

NORTH DAKOTA'S FORGOTTEN HERITAGE DIMLY REMEMBERED

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ABSTRACT: While the individual state assessment reports provided accurate descriptions of the conditions as they existed at that time, those conditions and needs continue to evolve. Using North Dakota's experience as an example, the author argues that the value of the state assessment reports lies in the fact that they can serve as benchmarks and as the basis for realistic planning documents. Follow-up studies are needed to continue the planning process and to interpret achievements and shortcomings.

Our view of a given situation is as much a perspective as it is a situation in itself. While I don't think I've ever been described as a Pollyanna, my own view of the state of American archives today—or at least the state of American state archives—is somewhat more upbeat than the picture painted by *Documenting America*. While the individual state reports give accurate descriptions of problems or shortcomings that need to be addressed, it is clearly not justified to conclude that these reports are no more than Posner revisited twenty years later, and that we need not have bothered because nothing has improved.¹ For example, Posner cited the Illinois State Archives as one of the outstanding state programs in the United States. Illinois has long had a comparatively strong program. But can anyone familiar with Illinois archives in 1963 view the situation today and not conclude that significant progress had been made, that the programs were better administered, facilities better equipped, records more accessible? Saying that does not excuse or ignore the tragic neglect of Chicago's records or other areas of need that were identified in Illinois' 1982 assessment report. It should be recognized, however, that a far different situation existed in 1982 and 1983 (when the first round of assessment reports was completed) than in 1963 in Illinois, Ohio, Wisconsin, North Dakota, and practically every other state in the Midwest Archives Conference's twelve-state region.

I make this point because failing to recognize significant change ignores an important contribution of these assessment reports as realistic planning documents or as the basis for planning documents. The assessment reports forced many of us "to put it in writing," "it" being those goals and priorities that may exist in numerous budget documents or memos, "it" being the conclusion that

historical records repositories in a state have a community of interest and a need to cooperate, "it" being the recognition that our planning must actively involve a variety of individuals and interests.

Many of us could have and should have done more. Assessments of the assessment reports bring out the fact that some were confused about who the intended audience was or what type of action was required. I confess that I was a shortsighted and somewhat reluctant participant. The grant had been awarded before I became state archivist and as I looked at our programs I didn't think an elaborate study was required to identify our major problems and priorities. A week or so on the job had accomplished that. I look at our report now and see missed opportunities.

Our report, *North Dakota's Forgotten Heritage*,² was published in June 1983. The report contained fifty-seven specific recommendations, thirteen of which were identified as "key." Three years later I reviewed the status of those recommendations in a report to our historical records advisory board. The results were surprising even to me. Of the fifty-seven specific recommendations, thirty-seven were completed or in progress. Clearly, three years had made a difference in many concrete areas. Two questions arise: (1) did the report make any difference, or would these thirty-seven things have happened without an assessment report; and (2) is question number one relevant?

The answer to the first question—whether the report itself influenced activity—is mixed. It was clearly useful in a few areas, in others the work would have been done anyway. The report had the greatest impact on the state's records management program. Even prior to the issuance of the assessment report, the consultant's report was used in legislative committee to support the transfer of the records management function from the Secretary of State, where it had languished for twenty-two years, to the Office of Management and Budget. However, after the transfer was legally effected, budget office staff politely declined to discuss with me the organization of the records management function. They chose instead to visit "model programs" in two states. Unfortunately, neither program has been considered "model" by anyone else. But they did read *North Dakota's Forgotten Heritage* and they did incorporate some of its recommendations into their internal report. Four years later, twelve of the fifteen recommendations relating to records management that were made in the assessment report have been or are now being implemented. The records management program moved further in four years than it had moved in the preceding twenty-two with significant initiatives in records scheduling and disposal, forms design and control, microfilming, and microfilm quality control.

