

The July 1991 Draft Report

Executive Summary

This is the final report on a year-long effort to identify and examine the significance of patterns of users and use at the National Archives in Washington, D.C., during 1990. The series of projects that comprises the study sought to learn who contacts the archives in person, by telephone and by mail; what information they are seeking; what services they use; and some of the ways they seek answers to their questions. The findings help in understanding present service demands on the agency, projecting trends in future use, and identifying issues for further study. The research focused on people who actually contact the agency for information, rather than on why people choose not to use the holdings of the National Archives.

The study was designed to assist in the understanding and design of reference services at the National Archives, including new facilities under construction in College Park, Maryland. Information about the agency's current users may also be of assistance in improving the productivity of the agency's existing reference procedures and may lead to the creation of new tools, procedures, and processes where appropriate. The study did not investigate the needs of patrons who use the holdings of the National Archives' presidential libraries system or its regional archives. Similar research projects, however, could be undertaken using the data-gathering instruments developed for this study and included in this report.

The multi-faceted study described in this report explores the types of people who currently contact the National Archives and the processes they follow to define their needs and make use of the services the National Archives provides. The complexity of the agency required a series of projects that together address the research issues. Much of the quantitative data for the user study was gathered from researchers in structured, face-to-face interviews. In total, 800 people were interviewed over a nine-month period in seven research rooms in the Washington, D.C., area. All

components of the user study included observation of patrons by the study director. Direct measurement supplemented and verified subjective data gathered in interviews and observation.

Additional research components of the user study included the logging of 662 incoming telephone calls and the assessment of 367 reference letters. Research in the records of the National Archives provided important historical background. A thorough review of secondary literature on the history of the National Archives, the structure of archival reference services, and the evaluation of patron services support the research design.

The findings cover a broad range of topics, beginning with the purposes researchers have in contacting the National Archives. For example, of the 587 individuals interviewed in the six research rooms, approximately one-quarter are involved in work-related projects. One in five researchers interviewed is engaged in academic research at various levels, including students and faculty. Academics, however, comprise the single largest group of Central Research Room patrons. Overall, less than half of the ongoing use of the combined research rooms involves personal research. Purely personal researchers, when combined with avocational projects still account for only fifty-four percent of the ongoing projects. Genealogy is the single most popular research activity at the National Archives. The findings of the user study suggest that no more than half of the individuals who visit the agency are engaged in genealogical research projects.

The 800 individuals interviewed for the study were asked how they found out that the National Archives had the information they needed for their research projects. The impression presented by the findings is one of an enterprising group of researchers who talk to friends and associates or take the initiative to find out what information is available. Across the board, personal networks are the most important means by which people find their way to the National Archives.

The study sought to explore the extent to which those who need to do research in National Archives holdings, either in person or by mail, are prepared to follow a sometimes-complicated research process. The findings show that the clientele of the agency during a typical week is composed of one part fresh faces, one part researchers with only a few days under their belts, and two parts people who have spent considerable time in National Archives Washington-area facilities, even though some of this experience may have occurred years ago. Just over one-third of all researchers interviewed had called or written for information prior to their visit.

An important part of the user study was the systematic investigation of how researchers pose their historical questions. The study sought to identify the specific components of researchers' questions, how much information they volunteer with and without probing, and the differences in question patterns between face-to-face questioning and reference correspondence. Overall, the findings suggest that researchers as a group apparently have significant information about their topics when they contact the National Archives and that much of this information consists of the fundamental elements of historical inquiry--names, dates, places, and events. Regardless of whether they call, write, or visit in person, researchers seem to have their historical questions specifically defined and their needs for documentation narrowed. The people who visit National Archives facilities follow

a process of orienting themselves to the reference system, searching for and retrieving relevant records, and making use of the information to address, at least partially, the problem at hand. By design, few people who pass through the Consultants Office receive significant assistance beyond the issuance of a research card. In general, desk attendants and consultants ask enough questions to make a reasonably accurate referral within the National Archives system.

All people interviewed were asked if they had already used or expected to use National Archives holdings other than the media available in the research room where they were interviewed. The responses indicate that researchers tend to move freely among research rooms in search of relevant information, suggesting the huge potential for fluid and frequent movement within the research complex at Archives II.

Reference staff have noticed a marked increase in the use of special note-taking equipment, including laptop computers and miniature tape recorders. About ten percent of those interviewed were observed using their own equipment. In addition, the Consultants Office is the de facto switchboard operator for the National Archives in Washington. Half of the 662 callers during the study week requested to be transferred to a specific employee or to a specific reference branch.

The tension between preservation needs and service to patrons is perhaps most readily apparent in the area of self-service copying. The combination of ready availability of photocopying equipment, deadline pressure felt by researchers, and the lack of consistent and rigorous monitoring in research rooms leads to occasional abuse of archival materials.

Looking ahead to the development of automated access systems at National Archives, the user study sought in several ways to assess the capability of researchers to make use of such systems and to express their research needs in ways that make feasible computerized search and retrieval. A relatively small portion of research visitors may need serious assistance understanding the capabilities of a sophisticated archival information system. At the other extreme, an equally small group of researchers will probably be eager to have direct access to automated finding aids, and may even use them from remote locations. Between these two extremes is a group of patrons that claims to be familiar with the computerized retrieval of information and that can be expected to respond well to an automated system whose user interface is responsive to the huge variety of patron questions.

The value of reference and access services to the public is vested not only in the uniqueness of the holdings but also in the perceptions by researchers that the National Archives contains just the right materials to address the task at hand. When asked directly how important the materials they were currently using for the successful completion of their overall project, the overwhelming majority (93%) stated that the materials were either "essential" or "very important." In spite of a fairly cumbersome, time-consuming reference process, researchers report that they are generally successful in identifying relevant information in the holdings.

As a whole, the findings of the study point away from the notion of increasing researchers' dependence on archivists. To meet successfully the present and future demands placed on it by a nation of potential patrons, the National Archives should consider a partnership approach to service that encourages the self-sufficient use of the holdings while preserving the quality of professional support that has been the agency's heritage for half a century. In partnership with patrons, archivists are but one component of an integrated system of facilities, staff, and computer-supported access tools that guarantees equal access and is capable of delivering a variety of services at a level commensurate with stated needs.

The primary challenge in moving from a gatekeeper to a partnership approach to service is overcoming the historic tendency to link the structure of reference services to the structure of the records themselves. Administratively released from their gatekeeping role, archivists could be free to embed their special knowledge into tools that mitigate the problems of access to archival materials. The report outlines a set of goals for the coming decade that if attained could move the National Archives toward the objective of user-oriented reference and access services. The report consists of five sections. Section one provides a conceptual model that serves as a structure for the research project. Included is a proposed definition of research purposes and a model of the reference process as it exists in most archival repositories. Section two describes the context of the study and outlines previous research on the patrons of the National Archives. Summarized in section three are the research approach adopted, basic methodologies employed, and quantitative research projects undertaken. The heart of the report is the fourth section, which includes a discussion of the findings on who uses the National Archives and the research process they follow. The final section presents an alternative model of reference services and suggests five goals for such services. An appendix details the research projects undertaken, including pertinent questionnaires, analysis forms, and data from patron interviews. An annotated bibliography completes the package.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction / 49

Understanding Users and Use / 50

The National Archives Context / 54

Summary of Research Methodology / 59

Major Findings / 62

 Who Uses the National Archives / 62

 Purpose of Research Visit /64

 Discovering the National Archives / 66

 Advance Contact and Previous Experience / 68

 Research Questions / 70

 The Research Process / 73

 Orientation / 73

 Search and Retrieval / 75

 Application / 79

Toward Enhanced Access to the Nation's Archives / 82

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure

1. Research Purposes / 51
2. Gatekeeper Approach / 53
3. Partnership Approach / 83

LIST OF TABLES

Table

1. Research Visits During Study Weeks / 63
2. Purpose of Research Visit / 64
3. Discovering the National Archives / 67
4. Advance Contact and Previous Experience / 70
5. Research Question Elements / 72
6. Intended Use of Resources by Media / 74
7. Use of Photocopying Services / 76
8. Familiarity with Computers / 78
9. Success in Finding Relevant Information / 81

Introduction

This is the final report on a year-long effort to identify and examine the significance of patterns of users and use by interviewing directly many of the people who contacted the National Archives in Washington, D.C., during 1990. The series of projects that comprises the study sought to learn who contacts the archives in person, by telephone and by mail; what information they are seeking; what services they use; and some of the ways they seek answers to their questions. The findings form a useful base of information for portraying present service demands on the agency, projecting trends in future use, and identifying issues for further study. The focus of the research is entirely on people who actually contact the agency for information rather than on why people choose not to use the holdings of the National Archives.

