

LSTA Grant Project Evaluation

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Evaluator: Normandy Helmer

Title: Cooperative Governors' Papers Planning and Implementation Project

Lead: Western Oregon University, for consortium of WOU, Portland State University, and Willamette University, joined by Pacific University.

## Summary of Evaluation

This project was a pleasure to review as the grant was concise and of appropriate scope, the project was executed well, and although a small project, it was designed and executed with the intent and the realization that this could serve as a foundation for a much larger future collaborative project.

The project was designed to leverage the holdings of one institution into a pilot collaborative collection development, management, processing and digitization project. Pacific University joined the project during the initial grant period, evidence of the project's success and its potential for scaling up.

As with many grants, circumstances of personnel delayed the project somewhat but an alternate staffing choice enabled substantial completion within the grant timeline. Of the ten absent collections, four were located in repositories, progress was made on soliciting three more, one was determined to be lost, and the current and previous governor were contacted. This is an impressive success rate.

The methods used to achieve the second and third objectives, to establish and utilize standardized processing and standardized digitization across consortium archives, were remarkably efficient and commendably cooperative.

## Project Objectives:

1. Identify the locations and ownership of personal papers of Oregon governors who served post World War 2.
2. Establish a standardized and efficient processing plan for political papers and train consortium archivists on implementation.
3. Establish a standardized and efficient digitization plan for political papers and train consortium archivists on implementation. Demonstrate through digitization of selected Robert Straub papers.
4. Complete processing of the collections held by the partner repositories.
5. Develop and implement a portal to facilitate access to the meta-collection.

## Project Method

Creation of a census of personal papers of the thirteen Oregon governors who have served since World War II, required substantial investigation, interviews, and negotiations. As only three of the governors in the designated group had placed their papers into repositories, the census researchers spent time identifying family members and colleagues of the governors, locating them, and gathering information

from them about what they held and who might provide additional information or collections. As high-profile elected officials, governors and their families often seek to retain some semblance of privacy and protection of public image, and the suggestion that letters and other documentation might be made openly available to researchers might cause concern. It was important that the census archivists be respectful of the concerns of those contacted, while explaining the historical importance of the collections and advocating for placement in an Oregon repository.

The project archivists had two meetings and several phone conversations, but came swiftly to accord on use of modern processing standards for political collections. Processing standards were based on modern archival practice commonly summarized as “More Product, Less Processing” (MPLP), which aims at highly efficient organization and description, designed to provide prompt intellectual access and thus get archival materials into the hands of researchers in a matter of weeks or days instead of decades. Consistently applied processing standards are a tremendous asset to researchers who want to search across the collections of multiple repositories. The project archivists clearly formed a remarkably efficient and commendably cooperative team.

Archivists from the partner institutions agreed to adopt the digitization standards created by Northwest Digital Archives (NWDA), a regional cooperative with national influence. All partners are current members of NWDA. An accord on digitization standards was generally reached but the group agreed that final policies and best practices would be based on the “The Cross-Search and Context Utility: Discovering and Contextualizing Digital Content and Encoded Archival Description (EAD) Finding Aid Metadata” grant, funded by Institute for Museum and Library Services. The partner archivists are commended for seeking a solid common ground, and for being informed and ready to adopt the results of current research projects.

A project archivist, Katrina Windon, was hired using grant funds. The archivist used the circuit-rider model, moving from one repository to the next as she developed and implemented processing plans and completed collection processing. Some collections already had skeletal finding aids. All collections are now accessible through EAD-encoded full finding aids; some have MARC records to enable discovery through catalog systems.

A web portal has been designed but at the time of the evaluation had not yet gone live.

## **Project Results**

At the beginning of the project, locations were known for the papers of only three of the thirteen governors. Research was conducted first by Gary Jensen, whose work contributed to the donation of the Atiyeh papers, but due to personal reasons he was not able to complete the survey. In the fourth quarter Charles Johnson took over research duties and made commendable progress. The census identified that four additional collections were already in repositories, one probably does not exist, one was in the process of donation, and discussions in progress would probably yield donations of three more collections. The current and previous governors still hold their papers and have not yet responded to outreach; and additional investigation is required for those governors who held other state offices. This is a very successful census and the researchers are to be congratulated on their diligence and

ingenuity. Johnson also wrote a book, *Standing at the water's edge: Bob Straub's battle for the soul of Oregon*, which relied heavily on a fully accessible collection of personal papers, and which serves as a powerful promotional tool for the research value of archives and the importance to the public of documented political history in Oregon.

