

Standards for Archival Description

Doing it by the Numbers: Standard Statistics for Describing Archives

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Abstract: The Working Group's definition of archival description encompasses not only bibliographic data and finding aids, but also the collection and analysis of administrative and statistical data about archival institutions and their holdings. The author examines several efforts at standardizing library and archival statistical gathering processes, focusing in particular on the recent efforts by the National Association of Government Archives and Records Administrators and its 1987 Program Reporting Guidelines.

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THE DETERMINATION OF WHAT statistics to keep in an archives may not seem to some to fit the definition of "descriptive standards." Yet an investigation of how the profession has developed this area of management practice is an instructive object lesson in standard-making. This paper provides an overview of the evolution of statistical reporting in libraries and archives. It focuses, in particular, on the archival profession's latest attempt to implement statistical standards—the *Program Reporting Guidelines for Government Records Programs*¹ developed by the National Association of Government Archives and Records Administrators (NAGARA).

The Working Group on Standards for Archival Description has defined archival description as "the process of capturing, collating, analyzing, and organizing any information that serves to identify, manage, locate, explain the context of, and interpret the holdings of archival institutions."² It is not stretching the meaning of "any information that serves to . . . manage . . . the holdings of archival institutions" to include numerical measures of holdings. One of our basic debates concerns the appropriate measure of collections—number of items or containers vs. linear or cubic feet.

The scope of NAGARA's *Program Reporting Guidelines*, however, is clearly broader than just the measurement of holdings. It asks for basic information on the place of program in government, budget, staffing, and facilities and goes on to record detailed measures of activity and workload all along the life cycle of records administration, from records creation to

reference and public programs. It is thus a standardized definition of all archival activity and a template for its quantitative depiction.

Library Statistics

The sharing of management statistics in the library world has not been quite so ambitious as to cover all library activities. Standard measurements of resources and activities can only be created and used if all the participating repositories mutually agree to do so. Our colleagues in the library world have wrestled with this problem and, despite appearances, are still doing so. The best known of the standard measurement tools is the Association of Research Libraries' annual volume, *ARL Statistics*. ARL is a consortium of 119 U.S. and Canadian libraries, mostly located in universities, but also including several private, state, city, and national libraries.

ARL has compiled and published the statistics since 1961-62, taking over a task Princeton University Library began in 1920. The annual published report consists primarily of measures of holdings, personnel, expenditures, and inter-library loans, along with institutional demographic data about doctorates awarded, student enrollment, and faculty population. The responses are presented in one enormous table for all 119 libraries. Fifteen of the twenty-eight variables are also presented in individual rank order tables, and selected variables are analyzed as percentages and ratios, giving high, low, and median figures. These latter include:

- professional, non-professional, and student assistant staffs as percentage of total staff;
- ratio of professional to non-professional staff (excluding student assistants);
- ratio of ILL items borrowed to lent;
- serials expenditures as percentage of materials expenditures;
- materials, contract binding, salary and

¹National Association of Government Archives and Records Administrators and Council of State Governments, *Program Reporting Guidelines for Government Records Programs* (Albany: NAGARA, 1987).

²"Report of the Working Group on Standards for Archival Description," *American Archivist* 52 (Fall 1989): 442.

- wage, and other operating expenditures as percentage of total expenditures; and
- unit cost of monographs (per volume) and serials (per title).

ARL has also published two of its Systems and Procedures Exchange Center (SPEC) Kits on the topic of management statistics.³ The overall conclusion is that libraries collect statistics to "support good decision-making and planning," although the statistics are only one factor in decision-making because they are "difficult to collect equitably and cannot address quality of service."⁴ Further problems are that the external demand for measurements does not always match internal needs and that library administrators are not always clear about the usefulness of particular statistics.

The internal statistics most libraries commonly collect are essentially the same types of workload indicators as those sought in the NAGARA standards. Much new interest in library statistics results from the opportunities computers provide to generate transactional data and the resulting need to plan for statistical outputs from library automation. Library statistics are generally used either for determining funding requests and resource allocations or inter-library reporting and comparisons. In some cases library data is used by state agencies in formulas to determine funding levels for needed staffing and space.

