, south	5-10	Reference; teaching and/or outreach; collection development; collection stewardship; leadership and administration; supervision	5-10
8	Public and technical service, 8 or more ft staff, not participating in aggregation	8D	Project archivist, performing arts archive, west	10-15	Reference; collection stewardship; collection systems it administration	5-10
8	Public and technical service, 8 or more ft staff, not participating in aggregation	8E	Special collections librarian, academic archive, northeast	15+	Reference; teaching and/or outreach; collection development; collection stewardship; leadership and administration; supervision	15+

Group no.	Group description and participation	Code	Participant description	Lib, archives, or cultural heritage field (yrs)	Major responsibilities in current position	Current position (yrs)
9	Public and technical service, 4-7 ft staff, participating in aggregation	9A	Librarian, public library archive, south	15+	Reference; teaching and/or outreach; collection stewardship	15+
9	Public and technical service, 4-7 ft staff, participating in aggregation	9B	Archivist, government archive, south	10-15	Reference; teaching and/or outreach; collection development; collection stewardship	5-10
9	Public and technical service, 4-7 ft staff, participating in aggregation	9C	Archivist, international organization, south	10-15	Collection stewardship	0-3
9	Public and technical service, 4-7 ft staff, participating in aggregation	9D	Accessioning archivist, academic archive, south	5-10	Collection stewardship	5-10
9	Public and technical service, 4-7 ft staff, participating in aggregation	9E	Metadata librarian, government archive, south	15+	Collection systems it administration	15+
9	Public and technical service, 4-7 ft staff, participating in aggregation	9F	Archivist, independent research library, south	3-5	Collection stewardship	0-3

Group no.	Group description and participation	Code	Participant description	Lib, archives, or cultural heritage field (yrs)	Major responsibilities in current position	Current position (yrs)
10	Public and technical service, 4-7 ft staff, not participating in aggregation	10A	Special collections manager, museum archive, northeast	15+	Reference; teaching and/or outreach; collection development; collection stewardship; supervision	3-5
10	Public and technical service, 4-7 ft staff, not participating in aggregation	10B	Archives manager, museum archive, south	5-10	Reference; collection development; collection stewardship; collection systems it administration; leadership and administration; supervision	5-10
10	Public and technical service, 4-7 ft staff, not participating in aggregation	10C	Archivist, government archive, south	15+	Reference; teaching and/or outreach; collection stewardship	0-3
10	Public and technical service, 4-7 ft staff, not participating in aggregation	10D	Processing archivist, performing arts archive, south	5-10	Collection development; collection stewardship	0-3
10	Public and technical service, 4-7 ft staff, not participating in aggregation	10E	Archivist, museum archive, south	5-10	Reference; collection development; collection stewardship; collection systems it administration; leadership and administration; supervision	0-3

APPENDIX B: NAFAN FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW CODEBOOK

THEME 1. Factors that *constrain* creating and maintaining archival description

Sub-theme	Sub-sub-theme	Count
Complex workflows and workarounds	---	29
Creating EAD is a challenge	---	8
IT resources—lack of support and/or control	---	16
Lack of financial resources/staffing	---	18
Learning curve/difficulty learning software	---	3
Realities of backlogs	---	12
Reliance on labor done by students, volunteers or short-term employees	---	11
Revised description	Legacy description	19
Revised description	Reparative description	7
Revised description	Other	0
Variance in how collections are represented	---	6
Other	---	16

THEME 2. Factors that *enable* creating and maintaining archival description

Sub-theme	Sub-sub-theme	Count
Tools	Archival collection management systems	21
Tools	Worksheets/templates	14
Tools	Documentation/manuals	8
Tools	Local authorities	3
Tools	Other	3
Grants	---	3
Other	---	4