Archivist of the United States Don W. Wilson initiated the study following the publication of a report by the National Coordinating Committee for the Promotion of History entitled *Developing a Premier National Institution*. One of the four goals identified in the report called on the National Archives to devote increased attention to users and recommended that the agency undertake a "comprehensive survey of the diverse categories of users and their needs."¹ This report is, in part, a response to the stated needs of one of the agency's user communities, research historians.

More importantly, the report is designed to assist in the understanding and design of reference services at the National Archives, including new facilities under construction in College Park, Maryland. The base of information about the agency's current users may be of assistance in improving the productivity of the agency's existing reference procedures and lead to the creation of new tools, procedures, and processes where appropriate. The study did not investigate the needs of patrons who use the holdings of the National Archives' presidential libraries system or its field archives branches. Such research projects, however, could be undertaken using the data-gathering instruments developed for this study and included in this report.

One of the central missions of the National Archives is to provide access to the archival materials it acquires and preserves to the widest possible audience. A basic assumption underlying the research for this report is that this mission cannot be accomplished unless the agency is given the resources necessary to make reference services as responsive as possible to the needs of all individuals involved, archivists as well as their research clientele. Services to the public should be grounded in a thorough and continuous assessment of patterns of users and use of archival holdings, rather than in adherence to traditional procedures once thought appropriate for a limited clientele.

The report consists of five sections. Section one provides a framework for understanding users and use that serves as an overall structure for the research project. Included is a proposed definition of research purposes and a model of the reference process as it exists in most archival repositories. Section two describes the administrative context of the study and outlines previous research on the

¹ Page Putnam Miller, *Developing a Premier National Institution: A Report from the User Community to the National Archives* (Washington, D.C.: National Coordinating Committee for the Promotion of History, 1989), 22.

patrons of the National Archives. Summarized in section three are the overall research approach adopted, basic methodologies employed, and quantitative research projects undertaken. The heart of the report, contained in section four, is the combined findings of the projects, and includes a discussion of who uses the National Archives and the research process they follow. The final section presents an alternative model of reference services and suggests five goals for such services. An appendix details the research projects undertaken, including pertinent questionnaires, analysis forms, and data from patron interviews. An annotated bibliography completes the package.

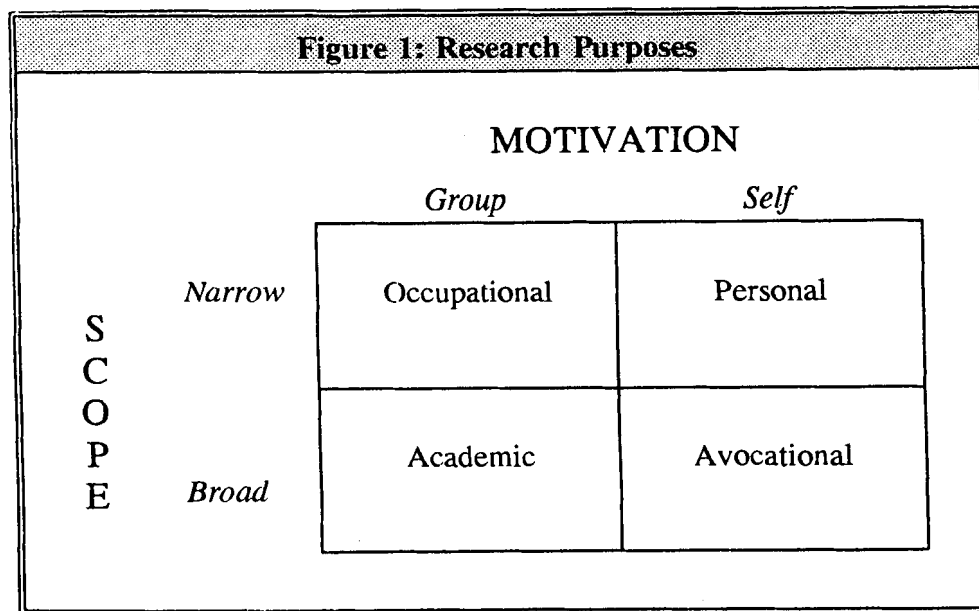
Section One: Understanding Users and Use

The fundamental responsibilities of all archival repositories are to acquire, preserve, and make available historical source materials of enduring value. In principle the ultimate rationale for the existence of archival institutions is not the preservation of archives for their own sake or because archivists appraise them to be valuable, but because they are used by people from all walks of life, for all manner of purposes, to address historical problems. From this perspective, archival programs are first and foremost a set of services designed to meet the stated needs of those who contact the archives.

For purposes of understanding the nature of these contacts, archivists have typically categorized people in terms of their occupations or their institutional affiliations. Although this approach has aided the understanding of the variety of researcher backgrounds, occupational categories reveal very little about how the purposes of the contact relate to actual service needs. From a patron-service perspective, it is important to understand, at a simple level, what motivates a person to contact the archives and the scope of the archival records sought. Knowing whether a person is self-motivated or approaches the archives within the context of a group affiliation provides important clues about the uses to which the information obtained may be put. Differentiating between patron needs for specific or narrowly defined records and broad documentation is necessary to identify the most appropriate access tools and the level of personal service required.

Figure 1 illustrates how research purpose can be understood as a functions of individual motivation and scope of information need. Four categories of researchers result: occupational, academic, personal, and avocational. Government administrators, journalists, lawyers, and film makers working on specific work-oriented projects are typical examples of **Occupational** researchers. A person's occupation per se may not necessarily place them in this group unless their purpose for visiting the archives is related to their job. A second group of researchers takes a much broader approach to archival research and conducts work within a group context. Often, but not exclusively, these researchers are affiliated with **Academic** institutions, and include faculty and many levels of students in a variety of disciplines. Other people have purely **Personal** reasons for consulting archives and define the scope of their research fairly narrowly. Typical personal researchers are tracing family immigration patterns, documenting their own military service, or seeking historical facts out of curiosity. The fourth group of researchers has an **Avocational** interest in archives. They are willing to pursue their interests in greater depth over a longer period of time than more focused personal

researchers. Persons researching Civil War history independently, documenting the personnel of a World War II ship or the design of a fortification in Florida are examples of "history hobbyists." They often expect to produce some concrete product from their work and may have significant publications to their credit.



Today as in the past, all researchers who visit, call or write an archival facility, regardless of their purpose, are engaged in some type of historical search, which is essentially a cyclical process of **discovering** potential sources of information to answer questions they may have only partially defined; **orienting** themselves to the components of the research process at particular institutions that house archives; **searching** groups of records in a variety of forms and media to retrieve specific "chunks" of relevant information, or having someone do it for them; and **applying** this information to solve at least partially the problem at hand. Researchers repeat the cycle until their information needs are satisfied or they quit.

Discovery: People who use archival materials have one or more questions and seek information to answer them. Patron questions may vary in complexity and depth, and the information they seek may serve a variety of purposes. Potential researchers may discover that an archives contains relevant information through word of mouth, a variety of published sources, or serendipity. Sometimes a casual visit may lead to substantive research inquiries. Potential researchers may be quite misinformed about the holdings of the archives, may make contact with the agency by mail or telephone, or may never actually make a personal visit. Those who do visit may or may not have made contact in advance. The discovery process is largely user-driven, although archivists can influence the process by understanding and controlling more directly the ways in which they present themselves to actual and potential users.

Orientation: At its simplest, orientation is the process researchers use to become familiar with the access rules and regulations; learn the structure of the holdings and building; and, most importantly, test their expectations against the reality of a particular institution. Researchers who visit may be oriented by signs, guards, or emergency exit maps; by technicians or professional archivists; and by fellow researchers. Those who choose to write or call have no central source of information for substantive inquiries. New users of non-microfilm holdings and registered researchers with new topics may be given a basic orientation by consultants, while reference archivists provide more substantive assistance with the structure and content of records on request. Because it is archivist-driven, orientation has as many definitions as there are people to administer it.