Contact was also made with three important stakeholders:

1. The Oregon State Archives is the repository of record for the official papers of Oregon governors, the “other half” of the documentary record of gubernatorial tenure. This is a very important role that is seldom understood by people outside the professional archivist community. The Archives collections are defined by statute, and the grant writers acknowledged and respected the primacy of the Archives mandate from the beginning of the project. Communication during the course of the grant identified some new information about the contents of collections. Developing a partnership with Archives may yield a stronger digital presentation of governors’ papers.
2. As the long-time preeminent archive of Oregon history and as a repository holding several relevant collections, the Oregon Historical Society (OHS) is an important contact for this project. However, recent financial difficulties have limited the activities of the OHS Library and its archives in collecting and in providing access, which reduces the potential future contribution of OHS to this project. The census researcher sought further information about a partnership between Portland State University and OHS, which possibly could have mitigated the OHS reductions as they affected selected collections, but seems to be unlikely as well as outside the scope of the grant.
3. The Orbis-Cascade Alliance is a consortium of over thirty academic libraries in Oregon, Washington and Idaho. All the partners in the grant are also Alliance members. (Disclosure: the evaluator is the spouse of the executive director of the Alliance). The Alliance is also the home of Northwest Digital Archives (NWDA), a consortium of archives and repositories in Oregon, Washington, Idaho, Montana, and Alaska. NWDA provides a union catalog of finding aids (inventories) for repository collections, and fosters use of best practices and standards for archives management. Although the project archivists are active in NWDA and developed the processing and digitization in accordance with NWDA practices, the census researcher did not seem attuned to the role of NWDA in the Governors’ Papers project. Instead, he investigated the status of a long-sought, but unfunded, shared processing and collections storage facility. While this is an outcome devoutly to be wished by Alliance repositories, establishment of a physical structure seems to be outside the scope of the grant.

The census researcher did identify collections held by the University of Oregon’s Special Collections and University Archives (SCUA) and indicated future plans to visit the repository and view the collections. No mention was made of contacting James Fox, the director of SCUA. This seems a remarkable omission, given that an LSTA report primarily authored by Fox, *Envisioning Oregon: Planning toward Cooperative Collection Development in Oregon’s Historical Repositories*, was a core document cited in the grant proposal for the Governors’ Papers project. Overall, the impression left by the census researcher seems to minimize the potential of SCUA as an active partner in the project. This may simply be an omission,

but it seems a notable one. As an employee of the University of Oregon and a member of the SCUA staff, this evaluator disclaims complete neutrality but is surprised by the apparent dismissal of the institution by the census researcher.

The evaluator made two sites visits to Western Oregon University's library, and had extensive discussions with library director Allen McKiel, archivist Erin Passehl, and project archivist Katrina Windon. Discussions with Passehl and McKiel were energetic and inspirational.

The Straub collection was inspected during two visits by the evaluator. As this collection has been long unprocessed and maintained by staff not formally trained in archival method, it was a classic example of a resource of potential great use, jumbled and obscured by lack of useful, well-documented arrangement and poor housing and control. During the course of the project the Straub collection was completely processed, at a useful, efficient and prudent level. It was reorganized and rehoused and described. Materials not germane to the utility of the collection were removed and appropriate items were returned to the family. The processing plan was developed with input for the family, enabling the project archivist to move forward with a clear understanding of the scope of the collection and the context of the holdings. The Straub collection is an excellent before and after poster child for this project.

At Western Oregon, this project facilitated creation of a permanent archivist position. The project also provided an opportunity to increase knowledge and understanding of archives among the librarians, building confidence in the professionalism of the new colleague and ensuring a lasting dialog about the integration of primary sources into instruction and research support throughout the library. Librarians often do not understand the potential value of archives, nor the complexity of effective archival management, so this is a great success for the institution.