THEME 3. Incentives to participate in aggregation

Sub-theme	Sub-sub-theme	Count
"Low barrier to entry"	---	11
Aggregator long-term sustainability	---	5
Aggregator web analytics	---	6
Aggregator-based support staff	---	6
Community building	---	12
Critical mass of peer institutions	---	5
Ease of contribution of existing records	---	21
Improved discovery system	Uncovering connections between collections	22
Improved discovery system	Attendance to accessibility issues in UI	1
Improved discovery system	Easy for users to understand/use	12
Improved discovery system	Digital objects integrated into archival description/discovery interface	17
Improved discovery system	Advanced search/faceting	13
Improved discovery system	Contact the archive	5
Improved discovery system	Support for digital objects within the interface	7
Improved discovery system	Other	12
Inclusive of small/underfunded institutions	---	19
Increase visibility/awareness of collections	---	25
Leverage other aggregation contribution	---	4
One system for creation and discovery of archival description	---	4
Only reliable means to provide online access to finding aids	---	7
Record creation tool provided by aggregator	---	8
Use as a collection development/decision tool	---	11
Use the power of aggregation to attract attention and brand recognition	---	8
Other	---	16

THEME 4. Disincentives to participating in aggregation

Sub-Theme	Sub-Sub-Theme	Count
Cost	---	8
Difficult to contribute records	Aggregator data requirements	19
Difficult to contribute records	Difficult to update/edit/delete records	14
Difficult to contribute records	Difficult to submit records	8
Difficult to contribute records	Redundant work contributing records	4
Difficult to contribute records	Need confirmation that records have been received/updated	6
Difficult to contribute records	Other	1
Difficult to get buy-in from decision makers	---	4
Lack of resources/staffing	---	2
Other	---	1

APPENDIX C: FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW PROTOCOL FOR ARCHIVES THAT PARTICIPATE IN AGGREGATION

Script for introduction

Let me tell you just a little bit about who I am, who I work for and what we're doing with this research project. I work as **[provide brief description of your title or job role]** at OCLC. OCLC is a non-profit cooperative that works with libraries around the world.

This focus group interview will provide an opportunity for you to discuss your current work practices and processes related to creating archival description and sharing that description with a finding aid aggregator.

Thank you for taking the time to talk with us today. We really appreciate your help. Our focus group won't take much longer than 90 minutes. There are no right or wrong answers. It is not a test. I just want you to be as honest as you can to find out what you think.

We have our note taker here, **[Name]**, who will be typing notes as you speak. I also will be jotting down notes, so please don't think I'm not listening to you if you see me **[writing/typing]**. We also are recording the interview. We will be using the notes and recording transcripts later so that we are able to document what you have said. Everything you say is private and will not be discussed with anyone outside of the team. We will not identify you in any presentations, reports, or external communications about this project. We want you to be aware that any of you can stop participating at any time. Is this all okay? Does anyone have any questions before we start?

Focus group interview questions

1. Please tell us about your role in working with archival collections at your institution.
2. Please tell us briefly about how archival description gets produced and published in your institution. We will go into this in later questions. **(Probes: Who does it? What tools do you use? What policies do you have? Are these policies documented? What standards or guidance do you follow? What formats do you use for your descriptive records (EAD, MARC, Word doc, spreadsheet)?**
3. This question focuses on producing and publishing archival description where you work. This only pertains to your website or discovery system and not to an aggregator. What are the things that make producing and publishing archival description in your home institution easy or difficult? What are the things that support this work and make it easier, either that you have now or would like to have? **(Probes: This could be about staffing, policy, equipment, technology, expertise, administration. When thinking about this range of types of resources, can you think of anything else? What workarounds or short cuts have you had to develop locally to make creating archival description easier?)**
4. Think about your current process for sharing archival description with an aggregator. What about the process is easy? What about the process is difficult? **(Probes: This could be about staffing, policy, equipment, technology, expertise, administration. When thinking about this range of types of resources, can you think of anything else? What do you think is the most important thing a finding aid aggregator can do to enable archives to contribute to it?)**

5. What makes participation in a finding aid aggregation valuable for your institution? What makes your participation in a finding aid aggregation valuable for your researchers? Do you think there are other things an aggregator could offer that would be valuable to your institution or researchers? **(Probes: Can you tell us more specifically what would be valuable? Why would this be valuable? Does participation eliminate local work, provide better visibility to collections, help researchers find and get access to what they need, etc.)**
6. If you had a magic wand and could create your ideal, national-scale finding aid aggregation system, how would it work and what would it do? **(Probes: How would your institution interact with it? What would it do for your researchers?)**

Conclusion of interview

1. What else, if anything, would you like to share?
2. What questions do you have for us?

If you think of anything else that you would like to tell me or have any questions, please feel free to contact me via email.