Search/Retrieval: The search/retrieval process is not necessarily linear nor straightforward and may involve back and forth movement (physically and intellectually) among archivists, finding aids, and the collections themselves. Very little is known about the user search/retrieval process in an archival setting other than the mechanics of servicing records. Researchers typically search for three types of information concerning:

- * the archives' programs and services;
- * the structure, content, availability, and condition of records in its custody that may be appropriate to the research question; and
- * facts or interpretations from the records themselves.

Researchers retrieve information in one or a combination of four ways:

- * committing it to memory;
- * taking notes in some form;
- * reproducing original images on paper, microform, magnetic tape or other media; and
- * borrowing materials for use in exhibition or other purposes.

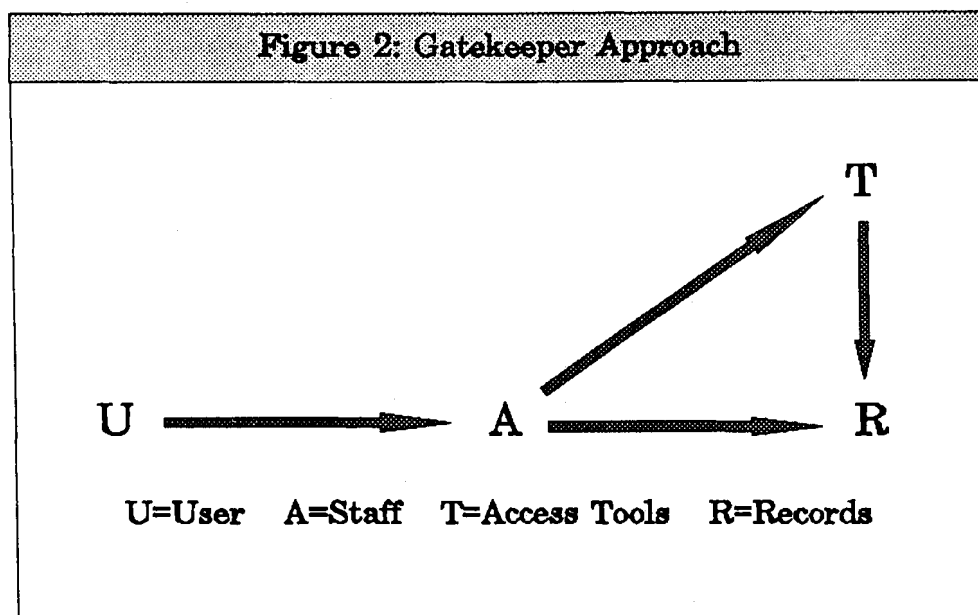
Application: Information obtained from an archives may or may not be vitally important to researchers in answering their questions. Typically, other sources of information are used in a patchwork fashion to address even the simplest of historical questions. Archivists may never really understand the complex variety of actual uses of archival materials. Of primary importance in structuring reference services and access systems is a more systematic understanding of the intended uses of archival information and the relative value of archival information for addressing a variety of questions requiring historical understanding.

Archives acquire their principal value initially from two inherent characteristics: the uniqueness of the records themselves and the relationships among groups of records. Archivists enhance the value of archival materials first by selecting them from the mass of documentation produced by people and organizations in the normal course of their activities; then by developing access systems that capture and describe archival values (content and relationships) in ways meaningful to those who use them; and, finally, by providing services that encourage and promote the self-sufficient use of the materials. Access systems include components such as physical descriptions (finding aids),

the archivists who prepare them, the environment in which staff and users interact, and the set of procedures and regulations that ensure the protection of the records from abuse, theft, or, in the case of national security information, breach of security. Responsive access systems are based on the retrieval needs of those who will use them, including archivists and patrons.

Given the unique nature of archival materials and the responsibilities that archivists have to maintain their integrity, a natural tension exists between preservation and security on the one hand and access services on the other. The point of greatest sensitivity is the research room where records are physically handled by researchers. Direct reference services in this environment are by necessity a compromise between efforts to protect records and actions to make them available. Access systems that make the best use of information technologies protect the record by limiting the handling of original materials, encouraging innovative use, and enhancing the efficiency of the user.

In most archival repositories, including the National Archives, reference and access services traditionally have been structured in what can be called a "gatekeeper" approach.² Figure 2 illustrates the relationships among the basic components of the gatekeeper approach. Gatekeepers, or expert intermediaries, place themselves between the user and both the primary access tools and the historical record. In a variation on the concept, users have direct access to the tools but must still pass through the gatekeeper, on some intellectual level, before they may consult the records. The efficiency of the gatekeeping approach is driven by the efficiency of the gatekeeper and controlled by agency regulation and administrative routines.



² For a description of the traditional view of archival reference services, see: William Saffady, "Reference Service to Researchers in Archives," *RQ* 14 (Winter 1974): 139-44; Sue Holbert, *Archives and Manuscripts: Reference* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1977); Philip C. Brooks, *Research in Archives: The Use of Unpublished Primary Sources* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969).

The gatekeeper approach to reference services suggests a number of intellectual and practical roles for archivists that carry value-laden assumptions about the clientele of archives, including at least the following four:

- * The role of the gatekeeper is to guide users to appropriate records, under the assumption that most researchers who contact an archives are ill-prepared, generally untrained in archival research methods, and unwilling to exercise the persistence it takes to make good use of the holdings.
- * The gatekeeper must master the subject content of the records, under the assumption that most researchers pursue historical subjects in depth and require the assistance of subject experts who have knowledge not easily embedded in finding aids.
- * Gatekeepers are specialists in the structure of particular groups of materials, under the assumption that most researchers seek information in a single media or format.
- * The gatekeeper serves as the user's ultimate finding aid, under the assumption that most finding aids are an inadequate means of access without interpretation; indeed it may not be feasible to assemble reference tools that can be used by patrons self-sufficiently.

The extent to which these roles and assumptions are valid for the National Archives, or any other archival repository, is an open question. Archivists know their records and their capacity to protect them. It is an exercise in wishful thinking, however, to assume that archivists can develop responsive, efficient systems that meet the archival information needs of their actual and potential users without understanding the people and the processes involved more systematically than they do now. Although individual needs for archival information are as unique as the records themselves, archivists need to know and keep track of the patterns of users and uses of the historical record and apply this knowledge in the development of responsive archival services. The best way to find out what the needs of researchers are may be to ask them directly, observe them at work, and monitor their actions on an ongoing basis.

Section Two: The National Archives Context

Throughout its fifty-five year history, the National Archives has provided service on an increasingly complex body of records to continually growing numbers of patrons. In fiscal year 1936, the first year reference services were available to the public, 119 people visited the reading rooms, requesting 114 photostatic copies; an additional 277 people requested information by telephone or mail. From 1937 to 1941 the number of researchers doubled each year the research room was open. In the intervening five decades, the number of research visitors has increased by a factor of 100 and the volume of requests placed by mail or telephone has increased 1000 fold. During Fiscal Year 1990, the Consultants Office issued 13,795 research cards and nearly 96,000 people visited the central, microfilm, and Suitland research rooms alone. The agency received over 250,000 requests for information by mail and approximately that number by telephone. Researchers made 1.6 million reproductions on the self-service photocopiers and placed orders for several million more images during the year.

Research at the National Archives has always been a complicated process. The Fifth Annual Report of the Archivist of the United States, for example, describes the reference process as it existed in 1939, three years after the first researchers visited the new facility. New researchers were issued a card and could consult records in the central search room, in the map search room, and in small search rooms adjacent to custodial divisions, or view motion pictures in the "acoustically perfect auditorium, which seats 216 persons." A reference library and subject experts on US history and Latin American history were available in the main search rooms, and researchers could arrange to meet records specialists in the custodial units. Incoming mail and telephone requests, significant in volume even in the 1930s, were routed to appropriate custodial units for reply. Copies of documents were supplied free to government officials and at cost to others.³

Even though the structure of reference service appears to have remained consistent over the intervening decades, the complexity of the system has increased dramatically. To cope with the increasing complexity and volume of both holdings and reference use, the Office of the National Archives developed an administrative structure for patron services that in effect mirrors the structure and media of the records it administers. Four components are involved: facilities, access tools, archival records, and staff archivists.

