ARCHIVAL NEEDS ASSESSMENT GUIDELINES

Background
Public or private organizations (governments, historical societies, libraries, not-for-profits, businesses, schools) undertake needs assessments to evaluate and plan for archival program development. A comprehensive needs assessment can pinpoint problems, recommend solutions, set priorities and guide the development of archival activity. These guidelines will provide anyone conducting a needs assessment with the information needed to develop a sound, practical planning tool for archival program development.

Who Conducts the Needs Assessment?
Because of the specialized knowledge that is needed, archival needs assessments should only be conducted by experienced archivists. Depending on circumstances, the assessment should be conducted by either qualified staff or a hired consultant.

SEE:
New York State Archives and Records Administration, Records Management Consultants for Local Government, Technical Information Series #44. Albany: New York State Education Department, 2000

Elements of the Needs Assessment
The needs assessment should describe the current status of each element below, then provide realistic and attainable recommendations for improvement for each element.

1. Needs Assessment
   1.1 Introductory/Background Statement
   The needs assessment should begin with brief background information about the organization (when established, where located, hours open, when archival program was established), date of the review/visit and the names and titles of staff consulted. It
should also include information about the efforts the organization has undertaken to improve its archival program or archival activities already in place. The assessment might address efforts the organization has made on its own or with grant funds (training staff have received, budget increases or supplies and equipment purchases).

1.2 **Purpose of Needs Assessment**
The assessment should state why the organization wants to conduct a needs assessment, including a statement about the situation or circumstances that let to the needs assessment. A statement should also be provided that includes the type of needs assessment undertaken, such as comprehensive archival needs assessment, assessment concerning the facility, various procedures, preservation or arrangement and description.


1.3 **Legal Authority and Purpose**
The assessment should note and review documentation relating to the legal status and authority for the organization to operate and acquire records (e.g. enabling legislation, resolutions, policies and procedures). An organization should have a formal statement of its purpose. In the event the organization has no such documentation, the needs assessment should include a recommendation that the organization develop these components, and any special considerations that the organization needs to be sure to address.


1.4 **Administration**
The assessment should indicate whether the organization is independent or part of a larger institution. If the archival program exists within an organizational unit or structure of a larger
institution, then is it compatible with the goals and functions of the organization? Whether the organization has any relationships with any other organizations (relating to cooperative collecting, for instance) also should be noted. The assessment should provide recommendations describing administrative changes or realignments that may enhance the status or credibility of archival activities. Other recommendations relating to cooperative collecting relationships or any other administrative issues of concern should also be addressed.

1.5 Policy Review
The needs assessment should review existing policies and procedures the organization has in place including enabling legislation and resolutions (for local governments), mandates and charters (for historical records repositories), and other governing documents as well as policies that relate to ownership and custody of archival records. The assessment should provide recommendations for improving or creating requisite policies and procedures.

1.6 Financial Resources
The needs assessment should evaluate the organization’s budget to determine whether financial resources are dependably available and adequate to carry out the program’s stated purpose. The assessment may make recommendations for what funding is essential for the program to be conducted adequately and for ways to increase funds for archival purposes.

1.7 Personnel
This element of the assessment should discuss the number of staff working with archival records, their background and training, types of positions held, and current responsibilities. The assessment also should provide recommendations for staffing levels and expertise needed to sustain and grow the program and may provide suggestions for staff development.

1.8 Physical Facility
The needs assessment should describe the physical characteristics of the records storage facility, including the physical construction of the building and interior makeup of the facility as well as environmental conditions and make recommendations on what needs to be done to bring conditions to an adequate level.
1.9 **Active Records**
While some organizations acquire and manage collections of records transferred or donated by records creators, many have their own administrative records to maintain. The assessment should address the management of these institutional records as well, from their creation to their disposition. The assessment should discuss current operating procedures and identify areas where the organization could take steps during the creation or active phase of the records life cycle to improve access and ensure longevity of the archival records.

1.10 **Building Archival and Manuscript Holdings (Acquisition/Appraisal)**
The assessment should note whether the organization has a formally adopted written acquisitions policy identifying the types of records the archives will acquire and if it maintains records to document the acquisitions process (e.g. records transfer documentation, deeds of gift) and records the provenance of all accessions. Where appropriate, the assessment should provide recommendations about the possible directions the organization may take in its collection development strategies. The assessment should note if all acquisitions are appraised to identify permanently valuable materials. For institutional/governmental records the assessment should address whether the repository has evaluated non-permanent records for historical value, or uses SARA or other records retention and disposition schedules to identify permanent records. In cases where appraisal is not currently undertaken, the assessment should advise the organization on how to identify historical or permanent records. The assessment should address the development of acquisition and appraisal policies and procedures if none or inadequate ones exist.