APPENDIX D: FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW PROTOCOL FOR ARCHIVES THAT DO NOT PARTICIPATE IN AGGREGATION

Script for introduction

Let me tell you just a little bit about who I am, who I work for and what we're doing with this research project. I work as **[provide brief description of your title or job role]** at OCLC. OCLC is a non-profit cooperative that works with libraries around the world.

This focus group interview will provide an opportunity for you to discuss your current work practices and processes related to creating archival description and sharing that description with a finding aid aggregator.

Thank you for taking the time to talk with us today. We really appreciate your help. Our focus group won't take much longer than 90 minutes. There are no right or wrong answers. It is not a test. I just want you to be as honest as you can to find out what you think.

We have our note taker here, **[Name]**, who will be typing notes as you speak. I also will be jotting down notes, so please don't think I'm not listening to you if you see me **[writing/typing]**. We also are recording the interview. We will be using the notes and recording transcripts later so that we are able to document what you have said. Everything you say is private and will not be discussed with anyone outside of the team. We will not identify you in any presentations, reports, or external communications about this project. We want you to be aware that any of you can stop participating at any time. Is this all okay? Does anyone have any questions before we start?

Focus group interview questions

1. Please tell us about your role in working with archival collections at your institution.
2. Please tell us briefly about how archival description gets produced and published in your institution. We will go into this in later questions. **(Probes: Who does it? What tools do you use? What policies do you have? Are these policies documented? What standards or guidance do you follow? What formats do you use for your descriptive records (EAD, MARC, Word doc, spreadsheet)?**
3. This question focuses on producing and publishing archival description where you work. What are the things that make producing and publishing archival description in your home institution easy or difficult? What are the things that support this work and make it easier, either that you have now or would like to have? **(Probes: This could be about staffing, policy, equipment, technology, expertise, administration. When thinking about this range of types of resources, can you think of anything else? What workarounds or short cuts have you had to develop locally to make creating archival description easier?)**
4. Think about the hypothetical scenario where your home institution would contribute to an archival aggregation platform. What about the process would be easy? What about the process would be difficult? **(Probes: This could be about staffing, policy, equipment, technology, expertise, administration. When thinking about this range of types of resources, can you think of anything else? What do you think is the most important thing a finding aid aggregator can do to enable archives to contribute to it?)**

5. What would make participation in a finding aid aggregation valuable for your institution? What would make your participation in a finding aid aggregation valuable for your researchers? Do you think there are other things an aggregator could offer that would be valuable to your institution or researchers? (**Probes: Can you tell us more specifically what would be valuable? Why would this be valuable? Why would this be valuable? Does participation eliminate local work, provide better visibility to collections, help researchers find and get access to what they need, etc.**)
6. If you had a magic wand and could create your ideal, national-scale finding aid aggregation system, how would it work and what would it do? (**Probes: How would your institution interact with it? What would it do for your researchers?**)

Conclusion of interview

1. What else, if anything, would you like to share?
2. What questions do you have for us?

If you think of anything else that you would like to tell me or have any questions, please feel free to contact me via email.

APPENDIX E: PARTICIPANT SCREENING QUESTIONNAIRE

Questions	Answer options
<p>In order to select a representative sample of archivists, librarians, and others who work with archival collections for our focus group interviews, we will need to collect some basic demographic information. So that we may be in touch with you in the future, we will need to collect contact information. Identifying information will be used for communication purposes only. Do you consent to sharing this information with us? (Mark only one.)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Yes• No
<p>Please confirm that you are 18+ years old to participate in the NAFAN Project. (Mark only one.)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• I am 18 years old or older• I am under 18 years old.
<p>Does your institution participate in an aggregation of archival description? Please indicate if your institution participates in an aggregation of archival description such as the Online Archive of California, Rhode Island Archives and Manuscripts Online, or Virginia Heritage? (Mark only one.)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Yes• No• Not Sure
<p>If yes, please select the aggregator that your institution contributes archival description. If you are unsure, please review the dropdown list to select the aggregator you think you contribute to. (If none are correct, click next to advance to the next question.)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Archival Resources in Wisconsin• ArchiveGrid• Archives West• Arizona Archives Online (AAO)• Black Metropolis Research Consortium (BMRC)• Chicago Collections Consortium• Connecticut's Archives Online (CAO)• Empire Archival Discovery Cooperative (EADC)• History of Medicine Finding Aid Consortium• OhioLINK Finding Aid Repository• Online Archive of California (OAC)• Philadelphia Area Archival Research Portal (PAARP)• Rhode Island Archives and Manuscripts Online (RIAMCO)• Rocky Mountain Online Archive (RMOA)• Social Networks and Archival Collections (SNAC)• Texas Archival Resources Online (TARO)• Virginia Heritage

