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# Facts and Frameworks: An Approach to Studying the Users of Archives

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**Abstract:** The continuing reluctance of the archival profession to develop a better understanding of users seems less a problem of will than a problem of method. The framework presented here is a first attempt to structure a comprehensive program of user studies. Built on definitions of users, information needs, and use, the framework combines the basic elements of information that should be recorded, analyzed, and shared among archivists with a scheme to gather this information. The author illustrates how parts of the framework can be implemented as an ongoing program through the use of a reference log and suggests applications of the framework at the personal, repository, and professional levels.

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Science is built up with facts as a house is with stones. But a collection of facts is no more a science than a heap of stones is a house.

*Henri Poincaré*  
*Science and Hypothesis*

FRAMEWORKS ARE THE STRUCTURES that organize the "heap of stones" that is the world around us.<sup>1</sup> Varied in form and content, frameworks are simplifications of reality—ways of reducing complexities to a set of meaningful, manageable ideas. Their great use is to summarize old facts and lead to new ones. Central to the best frameworks is the possibility of action derived from practical and useful rules. As such they are interim steps on the way to a developed theory. Archivists can use analytical frameworks to understand complex issues in systematic ways and to share the knowledge gained in the process.<sup>2</sup>

The framework for studying the users of archives presented here is a first attempt to structure a comprehensive, profession-wide program of user studies. Built on definitions of users, information needs, and use, the framework describes the basic elements of information that should be recorded, analyzed, and shared among archivists to assess programs and services. In addition, the framework illustrates a scheme to gather information on groups of users over time that takes advantage of accepted reference practices

already in place in many repositories. The framework should be widely useful because it is not rooted in specific institutional procedures. If tested and applied, the framework has the potential to help archivists compare and assess the results of individual studies.

In recent years archivists have described why we need a more systematic approach to understanding users. Elsie Freeman, Mary Jo Pugh, William Joyce, Bruce Dearstyne, and William Maher especially have been in the forefront urging the archival profession to develop a greater balance between archival materials and those who use them.<sup>3</sup> They argue that recognizing and responding to the information needs of users is central to the wider use of historical information in contemporary problem solving, central to the proper documentation of society, and central to the viability of a profession faced with rapid technological change. "Use of archival records is the ultimate purpose of identification and administration," declares the final report of the Society of American Archivists' Task Force on Goals and Priorities. Archivists are beginning to consider high quality research on users an essential means toward this goal.<sup>4</sup>

Archivists are less sure about *how* to design useful user studies, especially who and what should be studied, when and where user studies should be conducted,

<sup>1</sup>Henri Poincaré, *The Foundations of Science: Science and Hypothesis, The Value of Science, Science and Method*, trans. George Bruce Halsted (Lancaster, Pa.: Science Press, 1946), 127.

<sup>2</sup>Charles Nordmann, "Henri Poincaré: His Scientific Work; His Philosophy," *Annual Report of the Board of Regents of The Smithsonian Institution* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1912), 741-63.

<sup>3</sup>Elsie T. Freeman, "In the Eye of the Beholder: Archives Administration from the Users Point of View," *American Archivist* 47 (Spring 1984): 111-23; Mary Jo Pugh, "The Illusion of Omniscience: Subject Access and the Reference Archivist," *American Archivist* 47 (Winter 1982): 33-40; William L. Joyce, "Archives and Research Use," *American Archivist* 47 (Winter 1984): 124-33; Bruce W. Dearstyne, "The Impact of Research in Archives" (Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Society of American Archivists, Washington, D.C., September 1984); William J. Maher, "The Use of User Studies," *Midwestern Archivist* 11, no. 1 (1986): 15-26.

<sup>4</sup>*Planning for the Archival Profession: A Report of the SAA Task Force on Goals and Priorities* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1986), 22. See also Karen Benedict, "Invitation to a Bonfire," *American Archivist* 47 (Winter 1984): 48; Maynard J. Brichford, *Archives and Manuscripts: Appraisal and Accessioning* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1977): 9; Nancy Sahli, "National Information Systems and Strategies for Research Use," *Midwestern Archivist* 9, no. 1 (1984): 10-12.

and how to gather information systematically. Freeman, Pugh, and others have suggested that archivists make better use of orientation and exit interviews to query researchers.<sup>5</sup> But archivists have yet to develop a comprehensive approach that links the basic objectives of a user study program and a practical way for gathering and recording valid, reliable information from users. In short, archivists' continuing reluctance to develop a better understanding of users seems not so much to be a problem of will as a problem of method.