SEE:

Ham, Gerald F. *Selecting and Appraising Archives and Manuscripts.* Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1993

1.11 Security
The assessment should describe current security measures the organization has undertaken, including locked doors, limited access (who has keys) and alarms, and provide recommendations for ensuring basic security needs are met. Recommendations should discuss the handling of records by researchers and research room security procedures in general.

SEE:

1.12 Preserving Records
The needs assessment should include a general review of the quantity of records and their general physical condition. The report should note if the organization undertakes preservation activities. Preservation activities include: maintaining environmental controls; providing safe, secure and appropriate storage; staff and user education for handling records; and reformatting (e.g. microfilming, photocopying, etc.). It also should be noted whether the principles of archival appraisal govern the selection of materials for preservation. This section of the needs assessment also should indicate whether the organization addresses damage through intervening conservation treatments, and if so, uses methods consistent with current professional standards. Recommendations should be provides for facility improvement, relating to environmental controls, and proper storage of archival material. After a careful review of the archival records, the assessment may recommend records that are good candidates for special conservation intervention, microfilming or other reformatting.

SEE:
1.13 **Arrangement and Description**

The assessment should review whether records are arranged and described according to accepted archival practices and standards. Provenance and original order should be investigated along with review of inventory worksheets if appropriate, records transfer sheets, series descriptions, container lists and/or guides (finding aids). The assessment should note whether records created in all formats are appropriately housed, identified, and stored so that they are easily maintained and readily retrieved. The needs assessment should provide recommendations relating to policies, procedures, and standards for arrangement and description. Recommendations may also include potential records for inclusion in a guide or brochure or other descriptive tool that help promote the organization, its activities and records.

SEE:


1.14 **Access Policy and Reference Services**

The assessment should identify who uses the archival records, and how often. How the records are used should be considered in addition to a review of any reference/access policies that might be in place. The needs assessment also should indicate whether the organization is open for research use on a regular basis, provides adequate space and facilities for research use, makes its records equitably available to all users, and defines and carefully observes any restrictions on access. It should provide recommendations for appropriate access policies and reference procedures.
1.15 Outreach
The needs assessment should identify ways for the organization to reach out to the community it serves. This may include workshops, Archives Week activities, conferences, training programs, courses, festivals, exhibits, publications, and similar activities, aimed at such groups as students, faculty members, scholars, administrators, donors, records creators, governments, or the community at large. Recommendations should be provided that discuss particular outreach activities the organization can attain. The needs assessment may recommend outside funding sources to support various outreach activities. For example, a local food chain may underwrite costs of an exhibit or program.

SEE:


New York State Archives and Records Administration, Consider the Source: Historical Records in the Classroom. Albany: New York State Education Department, 1995

1.16 Disaster Preparedness
The needs assessment should indicate whether the organization has a disaster preparedness plan. If not, the assessment should provide advice and recommendations on the elements for a plan.

SEE:

1.17 Information Technology
Many organizations will not necessarily have embarked on technological solutions to records issues. But if an organization has even a single computer, the needs assessment might recommend its potential uses for records
management/archival purposes, such as on-line catalogues, accessioning, development of guides and outreach tools.


2. **Action Plan**

A valuable component of the needs assessment is to provide the organization with immediate direction via a brief, attainable Action Plan. This could be as simple as a list of recommendations relating to each of the points listed in points 1.1 through 1.17 above.

**Short-Term/Long-Range Goals**

A component of the Action Plan includes short-term and long-range goals. These activities provide the organization direction, attainable goals and vision. These can be given to the organization in a short-list format.

**Examples of short-term goals:**

a. Development of policies and procedures for arrangement and description that follow national standards.

b. Create a staff training policy that stresses the importance of security measures relating to access to collections and limiting the number of keys to the records storage area.

c. Write position descriptions for staff.

**Examples of long-range goals:**

a. Budget funds for the records program/obtain an increased budget for the records program.

b. Publicize holdings via press releases and open house during Archives Week.

c. Establish a program for the preservation of archival materials that includes various facility improvements such as purchasing archival shelving.

d. Develop expertise in appraisal of records for historical value by attending workshops sponsored by the State Archives and Records Administration.

**Conclusion**

This document is meant to provide guidelines for the development of comprehensive needs assessments to meet the needs of individual organizations. It is intended that the guidelines will provide anyone conducting archival programmatic analyses with information needed to develop the most
complete assessments possible, thus providing organizations with sound, practical planning tools. The needs assessment should not be left on a shelf to gather dust. It should serve as a critical advocacy tool, as such, its findings and recommendations should be presented to the organization’s board of directors or administrator to enlist support. Findings and recommendations included in the assessment can also provide the basis for applications to funding agencies.