

Standards for Archival Description

Archival Applicability of External Guidelines for Data Structures

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Abstract: By the conclusion of its first meeting, the Working Group on Standards for Archival Description had identified no standards that could be defined as external data structure guidelines. The absence of standards in this cell of the group's matrix may reflect either the non-existence of such standards affecting archival description, or the profession's inability to recognize them. The author discusses the role of such standards, offers some examples from the library community, and suggests strategies for influencing their development to support archival requirements.

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AT THE FIRST MEETING of the Working Group on Standards for Archival Description, the participants placed only a small number of existing documents or projects into the category of external data structure guidelines in the proposed standards matrix. Although it is debatable whether this reflects the absence of such standards or our lack of awareness of their existence, we can assume that such standards are not a highly visible component of our standards environment. This background paper will address the issue of whether this is important and, if so, what should be done.

Guidelines are the least prescriptive class of standards defined by the Working Group. They consist of principles that should underlie and guide more explicit standards, but in themselves do not address detailed issues sufficiently to provide unambiguous directions for development and implementation. Their use as criteria to evaluate practices also reflects their nature as suggestive standards.

Standards for data structures are the second level in the hierarchy of standards objects. Once information system standards are in place, defining the purposes and architecture of our systems, then data structure standards come into play and define how individual components must be organized to provide their share of the system functionality. In the absence of information system standards, data structure standards can still be defined, but confusion may result. A prime example is the inability to discuss the relevance of the USMARC Holdings format for archival description until Lisa Weber clarified the issue with her background paper.¹

Data structure guidelines should provide direction and principles for the detailed definition of the components (record types),

defined in the information system standards. Specification of individual data elements and their identification in a data structure properly belongs to data structure *conventions*, but *guidelines* must define the types of data elements in each record type, distinguished by their use or purpose. To give two examples, data structure guidelines should address when descriptive information should be handled through note fields rather than structured headings, and situations where coded information is more effective than full representation. Given these principles, designers of conventions and technical standards can then approach issues relating to the handling of individual data elements within a consistent framework.

Unfortunately, guidelines are generally ex post facto exercises or apologia that attempt to impose a systematic explanation on a situation that evolved in an ad hoc fashion. Rarely does a community have the resources or foresight to attempt an explicit statement of principles that can guide its planning. As Kathleen Roe points out in her background paper on internal data structure standards, the archival profession is no exception to this rule.²

Within the library community, there have been some attempts at data structure guidelines. The Paris Principles include a section on "Structure of the Catalogue" that begins to address principles of bibliographic record structure.³ Similarly, the International Standards for Bibliographic Description define "areas" of bibliographic description that provide an overall context

¹Lisa B. Weber, "The 'Other' USMARC Formats: Authorities and Holdings. Do We Care to be Partners at this Dance, too?" also published in this issue, pp. 44-51.

²Kathleen Roe, "From Archival Gothic to MARC Modern: Descriptive Data Structure Issues," also published in this issue, pp. 56-66.

³International Federation of Library Associations, *Statement of Principles adopted at the International Conference on Cataloguing Principles, Paris, October, 1961*, Annotated edition with commentary and examples by Eva Verona (London: IFLA Committee on Cataloguing, 1971).

for the structure of a bibliographic record.⁴ Guidelines for authority records are less official, but do appear in numerous articles in the library literature.

Another explicit data structure guideline for the library community is the *USMARC Formats: Underlying Principles*, approved by MARBI in 1982 with additions in 1988.⁵ This document provides a broad context within which discussions of MARC format issues can take place, but it does not address the handling of any specific issue. It assumes, but does not explicitly cite, an information systems standard that identifies record types and their purpose. A similar statement might come from the Common Agenda project of the American Association for State and Local History, although they have yet to generalize data structure guidelines from a host of local data structure conventions.

How should the archival community react to and interact with these external guidelines? Roe has rightly pointed out the need for archivists to get their own descriptive

house in order. This is an essential prerequisite for intelligent and effective influence on external standards. At this point, an effective strategy might be:

- the recognition and promotion of data structure guidelines as the essential underpinnings for effective work at this level of standards;
- encouraging the development and adoption of internal data structure guidelines, in conjunction with internal information system guidelines;
- encouraging archivists who act as representatives to MARBI, ALA's CC:DA, and other organizations that develop and adopt statements of principle that serve as data structure guidelines, to evaluate these initiatives in light of archival descriptive needs, and work to influence their content in ways that reflect those needs.

Unfortunately, guidelines do not result directly in the development and implementation of working descriptive systems. Exhortations to heed the guidelines may be dismissed as an academic exercise for the edification of the theorists and systematizers among us. A healthy skepticism about the practical value of such guidelines is understandable and laudable, but the effect of their absence has been the lack of any clear guiding principles to harness and evaluate the numerous efforts to develop and promote archival description standards.

⁴International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions, *General International Standard for Bibliographic Description* (London: IFLA International Office for UBC, 1977).

⁵The *USMARC Formats: Background and Principles* (prepared by MARBI in conjunction with the Library of Congress Network Development and MARC Standards Office, 1989). Copies available through the Library of Congress.