Archivists are not alone in their concern that user studies be useful analytical tools. For initial guidance on building a comprehensive framework, they might turn to the perceptive literature describing and criticizing the many studies of library patrons. A thirty-year tradition of research on national, regional, state, and local levels and in public, university, and special libraries has produced a backlog of over one thousand studies.<sup>6</sup> Their topics run the gamut from in-house use of library materials and circulation patterns, to characteristics of users and non-users, to the assessment of programs and services.<sup>7</sup> In general they have tended to describe programs in particular libraries, rather than take a multi-institutional approach. When they have focused on users in broader terms, library user studies often have described behavior of individuals rather than of groups.<sup>8</sup> Finally, library user studies have not shown how information gathered in the study process

can be applied to designing and assessing programs for users beyond the clientele being studied.<sup>9</sup> Individually, library user studies are not very useful for archivists.

By considering them as a group, however, several perceptive critics of library user studies in the United States and the United Kingdom—including Geoffrey Ford, John Brittain, Colin Mick, and others—have identified patterns of findings. Some of the concepts underlying these patterns may be useful for archivists because, removed from their particular library setting and stripped of their specific library procedures, user studies have identified some of the components of the process of information transfer. This fundamental form of communication is the point of departure for building user oriented services in both libraries and archives.<sup>10</sup> In an archives, information transfer occurs in many different ways, but most typically when a researcher with a specific information need interacts with archivists and finding aids and in the process acquires archival information of use in meeting some part of the need. For archivists, the three important parts of this equation are users, information need, and use.

*Users*, in the most elementary sense, are people who seek information in archival materials. They may be researchers who visit repositories or who use items obtained from archives. Archivists are users when they extract information from a body of files and organize it in a finding aid, reference letter, or exhibition. More

<sup>5</sup>Freeman, "Eye of the Beholder," 119; Pugh, "Illusion of Omniscience," 39; Carl M. Brauer, "Researcher Evaluation of Reference Services," *American Archivist* 43 (Winter 1980): 79.

<sup>6</sup>Susan Crawford, "Information Needs and Uses," *Annual Review of Information Science and Technology* 13 (1978): 61-82.

<sup>7</sup>Ronald Powell, "The Utilization of User Studies in the Development of Performance Measures" (Unpublished paper, University of Michigan School of Library Science, 1984), 2-13.

<sup>8</sup>Colin Mick, Georg N. Lindsey, and Daniel Callahan, "Toward Usable User Studies," *Journal of the American Society for Information Science* 31 (1980): 347.

<sup>9</sup>Geoffrey Ford, ed., *User Studies: An Introductory Guide and Select Bibliography* (Sheffield, U.K.: Centre for Research on User Studies, 1977), 70.

<sup>10</sup>Ford, *User Studies*, 7-17; Mick, "Toward Usable User Studies," 347-56; John M. Brittain, *Information and Its Users* (Bath, U.K.: Bath University Press, 1970).

fundamentally, users are also people who may never visit an archives but utilize archival information indirectly, for example, as partners or clients in a law firm, students in a classroom, viewers of a documentary film, or editors of a newspaper. Users of archives are, therefore, all beneficiaries of historical information.

By this definition, it is unlikely there are many non-users of archives. Critics of library user studies have described ways to think about grouping users into meaningful categories. Nearly all agree that researchers rarely act in isolation, but rather as members of networks with a variety of informal and formal ways of sharing information. Library studies have also shown that the functional nature of the groups to which the user belongs has a much greater impact than individual personal or professional characteristics on how that person perceives a need for information and goes about satisfying it.<sup>11</sup> In other words, the fact that a lawyer visited an archives on behalf of a client is more useful to know than either the specific name of the law firm or the lawyer's race, sex, or age.

Archivists should regularly question researchers who visit archives. The primary purpose of this questioning, however, is to identify the most immediate groups of beneficiaries of archival information and begin to understand the process of information transfer within and beyond the archives.

An *information need* is simply a question for which archival information may provide all or part of the answer. The concept is far easier to define than to explain. Geoffrey Ford has suggested that the purposes for which individuals seek

particular forms of information are largely determined by their roles along a work-leisure continuum. Colin Mick has further refined this concept to distinguish between applicational needs (e.g., a specific document) and more abstract nutritional needs that increase general knowledge or competence.<sup>12</sup> An important goal of a broad user study program is to contribute to a better understanding of the factors determining information needs that can be influenced by archival programs and services. Archivists need to know how individuals define particular information needs and why they seek their answers in archives.