Facilities: A number of aspects of the physical plant have a direct impact on the research process, including location, layout, environmental conditions, equipment, and signage. The current nationwide network of field branches and presidential libraries did not exist in 1939. Records in the Washington, D.C., area are now physically divided among three sites (National Archives Building, Suitland, Maryland, and Alexandria, Virginia). Seven research rooms (central, microfilm, still picture, motion picture, cartographic, Nixon project, and Suitland) are available to researchers for consulting records. Archives II, while reducing the number of physical locations, may add to this complexity when it opens in 1994.

Tools: All information about primary source materials and the research process potentially aids researchers in locating relevant records. Existing manual finding aids (registers, preliminary inventories, published subject guides and lists, special indexes) abound, yet are not consistent in completeness, structure, or the depth of coverage of the records. The most complete copies of finding aids are dispersed throughout facilities and no single source of information exists that describes the status of archival accessions, processing, and description. A master location register has recently been developed to aid records retrieval. Existing computerized access is either not easily available to the public or is widely varied in structure and format. The full implementation of the computer-based Archival Information System (AIS) will eventually unify and standardize the description of holdings, while initially adding to the complexity of access.

Records: The format, structure, and physical condition of archival records need to be considered when interpreting the nature of users and use. In the past five decades, new forms of film (color), magnetic (analog and digital), and optical media have become or are becoming integral parts of the archival record. The intellectual structure of archival collections becomes more complex as the functions of creating agencies change. Preservation of

³ *Fifth Annual Report of the Archivist of the United States*, (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1939), 27-35.

both the media and the content of records remains one of the agency's most important challenges.

Archivists: The staffing structure of the National Archives may simultaneously facilitate and hamper research use. Currently, consultants, reference archivists, subject specialists, technicians, aids, and volunteers in custodial units, reference branches, and research rooms all provide assistance at various times in locating and using archival records. Detailed advice on identifying and using records may be obtained in any of fifteen office units in the Washington area; few generalists or multi-media experts are available in any of these locations.

Previous Efforts to Understand Users and Use

Since its earliest years, the National Archives has become increasingly aware of and has attempted to address the gap between the demands and expectations of the agency's patrons and the resources available to meet them. Addressing the joint meeting of the Society of American Archivists and the American Historical Association prior to World War II, historian Roy Nichols expressed the hope of the scholarly community that direct access to the nation's archives could be accomplished through a staff of records experts. "If the archives...are to perform their true functions for scholarship...they can build up a staff to study the various classes of material with a view to acting as research assistants as well as consultants when scholars come to the archives."⁴ Nichols defined a gatekeeping role for the agency's professional staff.

As the volume and complexity of use increased over the next two decades, the National Archives continued to place its reference service responsibilities front and center. In 1945 the Archivist of the United States, Solon Buck, wrote, "To make records available for use is the peculiar and basic function of an archival agency. All else that it does is directed towards this end. And the extent to which it successfully fulfills this function is the measure of its benefit to the society of which it is a part."⁵ In his twenty-year progress report on the National Archives, Archivist Wayne Grover attempted to define the bounds of proper public service.

"But it is easy under any limitations to damage the spirit of service. The difference is between a grudging service, negatively performed up to the bare limit, and a willing, even eager, service, unfortunately confined by budgetary and other policies within certain limits. There is a world of difference."⁶

In 1957 the Assistant Archivist reported to Grover on the first comprehensive review of reference services at the National Archives. The review, based largely on information supplied by reference staffs, was designed to determine "whether or not changes can be made in procedures, policies, or organization that will improve productivity without sacrificing quality of service." It noted the steady increase in scholarly requests, from 14 percent in 1946 to 27 percent in 1957, a decrease in governmental services, and the small portion of research requests on genealogical topics (10%).

⁴ Roy F. Nichols, "Alice in Wonderland," *American Archivist* 3 (July 1940): 154.

⁵ *Eleventh Annual Report of the Archivist of the United States*, (Washington, D.C: US Government Printing Office, 1946), 25.

⁶ Wayne C. Grover, "The National Archives at Age 20," *American Archivist* 17 (April 1954): 104.

The review found the quality of reference service to be generally satisfactory, recommended no policy changes, and suggested minor procedural improvements. The most far-reaching recommendation concerned the further development of subject area expertise within the staff, initially defined by Nichols.

"The scholarly and difficult service requests can be handled effectively only by staff members who have gained a considerable familiarity with records by analyzing them in the process of appraisal, arrangement, and description. A functional organization of work runs counter to the development of subject-matter expertise in the staff. The National Archives, just as any other archival institution, cannot operate effectively in the scholarly area if its work is generally organized on a functional basis."⁷

By the early 1960s top level managers recognized the inadequacy of the full range of reference services, but seemed at a loss for ways either to improve the productivity of traditional activities or to revise the system fundamentally. A review of the reasons why the finding aids program had fallen so far behind schedule produced few practical suggestions but provided an important description of the source of the problem. It suggested that as an archivist, originally hired to master the content of a single record group, advanced through the ranks, "his acquired familiarity with the records to which he was first assigned is lost to reference service, and the finding aid work he has done leaves no very useful trace."⁸

A major theft of records from the Central Research Room in the fall of 1962 prompted a full review of reference procedures with the goal of "keeping thieves out of the National Archives," and the institution of new reference procedures in 1964. "While there should be nothing basically incompatible between adequate security measures designed to protect the record from theft or other loss and adequate service to customers, it is apparent that over the past 15 years the major emphasis has been placed on customer satisfaction, at times to the detriment of physical security."⁹ Among the enhanced security procedures established that are still in force were the centralization of the research application process, the elimination of some branch reference rooms, and the development of guidelines for orientation interviews and the withdrawal of research privileges. Grover vetoed a recommendation to require that researchers apply in advance to use the holdings.¹⁰

In 1976 the National Archives undertook a second study of researchers and research trends. As in 1957, the findings were based on information derived primarily from existing internal reports, supplemented by "selective use of other records not normally used for reporting purposes," and

7 Assistant Archivist of the United States to Archivist of the United States, June 13, 1957, memo, Record Group 64, National Archives, 15-16.

8 G. P. Bauer to Wayne C. Grover, June 29, 1961, memo, RG 64, p. 1.

9 Robert H. Bahmer to Grover, February 20, 1964, memo, RG 64, p. 8.

10 Donald W. Jackanicz, "Theft at the National Archives: The Murphy Case, 1962-1975," *Library and Archival Security* 10, no. 2 (1990): 23-50.

interviews with reference archivists. The scope of the study encompassed the regional archival branches but excluded presidential libraries.¹¹ No researchers were interviewed directly.

The study was designed only to describe trends in on-site research use, not to draw conclusions about the effectiveness of service or make recommendations for improvement. Relying on research application forms, which in 1976 were required of all researchers, the report found that 57 percent of all researchers during the year were engaged in genealogical projects; 37 percent were students, faculty, and non-university affiliated researchers who claimed that their intended end-product was a scholarly publication; and the remaining 6 percent were neither genealogists nor academics. The only systematic attempt to gather information directly from users in the Washington area, carried out in 1979, demonstrated that most researchers prefer Pennsylvania Avenue as the location of a new archives building. The General Services Administration overrode serious consideration of this option in 1980.¹²

That same year the National Archives once again undertook a comprehensive study of reference services, this time in response to a new mandate of the General Services Administration to deliver "maximum service, at a minimum cost, in a timely fashion." The focus of the study was the "feasibility of reducing reference costs and obtaining increased reference service productivity through the use of standard form replies, automated technologies, improved work measurement, reduced paper handling, and improved management and supervisory practices." As an internal audit, the study did not involve contacting researchers, but instead relied on data gathered by a study team of eight members who interviewed supervisors and operating personnel and assessed existing statistical reports, correspondence files, and standard forms.¹³

While praising the quality of individual staff, the report stated that, "taken as a whole, the Office of the National Archives (NN) is not sufficiently customer oriented." Among its many recommendations, the study argued that improvements in reference efficiency primarily depended on improving management leadership and clarifying lines of supervision. Other recommendations focused on staff training needs, reference service reporting requirements, streamlined procedures for handling mail and telephone requests, and the development of finding aids and search tools. The report highlighted the confusion researchers face in locating appropriate records and the functional

11 "A Study of Users of the Records of the National Archives," unpublished report prepared by the Planning and Analysis Division, National Archives, October 1976.