The publication of *ARL Statistics* is eagerly anticipated by library administrators every year. The reports always warn of the inherent flaws in the data, noting that library managers cannot "assume that statistical data are collected equitably enough or

are sensitive enough to drive allocation models."⁵ However, there seems to be a near-irresistible urge to find out "where we stand." Some critics note that the tendency of university administrators, in particular, to equate high numbers or rank with high quality is very dangerous. "These statistics are not only relatively meaningless, we also know them to be grossly inaccurate," asserts Indiana University library school dean Herbert S. White.⁶

White sees the measures of collection size as "a trap" because faculty and administrators will willingly sacrifice library staff to keep library holdings growing. They don't know what librarians do and assume that collecting more materials is the hallmark of a quality library. White advises: "Start counting and reporting things that do matter. What matters is that we are able to get people things they need, and that we are able to help them identify and determine what it is they need."⁷

Such warnings ought to be particularly alarming for archivists since the tendencies appear to be similar in archives and manuscript repositories. Lacking uniformity in measurement, what might 12,000 linear feet compared to 12,000,000 items suggest to an academic administrator in terms of size? What qualitative judgment might the layman make about 3,000 cubic feet of unselected senatorial papers, compared to 300 carefully appraised cubic feet if the adjectives were missing? The lack of any standard measure of collection size only worsens the confusion of quantity with quality of the archives.

White's preference for service measures over size of holdings stems from the fear that shrinking resources will be reallocated from personnel to materials budgets. While

³Association of Research Libraries, Office of Management Studies, Systems and Procedures Exchange Center, *Planning for Management Statistics in ARL Libraries*, SPEC Kit 134, (Washington: ARL, 1987) and *Use of Management Statistics in ARL Libraries*, SPEC Kit 153, (Washington: ARL, 1989).

⁴John Vasi, "Use of Management Statistics," SPEC Flyer 153, April 1989, SPEC Kit 153.

⁵Ibid.

⁶Herbert S. White, "Trouble at the OK Corral University Library," *Library Journal* 112 (1 September 1987): 155.

⁷Ibid.

we can continue to increase holdings despite shrinking budgets, we face the greater danger of losing resources altogether because of the perception that low use statistics equates to low staffing needs. In fact, statistical measures of all archival functions is our primary line of defense. We must show the complete range of activities that our appropriations fund to avoid budget cuts. To paraphrase White, we must demonstrate our selectivity in appraisal and our skill in intellectual control. Only through building adequate documentation and providing excellent arrangement, description, and reference can we show that an outstanding archives is not simply defined by the size of its holdings.

Archival Surveys

The primary mechanism for sharing statistical information about archives has been through survey efforts. Nicholas C. Burckel and J. Frank Cook surveyed a ten percent random sample of college and university archives in the early 1980s, building on a series of five previous surveys of academic archives going back to 1949. Their published report assessed the staffing, budgets, holdings, facilities, and problems of academic archives.⁸ It revealed the considerable diversity among college and university archives, but its summary presentation of sample data precluded any comparisons of specific institutions.

Many of the state assessment reports sponsored by the National Historical Publications and Records Commission (NHPRC) during the early 1980s included extensive survey activities that gathered much the same information about repositories as other efforts mentioned here. Pennsylvania's assessment study, for example, received survey responses from 109 historical rec-

ords repositories, 81 county offices, 123 municipalities, and a sampling of 83 researchers from five repositories.⁹ The Pennsylvania historical records repository questionnaire, based on a similar one done in Georgia, collected information on budget, staff, holdings, facilities, preservation, description, users, problems, and cooperative activities.

Perhaps the first archival attempt to develop a statistical standard was reported in 1983 when a Society of American Archivists task force, after three years of work, issued a set of definitions on standard reporting practice.¹⁰ The definitions of holdings, processing, use, and staff measurements were the product of much consultation and comment. The Task Force on Standard Reporting Practice encouraged adoption by members and subsequently the Task Force on Institutional Evaluation sought the reactions of institutions that applied the measurements, but no mechanism for regular reporting or sharing of results was proposed or implemented.

This situation was partially remedied by the more ambitious intent of the 1985 census of archival institutions.¹¹ The census not only created a broad national pattern for comparison, but would also "identify units of information that repositories should try to collect on a regular basis."¹² Author Paul Conway concluded that "by clarifying existing patterns and showing how they are evolving, present and future national studies can identify the common ground—the highest common denominator—that can

⁹Leon J. Stout, *Historical Records in Pennsylvania: An Assessment Report for the State Historical Records Advisory Board* (Harrisburg, PA: Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, 1983).

¹⁰"Final Report of Task Force on Standard Reporting Practice," *SAA Newsletter* (Nov. 1983): 13-16.

¹¹Paul Conway, "Perspectives on Archival Resources: The 1985 Census of Archival Institutions," *American Archivist* 50 (Spring 1987): 174-91.

¹²*Ibid.*, 177.