Use of archival materials is comprised of two distinct activities. Use occurs in a physical sense in reference rooms when researchers scan collections, series, folders, or individual items in search of information relevant to their needs. This form of use is most frequently documented in annual or quarterly administrative reports. For example, X number of researchers made Y number of daily visits and in doing so consulted Z number of collections, series, or items. Archivists need to evaluate systematically such use not simply for basic reporting purposes but also to assess the impact of physical use on archival materials and to evaluate alternatives to physical use.

A second kind of use is more difficult to explain but as important to document—usefulness, or the use made of archival information to benefit individuals, groups, or society as a whole.<sup>13</sup> The impact of use beyond the repository is not documented through the ubiquitous lists of important research visitors and their important projects, but through a careful

<sup>11</sup>William J. Paisley, "Information Needs and Uses," *Annual Review of Information Science and Technology* 3 (1968): 1-31; Ford, *User Studies*, 18-37.

<sup>12</sup>Ford, *User Studies*, 38-44; Colin Mick, "Human Factors in Information Work," *Proceedings of the American Society for Information Science* 17 (1980): 21-23.

<sup>13</sup>Dearstyne, "The Impact of Research in Archives," 2.

True  
but  
not!

You  
do it,  
Paul.

# METHODOLOGY

	Stage 1 <b>Registration</b> <small>(all users/always)</small>	Stage 2 <b>Orientation</b> <small>(all users at selected times)</small>	Stage 3 <b>Follow Up</b> <small>(sample users/selected times)</small>	Stage 4 <b>Survey</b> <small>(random sample)</small>	Stage 5 <b>Experiments</b> <small>(special groups)</small>
<b>Quality</b>	<b>Nature of Task</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>definition in terms of subject, format, scope</i></li> </ul>	<b>Preparation of Researcher</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>experience</i></li> <li>• <i>stage of defined problem</i></li> <li>• <i>basic/applied</i></li> </ul> <b>Anticipated Service</b>	<b>Search Strategies and Mechanics</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>search order</i></li> <li>• <i>posting search</i></li> <li>• <i>who recommended</i></li> <li>• <i>time spent searching</i></li> <li>• <i>time spent talking</i></li> </ul>	<b>Expectations and Satisfaction</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>styles of research</i></li> <li>• <i>approaches to searching</i></li> <li>• <i>levels of service</i></li> </ul>	<b>Access and Non-use</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>frustration indexes</i></li> <li>• <i>perceptions of use</i></li> </ul>
<b>Integrity</b>	<b>Identification</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>name</i></li> <li>• <i>address</i></li> <li>• <i>telephone</i></li> </ul> <b>Agree to Rules</b>	<b>Knowledge of Holdings and Services</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>written sources</i></li> <li>• <i>verbal sources</i></li> </ul>	<b>Intensity and Frequency of Use</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>collections used</i></li> <li>• <i>time spent with files</i></li> </ul>	<b>Alternative to Physical Use</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>value and use of microforms</i></li> <li>• <i>value and use of databases</i></li> </ul>	<b>Format Independence</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>linkages with information creation</i></li> <li>• <i>technology and information</i></li> </ul>
<b>Value</b>	<b>Membership in Networks</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>group affiliation</i></li> </ul> <b>Can We Contact You? Can We Tell Others?</b>	<b>Intended Use</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>purpose in terms of function and product</i></li> </ul>	<b>Significant Use Significant Info</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>importance of archives</i></li> <li>• <i>other sources</i></li> <li>• <i>valuable information</i></li> <li>• <i>gaps in information</i></li> </ul>	<b>Impact of Use</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>increased use</i></li> <li>• <i>citation patterns</i></li> <li>• <i>decision-making</i></li> </ul>	<b>Role of Historical Information in Society</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>total potential demand</i></li> <li>• <i>community network analysis</i></li> </ul>

Figure 1: Framework for Studying the Users of Archives

## OBJECTIVES

analysis of the dissemination of historical information within a wide variety of written and oral contexts. By identifying systematically both the physical use of archival materials and the impact of archival information beyond a single repository, archivists can better evaluate and plan archival programs and more clearly realize the value of the services they provide.

### Elements of the Framework

Based on these working definitions of users, information needs, and use, the framework presented in Figure 1 depicts what archivists could learn from a comprehensive program of user studies and how they could build such a program. As a whole the framework is an alternative to the common view of reference service as one segment in a linear progression of processes for handling archival materials. From this perspective appraisal, acquisition, processing, description, reference, and outreach activities each flow one after the other and set the bounds for each successive process. Archival manuals breaking the sequence into its component parts reflect the conventional approach, as do archival management decisions that establish functional specializations.<sup>14</sup> At best, information on the needs of users is factored in if and when it is available.