12 "Summary of Researcher Survey on Archives Facilities Location Preference," 1979, Planning and Analysis Division (NAA), National Archives, RG 64; Trudy Huskamp Peterson, "The National Archives: Substance and Shadows, 1965-1980," in *Guardian of Heritage: Essays on the History of the National Archives*, ed. Timothy Walch (Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, 1985), 78.

13 Edward Weldon to NN (Acting), December 3, 1980, memo, RG 64, National Archives.

discrepancies among the service branches. "These varying standards tend to pit one branch against another which adversely impacts on the researchers as well as the staff within each branch."¹⁴

Throughout the 1980s, the National Archives continued to acquire knowledge about its reference services and the people who use the holdings. A study in four presidential libraries provided a general portrait of the people who use these facilities and their service expectations. A multi-year assessment of the use of legislative archives and incoming reference correspondence to the branch described the scope of inquiries on a single administrative unit. Efficiency studies in the civil and military reference branches, despite their relentless attention to the details of staff time and motion, yielded important clues about the limitations of fine tuning the existing system as it has evolved.¹⁵

Overall, at least four patterns emerge from this brief review of previous effort to understand users and use at the National Archives. First, with only one exception, none of the past assessments has gathered information directly from researchers who visit or call. The secondary analysis of existing information on registration forms is useful for providing context but is not sufficient in itself to portray patron needs fully. Second, the focus of most reference assessments has been on the productivity and efficiency of those who provide reference services rather than those who take advantage of those services. There are obvious limitations on how far these efficiency measures can be carried without giving equal attention to the needs of patrons. Third, most previous evaluation efforts have had as their basic assumption the notion that archivists with subject area expertise are the only important component of the reference system. Fourth, these studies identify the lack of adequate finding aids as a central weakness of the existing access system.

Section Three: Summary of Research Methodology

The multi-faceted study described in this report explores the types of people who currently contact the National Archives for information and the processes they follow to define their needs and make use of the services provided by the National Archives. For purposes of a study designed to guide the development of responsive public services, it is important to learn what happens, from the user's perspective, when people motivated for their own reasons to pursue historical questions encounter the complex components of the National Archives. Users themselves can supply part of the information needed to address this issue, especially when their comments are supported by direct observation, an assessment of secondary information, and discussions with management and staff.

Given the complexity of the National Archives, a series of projects was developed and implemented that together, like the pieces of a puzzle, portray researchers and the research process. All components of the user study combined quantitative and qualitative research methodologies. The

¹⁴ Ibid., Exhibit II.

¹⁵ Paul Conway, "Research in Presidential Libraries: A User Study," *Midwestern Archivist* 11 (1986): 35-56; David R. Kepley, "What's the Use? Capturing User Information," paper presented at the annual meeting of the Society of American Archivists, September 6, 1987; "Management Study of the Reference Functions, Civil Archives Division," report prepared for Planning and Policy Evaluation Branch, National Archives and Records Administration, September 16, 1988.

projects shared the definition of research purposes outlined earlier in this report and relied as much as possible on researchers' own words to establish response categories for quantitative analysis.

A number of assumptions governed the design of the individual research projects, including the following four:

- * Random sampling is an appropriate strategy for selecting participants in the study, because of the large number of patrons who visit, call, or write the National Archives in any given time period.
- * Complex concepts, such as familiarity with computer technology, can be best understood through measures developed by combining multiple pieces of reliable data.
- * The most reliable information is that which is elicited by simple, unambiguous questions, preferably ones that require neither extensive long-term memory recall of those being interviewed nor interpretation by the interviewer.
- * Observed behavior, combined with systematic inquiry, more meaningfully indicates patterns of use and service needs than broad questions of satisfaction.

Each project undertaken during the course of the user study employed at least two of the following research methods.¹⁶

- * **Interviews.** Much of the quantitative data for the user study was gathered from researchers in structured, face-to-face interviews, ten minutes to one-half hour in duration. Additional information was obtained from lengthier, unstructured interviews with patrons and staff. Participants were interrupted in the midst of registering for research privileges or consulting archival records in research rooms. In total, 800 researchers were interviewed over a nine-month period in seven locations in the Washington, DC area. Twenty-five patrons agreed to undergo more extensive questioning. The advantages of direct interviews include the control the method affords the investigator in selecting participants, assuring an appropriate response level, probing for detail, and establishing rapport with the respondents. The disadvantages of interviewing, as with most obtrusive research methods, include the possibility of interviewer bias and the cost of gathering and processing the data.
- * **Observation.** All components of the user study involving assessments of visitors to the National Archives included observation of patrons by the study director, using both participatory and non-participatory techniques. In the former approach, patrons and staff are aware of the observer's presence and include him in ongoing activities and discussion. Non-participatory observation is unobtrusive from the patron's perspective, even when staff are fully aware of the study in progress.
- * **Direct Measurement.** Using information compiled by the National Archives staff in the normal course of reference service or extracted directly from researchers, direct measurement is straightforward counting of activities. The method served as the primary means of supplementing and verifying subjective data gathered in interviews and observation, including qualifying

¹⁶ Research approaches are distinguished by the kinds of information each produces, while research methods are distinguished by the manner in which information is collected. For a discussion of these issues, see: Charles H. Backstrom and Gerald Hursh-Cesar, *Survey Research*, 2nd ed. (New York: John Wiley, 1981), 8-23.

statements of researchers about their intended use of the facilities, tracking movement of researchers throughout the reference complex, monitoring research room use during key study periods, accounting for incoming telephone calls, and assessing the content of incoming reference letters. Direct measurement can be extraordinarily time consuming when carried out manually.

In addition to these methods, research in the official records of the National Archives (Record Group 64), as well as in unaccessioned administrative records of the agency, provided important historical background on the growth of reference activity and past research projects designed to understand changes taking place. A thorough review of secondary literature on the history of the National Archives, the structure of archival reference services, and evaluation of patron services supported the research design. The annotated bibliography included in this report lists the most significant published works consulted. The following is a brief summary of the set of research projects that generated most of the quantitative data for the user study. Further information on each project is included in the appendix.

- * **Telephone Reference Services.** During the week of January 22, 1990, every incoming telephone call to the Consultants Office in the main National Archives building was logged on a specially designed form. Reference staff who received the 662 calls noted the type of call (about the National Archives, about holdings), the action taken (answered or referred), and the topic of substantive inquiries, including calls about genealogical research.
- * **Initial Consulting Services.** During the week of January 29, 1990, every visitor to the National Archives building who applied for a research card was observed to identify how specifically the initial research problem was stated and how consulting staff handled the patron's request. In all, 213 new individual researchers or research teams were interviewed briefly to gather information about their previous experience and preparation. Follow-up research tracked the reference activity of each person interviewed over the next two weeks with the goal of discovering where they consulted records, the types of records consulted, and the time spent in various research rooms.
- * **Research Room Services.** Interviews were conducted with a total sample of 587 researchers who visited the National Archives during typical weeks in 1990. Included were the Microfilm Research Room (March 12-17), Central Research Room (July 2-21), Suitland Reference Branch (September 4-7), and the Special Archives Division (Still Picture Branch, April 30-May 4; Motion Picture Branch, April 23-27; Cartographic Branch, May 7-11). With only minor modifications, identical questionnaires were employed in each of the six research rooms. A total of twenty-one questions probed the purpose of research visits, prior experience and preparation, reference services utilized, and assessments of the value and physical condition of the materials being used when the interviews were conducted. Additional questions asked of patrons in the Central Research Room inquired about researcher experience with computers and online searching for information.
- * **Reference Correspondence Analysis.** Every incoming written request from patrons, excluding standard-form requests for reproductions and thank-you letters, received during the week of October 1, 1990, was analyzed to determine the broad purpose of the person who wrote it, the nature of the request, and the specific elements of the reference question as posed by the correspondent. The analysis of 367 letters also revealed whether the correspondent requested

reproductions, whether the topic concerned genealogy, and if the writer specified how the information would be used. Information generated by the telephone call logs and the reference correspondence analysis was analyzed manually using forms developed for this study and included in the appendix. Information from interview and observation questionnaires completed in the Consultants Office and the research rooms was compiled into a database using "Data Entry II," a software package for interactive data entry, data editing, and data cleaning. Data analysis was accomplished using "SPSS/PC +."¹⁷

Section Four: Major Findings

A portrait of a highly motivated, history-conscious clientele emerges from observation of and interviews with people who visited, called or wrote the National Archives in the Washington, D.C., area during 1990. The study's major findings are presented in two sections below. The first section, based largely on interview data, is concerned with describing who contacts the National Archives for information, especially those who visit in person. Topics included in this section are purpose of these contacts, how people find out that National Archives holdings may be relevant to their historical problems, their preparation and background experience, and how they state their requests in writing and in person. The second section explores the process that on-site researchers typically follow to orient themselves and then search and retrieve relevant information. This section also suggests some of the ways in which researchers may be using archival information for specific projects. The appendix provides additional information on the research projects that comprise the overall user study.