The progress in records management had a positive impact on state archives as well, particularly as improved retention schedules facilitated our appraisal process. Of the assessment report recommendations specific to state archives, six of ten are being implemented, including special efforts in arrangement and description and the production of general finding aids, informing agencies of the role of the archives, and a focused acquisition emphasis to acquire specific records. For local government records, six of nine assessment report recommendations are in various stages of implementation, with a county records project currently in progress which is a cooperative effort of the North Dakota Association of Counties, the state archives, and state records management, with funding assistance from NHPRC. For manuscripts repositories, progress was

recorded for five of seven recommendations, including published guides from two repositories, a workshop on conservation, and exchange of all inventories or registers among the three major repositories. One perhaps unsurprising lapse was in the recommended establishment of a coordinated collecting policy among the major repositories. For statewide services, nine of sixteen assessment report recommendations have been implemented, including promulgation of microfilm standards for the filming of all government records, expanded institutional loan of research materials, and microfilm projects to preserve newspapers and state government publications. All of this leads to one of two conclusions. Either we set a fairly light agenda for ourselves or we have made a lot of progress.

But it is also important to note what has not been implemented. A state records center has not been established and additional staff for the state archives has not been provided, two of the more significant and expensive assessment report recommendations. For the most part, any additional resources have come from grant-funded projects, not from substantially increased state funding, although there are some minor exceptions in the records management area. Within the state archives, state-supported staff levels have remained constant since 1981; and supplies, services, and equipment monies have actually been reduced, in some cases drastically.

Based on these diminishing budgets, it is clear that we failed to use the report—or failed in using the potential impact of the project—to convince resource allocators of the need for additional support for these programs. If the report had a *positive* impact I would hate to think what our position would have been without it. However, one must also reluctantly conclude that it is possible to have budget cuts and progress, too. I do not want to make that admission too loudly or too often but it is true that North Dakota's historical records are better cared for and more accessible today than they were four years ago. Of course all those records would be in much *better* care and would be much *more* accessible had staff and other funding increased significantly over that same time period. Two issues compound one another: do we have adequate resources and are the resources we have adequately or properly used?

So let me return to my questions at the beginning. The first question was: did the report make any difference or would these things have happened without an assessment report? The report did make some difference, but not enough to get excited about. Additional resources were not allocated, there was no ground swell of support for archives, and the ideas generated by the report were not new.

My second question was: is question number one relevant? I don't think so. Although the state reports were not consistent, and many of their goals were very general (and often unrealistic), the assessment projects themselves forced state boards and state archivists to put goals and priorities in writing, something long sought but rarely found. While Margaret Child's criticism is valid—she stated that the reports failed to look at areas of regional and national interest—at least they got as far as each state's borders.³ They forced a certain amount of lip service to interinstitutional cooperation. They produced at least a minimum amount of program analysis in a public forum. And, often overlooked, they provided a benchmark for measuring future change. I think one of the reasons we have seen so little progress is that we have lacked basic planning documents. It

is not enough to set goals and objectives; we also need to assess results. Too often we measure activities without relating them to the objectives those activities are designed to meet. The assessment reports provided us with a series of benchmark studies that, to a large extent, contain sufficient analysis of the status quo and sufficiently measurable objectives to permit follow-up analysis. I think that is important in itself. Perhaps in reconsidering these reports we will discover what we have accomplished. Perhaps we will even be able to interpret our accomplishments rather than continue to flaunt our failures to the public or to those ubiquitous resource allocators. (Actually, rather than "ever-present," perhaps it should be "never-present" resource allocators.)

Now that we understand what we should have done, we should do it again. The first round of these reports is sufficiently obsolete that the reviews can stop and the assessment of the results can start. My fear is that we will not follow up, that we will not attempt to do it again. The nature of assessment and planning is that it must be repeated at regularly scheduled intervals. Had we met fifty-seven of the fifty-seven recommendations contained in our report, North Dakota's archival heritage might still be forgotten or just a dim memory. If we were to undertake this project today we might end up with fifty-seven, or seventy, or one hundred new recommendations, reflecting our current situation, rather than that of 1983, or of 1963. These assessment reports should be viewed as benchmarks by which to measure future progress rather than as stagnant pools reflecting our collective failures.

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NOTES

1. Ernst Posner, *American State Archives* (Chicago: the University of Chicago Press, 1964). Comments on Illinois' program, pp. 98-105.
2. *North Dakota's Forgotten Heritage: Public and Private Records as Historical Documents* (Bismarck: State Historical Records Advisory Board, 1983).
3. Margaret Child, "Consultant Report: Statewide Functions and Services," in *Documenting America: Assessing the Condition of Historical Records in the States*, ed. Lisa B. Weber, (Albany, N.Y.: National Association of State Archives and Records Administrators, 1984), 51-52.