The framework's structure presupposes that service to users is the foundation of archival programs, regardless of the administrative structure of an institution and regardless of how archivists choose to organize their work.<sup>15</sup> It envisions a reference program as both a direct service for researchers and a central evaluative

mechanism for the repository. Information gathered in user studies provides essential raw data to help administrators evaluate reference programs, descriptive practices, outreach activities designed to increase use, processing priorities, and a myriad of other programs traditionally considered beyond the domain of the reference room. Information from users combined with the substantive knowledge that archivists acquire from archival materials are the two keys to understanding fully these programs.

The framework's structure also emphasizes that archival program objectives cannot be evaluated solely by researchers who visit. Past researchers, potential users, and even the broad extra-institutional community served by an archives must sometimes be queried to gain a full understanding of such complex issues. While the framework identifies the basic elements of an ongoing user study program, it is not a script for directing the program itself or reference service activities in general. Instead it enhances the traditional, passive custodial role of archivists by helping them become active gatherers and consumers of information about the services and programs they provide.

The core of the framework describes three complex objectives summarized by the words *Quality*, *Integrity*, and *Value*. Expressed as simple questions, Quality is "How good are the services?", Integrity is "How good is the protection of archival information?", and Value is "What good do the services do?" Quality and Value may be considered more meaningful substitutions for the information science jargon "effectiveness" and "benefit."<sup>16</sup>

<sup>14</sup>Kenneth W. Duckett, *Modern Manuscripts: A Practical Manual for Their Management, Care and Use* (Nashville: American Association for State and Local History, 1975). See also SAA's Basic Manual Series I, published in 1977.

<sup>15</sup>Frank G. Burke, "Archival Cooperation," *American Archivist* 46 (Summer 1983): 295.

<sup>16</sup>See R. H. Orr, "Measuring the Goodness of Library Services: A General Framework for Considering Quantitative Measures," *Journal of Documentation* 29 (1973): 315-32.

Integrity is derived from the essential responsibility of archivists to preserve the integrity of archival materials.

The choice of terms with a certain fuzziness of meaning is intentional for several reasons. First, there are no specific archival terms equivalent to the three objectives. The intuitive nature of the words indicates that they mean both something simple and something complex. Indeed, the notion that an important problem may have layers of understanding is fundamental to implementing the framework. Each objective consists of five gradations, and information gathered in each stage clarifies the questions to be asked in each successive stage. In addition, such non-technical words have meaning simply because all of the concepts are not totally measurable. The framework assumes that quantitative measures and qualitative assessments together provide a complete description of the issue. It recognizes that the subjective judgments of archivists are valid assessment tools if checked against objective measures wherever possible.<sup>17</sup>

In the framework, the *Quality* of archival programs and services is assessed in terms of how well archivists understand the information needs of their users and how well the programs and services are able to meet those needs they are intended to serve. At the most basic stage, Quality involves understanding how researchers define their task in terms of the subject, format, and scope of information needed. At more complex levels, Quality involves understanding research capabilities and expectations for service (stage 2); research strategies and problem-solving methods (stage 3); and the nature and degree of satisfaction with the research process (stage 4). Ultimately,

one objective of archival programs and services is to recognize how users actually or potentially approach archival information, including why archives are not used, and to take every possible measure to enhance access to useful information (stage 5).

In the framework, the *Integrity* of archival programs and services is assessed in terms of how well archivists balance their responsibilities to enhance use while preserving the information in archival materials. At the most basic stage, Integrity involves identifying researchers as a first step toward limiting theft and abuse of materials.<sup>18</sup> At more complex levels, Integrity expands to include how researchers become aware of available information (stage 2); assessments of the impact of physical use on the preservation of materials (stage 3); and assessments of the value of alternatives to physical use, including microforms and computerized data bases (stage 4). Ultimately another objective of archival programs and services is to understand and take action to assure that the information in archival materials is preserved and made available regardless of the format in which it is located (stage 5).

In the framework, the *Value* of archival services and programs is assessed in terms of the effects of use on individuals, groups, and society as a whole. At the most basic stage, Value simply involves understanding the extent to which individual researchers are a part of groups with similar interests and activities. At more complex levels, Quality expands to include understanding the intended uses of archival information (stage 2); the relationship of archival information to other sources of information (stage 3); and the impact of use

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., 317-18.