Who Uses the National Archives?

The in-person use of the National Archives is measured by the "research visit." A "research visit" is a single individual or team of individuals who visits the National Archives over time to gather information for a single project. Given the complexity of research use at the National Archives, measuring reference activity in terms of "research visits" may be a more meaningful way of comparing the characteristics and experiences of on-site researchers than statistics currently gathered and reported. Individuals or research teams visit for varying lengths of time and are composed of people with varying background experiences; they define their research questions in various ways, choose to take advantage of one or more reference services at the Archives, and visit one or more reference rooms or consulting areas.

The two alternative reference statistics used by the National Archives, indeed by most archival repositories, are "Research Cards Issued" and "Daily Visits." The first number, a running count of new researchers, roughly measures the influx of individuals over a given period of time. The research card count is useful for determining staffing requirements and charting long-term trends in the volume of new visitors, but does not account for the fact that a significant amount of research is carried out by research teams. Examples of research teams encountered in this study include a film

¹⁷ Both software packages are available from SPSS Inc., 444 N. Michigan Ave., Chicago, IL 60611.

producer and technical crew searching for appropriate footage, a husband and wife documenting the same family tree, and a lawyer with her paralegal team combing the files for regulatory precedents.

The daily visit count is typically compiled by summing the number of people who sign the register of researchers each day and cumulating these totals over reporting periods ranging from a week to a year. The daily visit count is a very useful measure of the demand on staff and facilities on a day to day basis, and is therefore essential for scheduling and administration over the short term. When aggregated over a long period of time, for example a full year, the total daily visit count tends to inflate the perception of high volume use without yielding meaningful interpretation of patterns of use over time. If visitors make use of more than one research room in a given reporting period, the meaning of the count is lessened still. For example, if a film production team of four people spends three days retrieving images from two reference branches each day, reference statistics will account for this group as four research cards issued and twenty-four daily visits--all for a single "research visit" of three days.

	New	Microfilm	Special	Central	Suitland	TOTAL
Daily Visits	278	957	214	1744	99	3014
Research Visits	217	640	129	745	39	1553
Interviews	213	292	76	189	30	587

Table 1 lists the daily visit count, the actual number of research visits, and the number of interviews conducted at each interview site. The daily visit count is drawn directly from the sign-in logs for each research room. The research visit count is obtained by eliminating duplicate daily sign-ins by individual researchers and by adjusting for research teams of two or more individuals identified during the interview process. The number of discrete interviews carried out in each research room is listed in the third row of the table. The "New" category lists the number of individuals who applied for research cards during the study week, the number of individuals or research teams, and the number of interviews or observations made. The "Special" category is a combination of interviews conducted in the Motion Picture, Still Picture, and Cartographic branch research rooms. Data was gathered at each site for one-week periods, except the Central Research Room, where interviews took place over a three week period.

The table demonstrates the impact on typically reported administrative statistics when discrete individuals or research teams are counted rather than daily visits. Researchers making use of textual materials (Central and Suitland) tend to log more time in the research room than researchers using other types of materials. In addition, regular patrons tend to account for a relatively large portion of the daily visit count. During the study period in the Central Research Room, for example, ten percent of the patrons accounted for nearly forty percent of the daily visits logged.

Purpose of Research Visit

The initial goal of the user study was to describe patrons in terms of the reasons they contact the National Archives for information. Although the method for gathering the information from researchers varied, assessments of purpose of research were included in components of the user study pertaining to walk-in visitors, reference correspondence, and initial incoming telephone requests. In the Consultants Office, information was obtained from research applications and from observations of the registration process. In interviews with patrons in the research rooms, the following question was asked directly: "Are you collecting information in this room for your private use, or is your research for work, school, or some other purpose?" Follow up questions probed for the patron's occupation, and for professionals, whether or not they worked for a client. In assessing reference correspondence, the content and appearance of the incoming letter were evaluated for clear evidence of purpose. If none was ascertainable directly, no effort was made to guess the reason the person wrote.

Table 2: Purpose of Research Visit

	New	Microfilm	Special	Central	Suitland	TOTAL
Occupational	32.4 %	8.9 %	73.7 %	27.5 %	63.3 %	26.0 %
Academic	15.5 %	10.6 %	7.9 %	39.2 %	20.0 %	20.1 %
Personal	37.6 %	72.3 %	14.5 %	23.8 %	6.7 %	45.7 %
Avocational	3.3 %	8.2 %	3.9 %	9.5 %	10.0 %	8.2 %
TOTAL	88% ¹ 213	100% 292	100% 76	100% 189	100% 30	100% 587

¹ It was not possible to determine the purpose of visit for a total of 12 percent of the group of 213 researchers issued cards during the study week in the Consultants Office, because of incomplete research applications.

Table 2 presents the percentage of researchers who fall into each of the four categories of research purpose. In the first column, the table shows that one-third of the research cards during a typical week are issued to individuals or teams of researchers who have occupational purposes in mind.

Only one in six researchers are affiliated with an academic institution, from all disciplines. The largest group of researchers issued cards is engaged in personal projects, with the remaining portion (3.3%) undertaking archival research for avocational reasons. A closer look at the research experiences of personal researchers suggests that up to 15 percent of them seek a card for souvenir purposes only.¹⁸

Of the 587 individuals interviewed in the six research rooms, approximately one-quarter were involved in work-related projects. A particularly large portion of the use of the Suitland reference facilities is occupational in nature, as is ongoing work in the Motion Picture, Still Picture, and Cartographic Branches that together comprise the Special Archives Division. One in five researchers interviewed is engaged in academic research at various levels, including students and faculty. Academics, however, comprise the single largest group of Central Research Room patrons. Overall, less than half of the ongoing use of the combined research rooms involves personal research. Purely personal researchers, when combined with avocational projects still account for only 54 percent of the ongoing projects.

All researchers who reported being engaged in non-personal projects were asked to state their occupation. A number of examples illustrate the problems of relying on occupational categories to predict the ultimate purpose of research. Nearly one quarter of those who state their occupation as faculty members also report that their work at the National Archives is being done under contract to third parties. Similarly, four full-time students, who normally would be classified in the academic category, were doing research for others. Of the seventeen retired persons interviewed, eleven were engaged in avocational projects, three in work-related projects for clients, and three in academic studies. Predictably, six of the ten U.S. government historians interviewed reported being engaged in occupational projects; yet two claimed to be spending time on their hobbies, and two were doing academic research unrelated to their jobs.

Genealogy is the single most popular research activity at the National Archives. The relative proportion of genealogical use to overall research activity, however, is probably smaller than generally assumed. Only 14 percent of the people who called the Consultants Office during a one-week period identified themselves as genealogists without being probed for more information. Only 83 of the 367 reference letters analyzed for study (22.7%) specifically pertained to genealogical topics. Estimating the actual portion of genealogical research on-site is complicated by the fact that the most commonly used sources are available in the Microfilm Research Room without obtaining a research card. Genealogists account for only one-third (32.4%) of the research cards issued during a typical week in the Consultants Office.

¹⁸ This figure was determined by tracking all individuals who were issued a research card during the designated study week through reference consultant office and research room sign-in logs for the following two weeks. Fifteen of 79 personal researchers signed only the daily register of the Microfilm Research Room during that period.