Questions (continued)	Answer options
<p>Please indicate the approximate number of years you have worked in the library, archives, or cultural heritage field. (Mark only one.)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 0-3 • 3-5 • 5-10 • 10-15 • 15+
<p>What is your title in your current position?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Free text
<p>What are your major responsibilities in your current position? (Check all that apply.)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reference • Teaching and/or Outreach • Collection Development • Collection Stewardship (accessioning, processing, description, preservation) • Collection Systems IT Administration (ArchiveSpace, Aeon, etc.) • Leadership and Administration • Supervision
<p>Please indicate the approximate number of years you have been in your current position at your institution. (Mark only one.)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 0-3 • 3-5 • 5-10 • 10-15 • 15+
<p>Please indicate your gender. (Mark only one.)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Female • Male • Non-binary • Prefer not to answer • I describe myself as: [free text]
<p>If you are employed by an educational or cultural heritage institution, please provide the name of your institutional affiliation (optional).</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Free text
<p>Please provide the city and state where your employer resides.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • State: [list of all US states and territories] • City: [free text]

Questions (continued)	Answer options
<p>Please give the approximate number of employees your institution dedicates primarily to working with archives and special collections. (Mark only one.)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Less than 1 • 1 • 2-4 • 5-7 • 7-10 • 10-15 • 15-20 • 20+
<p>Please select the type of archive where you work.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Academic Archive • Community Archive • Corporate Archive • Government Archive • Historical Society • Museum Archive • Public Library Archive • Other (please specify): [free text]
<p>Please select how frequently your institutions' collections are used by each user type.</p> <p>[High, Medium, Low, None options within each type]</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Academic (e.g., student) • Advanced academic (e.g., professor) • Archivist (e.g., doing work-related reference) • Enthusiast (e.g., local history or genealogy research for personal use) • Professional (e.g., artists, journalists, legal research)
<p>Does your institution make its archival collections available for public use? Please answer generally, even if your institution is currently closed due to the pandemic.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yes • No
<p>Please provide your name and your preferred email address where we can contact you. This will be used to notify you that you have been selected to be interviewed and to communicate about focus group logistics.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Free text

NOTES

1. For details on the grant proposal, see Institute of Museum and Library Services. 2020. Program: National Leadership Grants - Libraries. Regents of the University of California. Log Number: LG-246349-OLS-20. <https://www.ims.gov/grants/awarded/lg-246349-ols-20>.
2. Turner, Adrian. 2021. "Our Goals, Values, and Principles." *Building a National Finding Aid Network*. Confluence, University of California Office of the President. Created by dbartlin 10 October 2018. Last modified 12 March 2021. <https://confluence.ucop.edu/display/NAFAN/Our+Goals%2C+Values%2C+and+Principles>.
3. For further detail on The Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education system, see "Basic Classification System." 2023. The Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education: American Council on Education. Accessed 15 March 2023. https://carnegieclassifications.acenet.edu/classification_descriptions/basic.php.
4. Legacy description is often characterized as outdated archival description that may be incomplete or inaccurate, may not have been reviewed or updated in many years, may not be compliant with current descriptive standards, and/or may be in paper-based or older electronic formats that cannot be easily used by modern systems.
5. Society of American Archivists' Technical Subcommittee. n.d. "(DACS) Describing Archives: A Content Standard." Github. Accessed 3 March 2023. <https://github.com/saa-ts-dacs/dacs>.
6. Turner, Adrian. "Our Goals, Values, and Principles," (see n. 2).