<sup>18</sup>Nancy Lankford, "Ethics and the Reference Archivist," *Midwestern Archivist* 7, no. 1 (1983): 7-13.

beyond the repository (stage 4). Ultimately, another objective of archival programs and services is to understand and increase the role of historical information in contemporary society.

Beyond identifying and describing three primary objectives of archival programs and services, the framework includes a scheme for gathering assessment information from users. The methodology combines two assumptions. First, archivists can gather information within a continuum of standard reference services, but at the most complex levels of understanding, rigorous surveys and even controlled experiments are needed. Second, archivists can benefit by understanding and using basic survey research techniques to limit the total population studied while increasing the reliability and validity of the findings.

Sue Holbert has described researcher registration, orientation interviews, and exit interviews as standard elements of the reference continuum.<sup>19</sup> Robert Tissing and Carl M. Brauer, among others, have suggested how archivists can make special use of orientation and exit interviews to gather information.<sup>20</sup> The valuable opportunities of exit interviews often are lost through well-meaning procrastination on the part of reference archivists or unceremonious departures by researchers. As a partial solution, archivists could banish the term "exit interview" from their vocabularies and substitute instead "follow-up discussions." Less formal and more fluid than interviews, follow-up conversations may begin anytime after a researcher has settled into the research room.

In the framework, five increasingly more sophisticated research methods parallel the stages of the three objectives—Quality, Integrity, Value. Just as information from each stage of an objective serves as a base for the succeeding stage, the research methods at each stage help define or narrow the sample population of users studied at succeeding stages. To sample users effectively archivists must build a base of information about the universe of actual researchers.<sup>21</sup> Stage 1, Registration, may be the best place to accomplish this task. Registration forms can help ensure essential security and gather information on research problems and the circumstances of use. Archival repositories should always require every researcher to complete a registration form.

Stage 2, Orientation, and Stage 3, Follow Up, allow archivists to select a specific time period during which to study researchers or to further limit the population by selecting a specific group of researchers for special emphasis. In both stages, the reference room serves as the principal location of user studies. Stage 4, Survey, and Stage 5, Experiments, recognize that the most complex aspects of a research problem are not necessarily best understood through routine repository procedures. Instead, sophisticated surveys of randomly sampled populations and controlled experiments with groups selected by a variety of criteria may be more appropriate. The last two methodological stages need not be confined to researchers who actually visit archives, but may tap a broader base of users. At all stages of the

<sup>19</sup>Sue E. Holbert, *Archives and Manuscripts: Reference and Access* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1977), 12-13.

<sup>20</sup>Robert W. Tissing, "The Orientation Interview in Archival Research," *American Archivist* 47 (Spring 1984): 173-78; Brauer, "Researcher Evaluation of Reference Services," 79; Freeman, "Eye of the Beholder," 119.

<sup>21</sup>The best introduction to survey research is Charles Backstrom and Gerald Hursh-Cesar, *Survey Research*, 2nd ed. (New York: Wiley and Sons, 1981). Also useful is Maurice B. Line, *Library Surveys* (London: C. Bingley, 1982).

framework, archivists should choose the populations and method most appropriate to the problem being studied.

The framework is an integrated unit and presents a comprehensive approach to user studies. Reading an objective from left to right gives a sense of how each of the three objectives becomes more complexly defined in succeeding stages. Reading one of the stages from top to bottom indicates the most important elements of the three objectives that should be recorded at that stage. The elements in each cell of the framework are those aspects of an ongoing user study program that should be shared among archivists and repositories to develop a profession-wide understanding of Quality, Integrity, and Value.

### Implementing the Framework

Translating the framework into an ongoing research program at a repository does not necessarily involve massive questionnaires and sophisticated computer analysis. The "Reference Log" in Figure 2 is one example of how stages 1, 2, and 3 of the framework could be made operational for daily use. It is called a log because it tracks and records researchers at different points along the reference service continuum. By linking activities and assessments across time, archivists can better understand the process of seeking and finding useful information. As such, the log would enhance, but not replace a sign-in register recording daily visits to the research room. The reference log in the example combines the two most basic survey research approaches—observation and questioning—but distributes the task of completion about equally between reference archivists and the researchers.

The sample reference log is designed as a two-sided form with four distinct parts. Except for the section labeled "Search Report," the questions on the log have been field-tested for accuracy and usefulness.<sup>22</sup> Nevertheless, the specific wording of the questions and response categories may be tailored to the patrons of specific repositories. Given the log's level of inquiry and analysis, the underlying elements of a question are more important than the specific wording of the text or response categories.