The findings of the user study suggest that no more than half of the individuals who visit the National Archives are engaged in genealogical research projects of any character. Of the 587 individuals asked directly in six separate research rooms, only 285 (48.5%) claimed to be doing genealogical research. No genealogists were encountered in the Suitland Research Room during the study week, and none of the four genealogists referred to Suitland by the Consultants Office during the study week had signed the visitors log there within two weeks of receiving their research cards. Only one genealogist was interviewed during three study weeks in the Special Archives Division research rooms. More tellingly perhaps, is the finding that only 22 percent of the 189 researchers interviewed randomly during a three week period in the Central Research Room reported being engaged in genealogical research.

It should come as no surprise that nearly 83 percent of all visitors to the Microfilm Research Room are engaged in genealogical research. Most, but by no means all genealogical research (87%) consists of purely personal family history projects, such as completing family trees with census records, documenting the emigration of ancestors with ship passenger arrival records, and confirming the military experiences of relatives who may have served prior to World War I, using military service and pension records. These are the records featured in the orientation film, described in pamphlets, and recommended by the staff as the most fertile sources of personal family information.

Given the large number of people who use the Microfilm Research Room on a yearly basis, even a relatively small portion (13%) of genealogical research projects undertaken for reasons other than personal ones is significant. Interviews during the week identified at least 31 individuals (10.6 percent of the total number) who were doing genealogical research in the interest of scholarship or ongoing professional or avocational projects. If the sample is representative of the research clientele as a whole, the study findings suggest that over 3,000 people visit the National Archives each year on genealogy projects that may have an impact on many people beyond the individual researcher.

Discovering the National Archives

Each of the 800 individuals interviewed for the study was asked how they found out that the National Archives had the information they needed for their research projects. Researchers were urged to be as specific as possible. Their verbatim comments were noted directly on the questionnaire. Respondents named a total of twenty-six separate ways of discovering where appropriate sources are located, ranging from newspaper articles, friends or relatives, and genealogy classes, to National Archives publications and federal agency referrals.

For purposes of analysis, these diverse sources were combined into five groups. The first group, labeled "Assumed," includes researchers who made statements such as "I just knew," "Where else would State Department files be?" and similar comments that suggest general knowledge of the National Archives. A second group, "Oral," includes direct personal referrals from friends and colleagues, professors, and clients. A third natural category, "Written," consists of printed sources of information generally distributed, including book citations, newspaper articles, and published guides, except those produced by the National Archives. A fourth group, "Research," includes leads

developed through individual effort, such as previous research in other archival collections, research in general reference collections, and telephone calls to other federal agencies. The fifth group, "NARA," includes researchers who mentioned any source of information, oral or written, produced by the National Archives, and includes tours and classes, published guides, and pamphlets.

	New	Microfilm	Special	Central	Suitland	TOTAL
Assumed	15.2 %	26.5 %	17.2 %	25.9 %	30.0 %	25.3 %
Oral	51.5 %	45.0 %	36.8 %	37.0 %	33.3 %	41.5 %
Written	12.3 %	4.3 %	10.6 %	13.2 %	3.4 %	7.5 %
Research	16.6 %	17.7 %	27.6 %	19.0 %	33.3 %	19.9 %
NARA	5.4 %	6.5 %	7.8 %	4.9 %	0.0 %	5.8 %
TOTAL	100% 213	100% 292	100% 76	100% 189	100% 30	100% 587

Table 3 reports responses to the basic question on how researchers discover that the National Archives has appropriate holdings. The first column is the percentage of researchers issued new research cards, while the remaining columns report responses from six research rooms, totalled in the final column. The figures in each cell pertain to vertical totals only.

The overall impression presented by the table is one of an enterprising group of researchers who talk to friends and associates or take the initiative to find out what information is available at the National Archives. Across the board, personal networks are the most important means by which people find their way to the National Archives; over half of those issued new research cards mention oral sources of information. The value researchers place on personal networks confirms the findings of other user studies.¹⁹ Few researchers mention either National Archives-produced information sources or other specific printed materials. And yet because fully one quarter of those interviewed could be no more specific, when pressed, than to say they "just knew" about the holdings, the message contained in National Archives publications and public programs seems to get through to potential visitors in indirect ways.

¹⁹ Conway, "Research in Presidential Libraries," Stephen E. Wiberley and William G. Jones, "Patterns of Information Seeking in the Humanities," *College and Research Libraries* 50 (November 1989): 638-45. Refer also to unpublished studies at the New York State Archives (Young), University of Illinois Archives (Maher), and South Carolina Department of Archives and History (Helsley) cited in the bibliography.

Advance Contact and Previous Experience

The study sought to explore the extent to which those who need to do research in National Archives holdings, either in person or by mail, are prepared to follow a sometimes complicated research process. Preparation, in this context, may be viewed as a combination of specific knowledge of the research problem at hand and knowledge of specific reference procedures. Since topical knowledge most likely is unique for each individual, the study focused on the more procedural aspects of preparation: contact by mail or telephone, prior to or in lieu of a research visit, and previous research experience in primary resources, both at the National Archives and elsewhere.

The National Archives has no central switchboard operation to receive incoming calls, identify callers with research-related questions, and route them to the appropriate reference branch. As a result, researchers who have not had prior substantive contact with the agency typically call the general information number listed in telephone directories and given out by long distance operators. This number rings in the Consultants Office, where general inquiry and more specific research questions are fielded by the same staff responsible for issuing research cards and providing initial consultative advice to new patrons.

A simple logging of incoming calls to the office, carried out over a one-week period, shows that the Consultants Office is the de facto switchboard operator for the National Archives in Washington. Half of the 662 callers during the study week requested to be transferred to a specific employee or to a specific reference branch. Less than one third of all incoming calls (29.8%) concern archival holdings, with the balance (20.2%) relating to agency procedures or activities (e.g., how to get a research card, hours of operation, obtaining publications).

Most people who call the National Archives about a records related questions have specific requests. Only one in four of these inquiries were on broad subjects; equal numbers were answered and referred to reference branches for follow-up. About 40 percent of the inquiries about archival records received by phone during the study period concerned single items or documents, such as a pension file, a patent record, or a photograph of an event. An additional 30 percent of these type of calls related to specific record groups, such a passenger ship lists, the availability of the 1920 census, or Works Progress Administration records on a specific topic. Only one in ten callers with records-related questions called the National Archives incorrectly; half with questions pertaining to non-accessioned federal agency records, and half with questions about non-federal records such as birth, marriage, and death records housed in state and local government archives and other repositories.

All persons interviewed in six research rooms were asked if they had called or written before beginning research on their current topic. In addition, all interviewees were ask if they had ever done research at the National Archives before that day, and if so about how many days they had spent in the building since the first of the year. Researchers with previous experience were asked to report the first year in which they had done research at the Archives. New researchers in the

Consultants Office were asked if they had ever used original historical materials in a repository other than the National Archives. When combined, the answers to these questions provide a basic picture of one part of the larger issue of researcher preparation.

In the Consultants Office, two of every three persons issued research cards are new to the National Archives. About 40 percent of this group of inexperienced researchers claims never to have used archival materials in the past. Of the experienced researchers applying for cards, almost all report additional experience with other archival repositories.

On the surface, interviews in the research rooms reveal an even higher level of experience. Seventy-three percent of the group of 587 contacted report having previous research experience at the National Archives. When probed for specifics, however, the amount of actual experience varies quite a bit. Eighty people (18.6%) report that they had not been in the building in the past year; some report decade-long absences. Almost one-third of the experienced researchers had spent between one and three days in the building in 1990; many of these people had begun work only a day or two before the interview. About one in six of the experienced researchers can be characterized as "regulars," those who had logged over fifteen days in the building in the months prior to the interview. In broad strokes, the findings show that the clientele of the National Archives during a typical week is composed of one part fresh faces, one part researchers with only a few days under their belt, and two parts people who have spent considerable time in Washington area facilities, even though some of this experience may have occurred years ago. Just over one-third of all researchers interviewed had called or written for information prior to their visit.