⁸Nicholas C. Burckel and J. Frank Cook, "A Profile of College and University Archives in the United States," *American Archivist* 45 (Fall 1982): 410-28.

serve as a foundation for widely accepted standards for archival programs.”¹³

In addition to measures of holdings, budgets, staffing, facilities, and use, the census provided analytical measures that were analogous to those often used in library statistical reports. These included ratios of staff to holdings (“intensity of care”), budget to holdings (“cost of holdings”), budget to reference load (“cost of use”), holdings to research visits (“intensity of use”), and staff to research visits (“reference demand”). However, no tabulated report of data from individual institutions has been provided that would permit comparative analysis.

NAGARA Reporting Standards

Public records archivists had already begun their efforts in this area under the National Association of State Archives and Records Administrators (NASARA) in 1976 with an application to the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) for support of a study of terminology and work standards. The goal was to create standard terms and measurements for state records programs. With NEH approval, the study commenced in 1978 with a “Study Summary Report,” issued in 1981, based on the data gathered from questionnaires.

The report provided the basis for the work of study committees appointed at the NASARA annual meeting in 1981. Their recommendations were presented and approved at the 1982 meeting. They were published as *State Archives and Records Management Terminology, Measurement and Reporting Standards* in November 1982.¹⁴ The standards covered archives, preservation, records scheduling and disposition, records centers, microfilming, and records man-

agement. The report identified and defined functions and activities, stipulated a standardized set of tasks, and recommended measurement and reporting units for each function or activity. Although the term *reporting* was used in several locations in the report, the intent was only to identify and define categories of data to be collected. This was not yet a reporting mechanism or format.

As a next step, NASARA, which became NAGARA in 1985, applied for and received a grant from the NHPRC to transform the Standards into a more comprehensive reporting tool. During 1985-87 a NAGARA committee, in cooperation with a consultant from the Council of State Governments (CSG), gradually redrafted the definitions and measurement units into a more compact document. Significantly, the term *guidelines* replaced *standards* in the title of the resulting publication, *Program Reporting Guidelines for Government Records Programs*.

In order to explore implementation issues, a NAGARA committee chaired by Jim Berberich, Chief of the Florida Bureau of Archives, distributed a test questionnaire to selected states in 1988, and followed with a full test mailing to all states of the reporting form in the spring of 1989. The 1989 questionnaire (covering fiscal year 1988) yielded results from thirty states.¹⁵ A subset of “meaningful” data has been compiled for publication in the NAGARA *Clearinghouse*. Although each state’s data is shown individually, the states were promised anonymity, making direct inter-institutional comparisons impossible. Organized in spreadsheet form, each institution’s organizational type (i.e., archives, records management, a combination of the

¹³Ibid., 191.

¹⁴*State Archives and Records Management Terminology, Measurement and Reporting Standards* (Albany: NASARA, 1982).

¹⁵Based on an telephone interview with Jim Berberich, 1 May 1990, and a copy of the report and spreadsheet prepared by the NAGARA Committee on Program Reporting Standards provided to the author by Mr. Berberich.

two, or in one case, "Department of Reference"), budget, staff, and holdings of archives and records centers are reported. This is followed by nine activity measures for record schedules completed, disposal requests received, archival appraisals completed, records center retrievals, pages of microfilming done, rolls of microfilm stored, archival records accessioned, archival records arranged and described, and reference actions completed.

The committee's current plans call for distribution of an annual "short form" that seeks responses to only fifteen to twenty items, sending the "long form" every fifth year. Although the reporting form is being revised, it seems unlikely that the definitional structure of the *Program Reporting Guidelines* will be. The survey revealed two primary problems: the failure of many states to collect all the pieces of information, and the lack of agreement on quantifying the various activities. How else does one account for state archives with comparably-sized holdings where one reports more than 22,000 reference actions, and the other only 905? A further complication in using the report may be the listing of both archival and records management activities in one table although budget and staff for the two functions are not separately reported.

Simplifying the reporting form may not really address these problems. The cooperating archives must be willing to bear the cost of counting actions never counted before and the bureaucratic or psychological adjustment to count some things differently than before. Without access to the compiled information or regular reporting of the statistics, the archives are unlikely to accept that the knowledge gained is worth the effort to change practices.¹⁶

The need for regular statistical reports

may provide a role for continuing the relationship with the Council of State Governments. The Council provided the project consultant for the NHPRC grant that developed the original standards for the published *Guidelines*. According to the final report, CSG's lack of familiarity with archives and records management and the consultant's distant location in Madison, Wisconsin (the NAGARA project director was Roy Tryon at the Delaware State Archives) slowed the rate of progress.¹⁷ Nevertheless, CSG continued to provide NAGARA with the conduit for the 1989 survey activity, sending and receiving the forms. Perhaps the data can be regularly reported by becoming the basis for several pages of tables in CSG's annual *Book of the States*.