Information requested within the blocked area of the log is based largely on the elements in stage 1 of the framework. As a registration form, this section asks researchers to identify themselves, waive the confidentiality of their research activity, and agree to basic procedures. All these elements are standard features of many registration forms.<sup>23</sup> The most important parts of this section are the open-ended question on the nature of the research project and the multiple-choice question, "What work brought you to the archives?" This form presents the prime opportunity for a researcher and the archivist to record an understanding of the subject, scope, time frame, and function of the research question. In combination with information on institutional affiliation, these questions form the basis for understanding a researcher's group identity and approach to the archival record.

The log's second section, "Orientation," is a brief questionnaire for researchers to complete during or immediately following the orientation interview. The questions tap the elements from stage 2 of the framework. Included are inquiries on the intended use of information located, how a researcher found out about holdings or services, the nature

<sup>22</sup>Paul Conway, "Research in Presidential Libraries: A User Study," *Midwestern Archivist* 11, no. 1 (1986): 35-36. Ina Berzins, et. al., *The Methodologies Report on Research and Public Service Component Program Evaluation Study*, Volume III, report prepared for the Public Archives of Canada by Currie, Coopers & Lybrand, Ottawa, Canada, January 1985.

<sup>23</sup>*The Archival Forms Manual* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1982).

Figure 2

Reference Log		
Information in this box is required to use the research room facilities. The principal purpose of this form is to identify and record individuals who use materials at the archives, to help us identify which materials may be most useful, and to permit later contact with researchers as part of more detailed studies of research use.		
APPLICANT'S NAME (Last, First, Middle Initial)	PERMANENT PHONE NO.	OCCUPATION (please be as specific as possible)
PERMANENT ADDRESS (Street, City, State, ZIP)	INSTITUTION	WHAT WORK BROUGHT YOU TO THE ARCHIVES? <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>
DESCRIPTION OF RESEARCH PROJECT (Include subject, dates, important names, type of material needed)		
MAY WE ADVISE OTHER INDIVIDUALS OF THE SUBJECT OF YOUR RESEARCH? <input type="checkbox"/> YES <input type="checkbox"/> NO	MAY WE ADVISE OTHER INDIVIDUALS WHICH ITEMS WERE SERVED TO YOU? <input type="checkbox"/> YES <input type="checkbox"/> NO	
I HAVE READ "REGULATIONS FOR THE PUBLIC USE OF RECORDS" AND I WILL COMPLY WITH THE RULES. Applicant's Signature _____ Date _____	MAY WE CONTACT YOU BY MAIL OR TELEPHONE AS PART OF A FUTURE USER STUDY? <input type="checkbox"/> YES <input type="checkbox"/> NO	

  

### Orientation

Your answers to questions in this section of the form will help the reference archivist orient you to using the archives' holdings. Together with answers from other researchers, the information you provide will enable archivists to assess the overall use of the archives.

What is the purpose of your current research project that involves using the archives' holdings or services (Circle all that apply)

1. Academic requirements
2. Genealogy
3. Publication (book, article)
4. Background information for newspaper, magazine article, advertising
5. Exhibition
6. Film, radio, television program
7. Government research
8. Professional research (for individual, group, association)
9. Personal interest/hobby
10. Other \_\_\_\_\_

Some researchers prefer to rely on their background preparation or the finding aid system in the research room. Others feel most comfortable if reference archivists guide their searches of the holdings.

Please mark the scale below to show your personal preference for doing archival research.

1	2	3	4	5
rely on finding aids		archivist and finding aids		rely on archivist

Before your first visit on this project, did you write or telephone to get information on holdings or services?

YES     NO     DON'T KNOW

Excluding writing or telephoning the archives directly, which of the following sources did you most rely on to identify the holdings or services of use in your research. (Circle the best choice)

1. References, citations in published works
2. Published guides to archives, primary sources, bibliographies
3. Teacher, professor, colleagues
4. Archivist/librarian at other institutions
5. Information from historical, professional or genealogical organizations
6. Television, radio, newspaper
7. Presentation by archives staff
8. Visit to museum exhibition
9. General knowledge, assumptions
10. Other \_\_\_\_\_

If you have done archival research in the last five years, please write the name of the archives in which you have most recently worked.

Figure 2 (continued)

### Search Report

The reference archivist should note the first ten collections consulted by the researcher, the source of recommendation, and whether the researcher located information of use in the research project. Data for this section is obtained from paging slips, photocopy request forms, observation, and if necessary, by questioning researcher.