Review of the catalog records and the finding aids produced through the project showed a professional caliber of description, arrangement, and encoding. The project archivist stated that the shared circuit-rider method had worked very well. She said she felt communication had been very consistent and she had been well supported at each institution. In the course of the project, she stated that she had learned a great deal about political methods in Oregon, and this knowledge surely shaped the effectiveness of the processing plans and the decisions made, to create a cohesive set of collections.

In some cases, the project archivist had direct access to the creators of the papers, which facilitated a stronger processing plan. Given the economic realities of the region, the circuit-rider archivist appears to be a very effective model for helping smaller repositories complete processing of archival collections. The project team will be presenting a paper on this topic at an upcoming Society of American Archivists' meeting, conveying the strength of the model and the success of the project.

An important outcome of this project is the lasting connection developed between the partner repositories. This connection, and wiliness to work together for efficiency and a common cross-institution goal, will be a great asset to the state.

## Suggestions for Improvement

In the opinion of the evaluator, there is little room for improvement on this project. The following are therefore primarily notes about potential opportunities for expansion and leveraged strength

- As the portal intended to offer centralized access to the collections was not live during the evaluation period, its efficacy and design could not be assessed. Project participants are encouraged to consider the portal as an active tool, to be routinely assessed and improved.
- To determine the lasting impact of the project, and identify areas for future investment, project participants should carefully monitor statistics documenting use of the collections, whether on site, virtually, or in classes.
- To leverage the initial consortial arrangement, participants should aggressively move to brand this aggregate collection, creating a series name that can be uniformly applied to finding aids, catalog records, and outreach work. This will make it easier for researchers to quickly search across collections, and could be the foundation for creation of related series (Oregon Governors' Papers, Northwest Governors' Papers) that are more user-friendly than the average Library of Congress heading.
- Branding should be institution-neutral.
- Branding will also facilitate an increased prestige, promotion of public awareness of this resource, for use and for support, including potential legislative support for Oregon repositories and protection of historical documentation. Awareness drives use; use builds support, and a catchy name sparks broader interest.
- Branding will also support awareness of the project among politicians. Beyond legislative support, this will help promote an individual awareness of the value of personal papers and records as a legacy of every politician. The Atiyeh papers were donated to a repository and processed as a direct result of the increased awareness of the value of political records generated by the first phase of this project: "Vic Atiyeh is now conscious of the purpose of archives and his role in history," McKiel stated. This is an excellent outcome and grounds for continued promotion of the project. Additionally, this may assist in better records management techniques by the records creators and their staffs, which benefits the State Archives as well as every repository and every researcher.
- To leverage the value of the collection, participants should continue to identify related collections and work with colleagues at Northwest repositories to expand this meta-collection for mutual benefit and increased discoverability for researchers.
- To leverage the value of the collection, participants should consult with local historians to ensure that important movements and core events are identified and that appropriate authority headings are utilized, and created if necessary. For example, a unifying subject heading related to protection of Oregon's coasts would be of value. The consolidation of the Orbis-Cascade Alliance's catalog and the development of shared technical services is an opportunity to strengthen the analysis of archival collections such as the governors' papers through shared authority control.

- To leverage use of the collection, participants are encouraged to seek methods of developing curriculum that use these resources. Potential partner groups include K-12 teachers, teacher training programs, reference librarians, and teaching faculty and partner institutions as well as community colleges.
- To leverage use and awareness of the collection, an award could be established for a student paper that made substantial use of the resources. The University of Oregon has an undergraduate research award which is often won by students using primary source collections.
- As the circuit-rider model has been proven successful, project participants are encouraged to seek other opportunities to promote renewal and expansion of this model across the region. The Orbis-Cascade Alliance is a natural partner.

## Summary

This was an exceptionally well design and well executed project, which created a product of lasting value, proved successful models, built a strong partnership, and laid the foundation for future growth in many directions. With the sole caveat expressed above about the apparent exclusion of one potential partner, the evaluator can find no grounds for criticism and can only suggest methods for future growth.