Comparable Archival Efforts

There have been few efforts at standard-making in the profession with which to compare the NAGARA guidelines project. Perhaps the only comparable effort was the work of the National Information Systems Task Force (NISTF), which led to the development of the MARC Archival and Manuscript Control Format.¹⁸ NISTF was appointed in the fall of 1977, although its most significant work, funded by NEH, took place during the 1980-83 period. Starting with a vague charge to examine national systems for controlling information about archival and manuscript materials, the group eventually redefined its task as setting the preconditions for archival information exchange.

NISTF avoided the traps of designing a system or trying to create descriptive stan-

¹⁶According to Berberich, cooperating archives that provided a diskette could have a copy of the compiled data in computer spreadsheet form.

¹⁷NAGARA, Program Reporting Standards Revision, Grant No. 85-105, Final Report, July 1985-June 1987, to the National Historical Publications and Records Commission, p. 7.

¹⁸Richard H. Lytle, "An Analysis of the Work of the National Information Systems Task Force," *American Archivist* 47 (Fall 1984): 357-65.

dards for the appearance of information which should be found in such a system. Instead it analyzed the kinds of information that various types of archives used to describe their holdings and developed a data element dictionary. The dictionary sought to standardize how a descriptive data element was used, not what the data that it held should look like. The logical next step was a standardized format for exchanging archival information and here the Task Force agreed to stay within the realm of the MARC format.

The work of NISTF in creating the MARC Archival and Manuscripts Control (AMC) Format had several substantive differences from the NAGARA effort. The creation of the AMC format benefitted from a concrete opportunity: the entry of archival and manuscript materials into existing library online catalogs and bibliographic utilities. In the NAGARA effort, as in the 1985 Census of Archival Repositories, no clearly-defined, on-going product is yet apparent, only the hope that the statistics gathered will be made available in some fashion. With only a hope of useful outcome, there is far less motivation to participate or change traditional ways of doing things.

A further important difference is that SAA has had to work closely with outside agencies, principally the Library of Congress (LC) and the American Library Association (ALA), in order to accomplish its goal of creating and implementing the MARC AMC format. NAGARA has worked closely with the Council of State Governments to create and encourage the use of the *Guidelines*, but neither NAGARA nor CSG has the governing power to enforce their use in the same manner that LC and ALA "influence" the use and modification of the MARC formats.

Conclusion

What do we learn of standards-making in the archival community from the statis-

tics efforts? Clearly we have surveyed archival institutions many times over the years, asking for the same basic information. Summary results have been published from time to time and have proved somewhat useful in judging our status. Undoubtedly individual institutions have used some of the statistics as benchmark norms against which to compare levels of activity for the purpose of justifying requested increases in staffing or space. The inherent value of some management statistics seems self-evident; furthermore, many archival repositories are required to provide some workload activity measures to parent or other funding agencies. Inevitably, we must ask if we have not yet done enough surveys to recognize that there is a basic set of measures common to all archives? Have we arrived yet at a point analogous to that perceived by Elaine Engst in her NISTF study of descriptive data elements in finding aids—that regardless of how it may look, we are all doing the same basic things?¹⁹

Several of the projects described above indicate that at least some in the archival community recognize the patterns of commonality. Yet the profession has failed to create a mechanism that will change random, individual survey efforts into standing programs to regularly collect statistical information and report it back to the profession. NAGARA has taken a stronger step than any other segment of the archival community to do this. It is convinced that the return will justify the effort and that state archives are willing to change long-standing work patterns to accomplish this effort.

In essence, standard measurements of resources and activities can be created and used only if all the participating reposi-

¹⁹Elaine D. Engst, "Standard Elements for the Description of Archives and Manuscript Collections," (unpublished report to the Society of American Archivists Task Force on National Information Systems, September 1980).

ries agree to do so. Reaching that agreement requires the abandonment of some traditional practices in measuring what we have and what we do, as well as beginning to measure many things that we have never measured before. There must be a willingness to change and a faith that the ultimate product will be worth the effort.

The NAGARA constituency is only be-

ginning to realize a return on the efforts expended. This must continue. The resulting reports will certainly be examined carefully by the entire archival community. If done well, more than just state archivists will realize that there are benefits to having standardized measures of resources and performance available for comparative purposes.