	RECOMMENDATION	USER	FINDING AID	COLLECTION NAME	SEARCH RESULTS	
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>		<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>		<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>		<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
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ARCHIVIST
USER
FINDING AID
POSITIVE
NEGATIVE

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### Follow Up

The information you provide in this section will assist archivists to understand how archival research is carried out, and how archival information may be used.

Please provide an approximate breakdown of the total time you spent at the archives during this research project across each of the activities listed below. (Make sure the total equals 100%)

Orienting yourself to the archives' services and facilities \_\_\_\_\_%

Searching through finding aids and collections to locate documents \_\_\_\_\_%

Actually reading/viewing/studying documents \_\_\_\_\_%

Discussing research project with archivists or other researchers \_\_\_\_\_%

TOTAL            100%

What portion of your research project will be based on archival materials located at this archives or other archives?

1. I hope to use primarily archival sources of information.
2. I hope to use archival sources and other sources about equally.
3. I hope to use other sources of information primarily.
4. I don't know yet.

On the line below, please write the name of the collection in which you located the most useful information.

\_\_\_\_\_  no useful information located

If you expect to share the information you find at the archives, please describe below in what ways the information will be used. Please use this opportunity to name the title of a proposed publication, describe the group that may benefit from your archival research, or describe the results of your research in more detail.

of the service anticipated, and the existence of prior archival research experience. If a sampling strategy is necessary to limit the population studied, this section might only be completed by a selected group of researchers—for example, undergraduate students—or during a selected time period—for example, the first week of every month. The information in this section could also help subdivide the full researcher population for further, more detailed questioning.

The reverse side of the log contains the third and fourth sections, labeled "Search Report" and "Follow Up." Together these sections apply the elements from stage 3 of the framework. The "Search Report," an untested proposal at this point, is designed as a way to learn about the complex problem of research strategies and the process of locating useful information. Like the "Orientation" section, it is not necessarily intended for all researchers at all times, but for selected groups of researchers sampled during specific points in a year. Alternatively, this section may serve simply to illustrate the varied ways collections are used by groups of researchers.

Reference archivists administer the search report by observing researcher behavior, examining evidence such as call slips and photocopy requests, and noting the names of the first ten collections consulted. Archivists would then check a box for each collection noted to indicate whether the reference archivist, researcher, or in-house finding aids were the principal source of the recommendation that the collection may contain useful information. Finally, the observer-archivist would indicate whether the researcher located useful information. While this last information may be obtained through observation, some direct questioning may be necessary.

The fourth section of the reference log, "Follow Up," draws on additional

elements from stage 3. Included are questions on how a researcher spent time, the researcher's expected use of archival and non-archival sources of information, and the most significant collections used. A final open-ended question enables the researcher to comment in more detail on the results of work or how the obtained information will be used. As with the "Orientation" section, the follow-up questions in the log represent only the very basic pieces of information that should be obtained and recorded from the groups of researchers chosen for study. The queries should be considered a point of departure for further discussions or a way of clarifying issues that could be addressed more completely in stage 4 and 5 projects.

A reference log is not the only way to implement the research strategy explained in the framework's first three stages. Archivists could design separate survey instruments to collect information for each stage. A microcomputer at the reference desk, equipped with data base management software, could substitute quite well for a whole range of survey questionnaires. It bears emphasizing that the fundamental goal in implementing the first three stages of the framework is to record information gathered so that it can be used to link groups of researchers with their evaluations of services and programs.

User surveys and special studies implementing stages 4 and 5 should be built on information gathered in the earlier stages. They are opportunities to move beyond researchers in reference rooms, to tap the behavior and attitudes of past users, potential users, and the community of beneficiaries. Surveys and special studies are also more amenable to multi-institutional approaches. Examples of research topics of this nature might include factors that contribute to user satisfaction, the impacts of frustration

and limited access on scholarly research, citation patterns in a given subject area, and the value and usefulness of non-paper records. As archival research questions become more complexly defined, so too should research methods become more rigorous and sophisticated.

### **Applying the Framework**

Putting to practical use information gathered in a user study program begins with an analysis of the data. This does not require computing equipment. A reference log will yield a wealth of information from hand tabulation. Simply shuffling logs into piles with specific questions in mind can be enlightening. Take for instance the question, "This year, what portion of their time did genealogists spend in the research room becoming familiar with the repository's holdings and services?" Dividing the logs completed by genealogists into three groups according to the range of responses to the appropriate follow-up query will produce a simple answer. A closer inspection of other parts of the completed logs in each group will help archivists understand why some genealogists begin research more quickly than others. At this level of analysis, archivists equipped with microcomputers merely will find the data analysis more efficient and convenient than hand tabulation.

Both archivist and researcher should find an ongoing user study program founded on a systematic framework a valuable learning process. Structured contacts actively demonstrate to researchers the concern archivists have for successful research efforts without adding substantially to the researchers' burdens. If widely implemented, researchers may even come to expect opportunities for orientation questionnaires and follow-up discussions. For the reference archivist, structured contacts

transform a role that sometimes begins to resemble that of a traffic cop into a central evaluative mechanism for the entire repository. Routinely recording useful information on researchers is much less burdensome than recording routine production statistics—especially if the information gathered is an integral part of the design and evaluation of all archival programs.

Integrating the results of user studies into the administrative structure of a repository begins with more creative reporting to resource allocators, senior administrators, and user communities. Head counts and daily researcher visits can be augmented by reports on the wide variety of questions addressed through archival research. Reports based on vivid data from users of archival services may be far more powerful tools than those based on dry statistics. Archives administration from the users' point of view requires that archival programs be defended from the users' point of view.

Beyond its value in reporting, an ongoing user study program can have a central role in the design and modification of archival programs only if archivists trust the guidance users provide. Data collected from users in an ongoing program, even at a very basic level, may be substantially more reliable, and hence more useful, than even sophisticated one-time surveys because of the program's capacity to reflect change. Evaluating the success of programs for users, such as an automated catalog or an outreach program designed to increase physical use, is far easier if user evaluations provide benchmarks over time. In short, without direct and continuous user evaluations, archivists can only suppose that their information needs are being met on a regular basis. For public institutions with a mandate to serve the research public, suppositions can only be stretched so far at budget time.

A general framework for understanding users can serve as an agenda for talking about the archival profession's progress toward the goal of user responsive programs and services. But at some point the talk must take a back seat to cooperative study projects. Perhaps the classroom is an appropriate place to begin building a research tradition. Elsie Freeman has suggested that archival education should include training in survey research techniques.<sup>24</sup> Archival educators might consider transforming the practicum portion of a two-course sequence into a laboratory for teams of students to design, carry out, and evaluate archival research projects, including user studies.

Knowledge from user studies will have value beyond single repositories only if widely shared. Mechanisms for a cooperative effort need to be developed and supported. At the very least, an archival information clearinghouse, such as the one proposed by NAGARA, should be prepared to actively gather, evaluate, and disseminate the results of user studies.<sup>25</sup> A proactive clearinghouse can serve the same broad functions for archives that the perceptive critics of user studies served for libraries—to discover patterns in isolated studies, encourage further research, and develop strategies for integrating research findings into standards of practice.

Mathematician and philosopher of science Henri Poincaré was not the first scientist to explain in clear terms the fundamental need for structures to order random observations. But his pragmatic approach to scientific investigation seems particularly appropriate to a profession trying to find larger meaning in the

details of history. Poincaré saw no dichotomy between theory and practice because any theory worth the name could only be judged in practical terms. Indeed, Poincaré saw in the problems the fledgling library profession was confronting in developing descriptive practices a proper metaphor for the problems of mathematical physics. Theories organize thought as a means of organizing action.

Archivists too are universalists of sorts. They are proud of their broad understanding of the process of historical research and their attention to the details of past experience. Given the profession's practical nature, archivists may never develop a scientific theory that meets Frank Burke's definition of universal and immutable laws.<sup>26</sup> But to avoid building a profession on a set of immutable platitudes, archivists' practice can and should be based on solid conceptual structures that transcend the limits of local precedent. Analytical frameworks encourage systematic problem-solving, promote cooperation, and allow archivists to collect the information necessary to develop standards of practice benefiting the profession as a whole.

The framework for studying users and the reference log are offered as basic tools in such a process. Archivists should begin with the basics, coordinate research designs, collect data, share results widely, and revise their approaches based on these results. The specifics of the proposed system need to be tested and refined. Archivists can acquire the skills and insight necessary to design an ongoing evaluation program that includes users by studying library surveys and mastering sound survey research methods. But ultimately archivists must

<sup>24</sup>Freeman, "Eye of the Beholder," 122.

<sup>25</sup>*Planning for the Archival Profession*, 31.

<sup>26</sup>Frank G. Burke, "The Future Course of Archival Theory in the United States," *American Archivist* 44 (Winter 1981): 40.

design their own methods and define their own goals, beginning with a commitment to develop a truly user-responsive archival profession. Making the reference room rather than the

loading dock the hub of archival activity requires facts about users—recorded facts, shared facts, but most of all facts organized for clear objectives.



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