Table 4 combines responses to the set of questions on prior experience, days spent at the National Archives in 1990, and whether advance contact had been made. The first row includes people who report no prior experience and who made no advance contact prior to their visit. Overall, just over 16 percent of those contacted fall into this category of true novice. The second row includes researchers who have no prior experience but who made some effort to call or write before visiting. The 11 percent who fall in this group are confident of the existence of appropriate materials, even if they know very little about proper reference procedures. The third row includes the 10 percent of those interviewed who report having between one and three days experience and having made advance contact. The fourth row, the largest category at 64 percent, includes people who report in their interviews that they have spent four or more days at the National Archives in recent months, regardless of whether they called or wrote in advance. The break between rows three and four is based on the observation that researchers with more than three or four days of experience at the National Archives seemed to be comfortable with the physical layout of the buildings, specific research procedures, and the availability of assistance and advice.

In the first column of Table 4, the mix of responses by new patrons varies somewhat from the responses of those interviewed in the six research rooms. About 14 percent of people issued research cards can be fairly characterized as novices; they have never been in the building, have never used archival materials in other repositories, and have made no advance contact before applying for a card. A disproportionate number of this group is undertaking personal research projects. In the

second row are people who are new to the National Archives and made no advance contact but who have used archival materials in other settings. Occupational and personal researchers are over-represented in this category. The third row contains people who are new to the building, experienced in archival research, and aware that materials exist on their topic. In the final row are researchers who have spent some time in the building already, typically in the Microfilm Research Room, or who are renewing their expired cards.

	New	Microfilm	Special	Central	Suitland	TOTAL
New, None	13.7 %	20.9 %	9.2 %	12.7 %	6.7 %	16.2 %
New, Contact	23.6 %	9.2 %	15.8 %	10.6 %	13.3 %	10.7 %
Minimal	31.1 %	4.8 %	15.8 %	13.7 %	26.7 %	9.0 %
Experienced	31.6 %	65.1 %	59.2 %	63.0 %	53.3 %	64.1 %
TOTAL	100% 213	100% 292	100% 76	100% 189	100% 30	100% 587

The researcher patterns portrayed in the table as a whole suggest that the National Archives confronts a continuous challenge to orient patrons unfamiliar with the procedures of the agency, many of whom probably have little concept of information retrieval in an archival setting. Most likely the group of inexperienced researchers primarily needs assistance in the mechanics of the reference process rather than in-depth consulting on historical topics. This implication is further reinforced by the findings on how researchers pose their research questions, reported in the next section of this report.

Research Questions

An important part of the user study was to investigate systematically how researchers pose their historical questions. The study sought to identify the specific components of researchers' questions, how much information they volunteer with and without probing, and the differences in question patterns between face-to-face questioning and reference correspondence. The purpose of looking closely at incoming letters and orientation interviewing was not to evaluate the process archivists follow in responding to patron requests, but rather to learn more about the ways researchers identify their historical information needs.

This aspect of the user study was influenced by previous research that investigated the characteristics of the initial question posed to archivists in writing, in person, and over the telephone by about 1,600 researchers in 17 archives on a single day.²⁰ The research procedure for this project involved noting verbatim the original research question posed by 213 individual or teams that were issued research cards in the Consultants Office during a one-week period and listening to the answers to probing questions by consultants for new information supplied by researchers. In addition, 367 reference letters received during a single week were read and evaluated in terms of the information supplied by the correspondent. A modified list of question elements from the earlier research project, tailored to the administrative context of the National Archives, served as the foundation for this component of the user study. A portion of the results of the analysis is contained in Table 5. Additional information is in the appendix. Overall, the table shows that patrons who write for advice supply nearly four pieces of information about their topic per letter on the average, while on-site visitors only need to specify 2.4 question elements on average to be issued a research card. In the group of letters examined, the maximum number of elements supplied was nine; the minimum was one (in all four cases a broad subject). Closer analysis of patron requests broken out by purpose of visit or letter shows no differences in the average number of question elements supplied, which may run counter to the stereotypes of the un-prepared personal researcher versus the expert academics and professionals. Patrons who write to National Archives military reference units tend on average to supply more information; those who write to the legislative branch tend to supply less information than average.

As for the specific elements of questions posed, patterns vary depending on whether the query arrives in the mail or at the door. In the Consultants Office medium, date (specific or general), and personal names are the most frequently mentioned elements. Probing by staff in the Consultants Office elicits additional question elements but does not substantially change the ranking of the most commonly specified elements. Correspondents also typically supply dates and media, but tend to describe their interests more specifically in geographic terms. Few visitors supply personal identification numbers or mention specific historical events in a first encounter with archivists, yet they are clearly prepared to do so when the opportunity for face-to-face interaction is limited. On the other hand, one in four visitors to the Consultants Office initially describes his or her topic in terms of a broad subject, whereas few correspondents write in general terms. Correspondents are also much more prone to mention a National Archives record group by name or the title of a document or report than those who visit the Consultants Office. Few researchers conceive of their topics in terms of federal agency function, document language, or a National Archives administrative unit that may assist them in their search.

²⁰ David Bearman, "Study of User Presentation Language," unpublished report prepared for Archives and Museum Informatics, Pittsburgh, Pa., Summer 1989. Less than half the queries evaluated were substantive questions about repository holdings. In 56 percent of these the researcher sought specifically identifiable items, even when the actual existence of the item was not known. Only 9 percent of all queries analyzed specified a broad topical subject. In addition to these findings, the report on the project listed a total of 18 access points, or question elements, specified by researchers in their queries. The most common elements found in the study were type of document, personal name, and title of document.

QUESTION ELEMENT	Orientation		Letters	
	Date	94	44.3%	225
Place	45	21.2%	177	48.2%
Medium	98	46.2%	169	46.0%
Personal Name	94	44.3%	132	36.0%
Type of Document	31	14.6%	115	31.3%
Federal Agency	32	15.1%	110	30.0%
Other Name	8	3.8%	85	23.2%
Number, etc.	0	---	82	22.3%
Historical Event	14	6.6%	81	22.1%
Title of Document	7	3.3%	66	18.0%
Record Group	11	5.2%	46	12.5%
Broad Subject	54	25.5%	44	12.0%
Corporate Body	10	4.7%	17	4.6%
Building Name	8	3.8%	16	4.4%
Footnote	2	1.0%	11	3.0%
NARA Unit	0	---	4	1.1%
Language	0	---	3	0.8%
Agency Function	1	---	2	0.5%
TOTAL	509		1385	
Units	212		367	
Average	2.40		3.77	

The patterns of question elements supplied by those who submitted their requests in writing also varies somewhat depending on the writer's purpose and where the letter was sent. For example academics specify their requests in terms of broad subjects far more often (33%) than average. Professional researchers also supply document types and titles as well as unique personal identifiers (e.g., military service number) more often than other types of correspondents. Both letters specifying agency function as an element of their questions were engaged in personal projects.

Correspondence routed to reference units in the Special Archives Division, which includes still pictures, motion pictures, and cartographic records, more typically specifies the desired medium of the information requested. Writers to the Cartographic Branch are particularly apt to specify the type of document and unique identifying numbers. Researchers are far less likely to provide geographic place names when requesting information on motion pictures, and far less likely than average to supply dates and time periods when contacting archivists about still pictures.

This component of the user study was designed only to explore the feasibility of understanding researcher topics in terms of the specific question elements. Overall the findings suggest that researchers as a group apparently have significant information about their topics at their disposal when they contact the National Archives and that much of this information consists of the fundamental elements of historical inquiry--names, dates, places, and events. Regardless of whether they call, write, or visit in person, researchers seem to have their historical questions fairly specifically defined and their needs for documentation narrowed. Researchers have thought through the types of evidence that will answer their questions and contact the archives equipped with a wish list of document types as well as the format and media of the information they need. Perhaps the most important finding of this exploratory study is the dominance of document type and the names of specific historical events over broad subject categories and agency functions as key question elements in patron requests.

The Research Process

Interviews with hundreds of researchers, supplemented by months of close observation and discussion with staff, suggest that people who visit National Archives facilities follow a nearly universal process of orienting themselves to the reference system, searching for and retrieving relevant records, and making use of the information to address, at least partially, the problem at hand. The following sections describe key aspects of the research process from the researcher's perspective against the background of actual National Archives reference procedures.

Orientation

Understanding the orientation process involved observation of initial consulting and referral activities in the Consultants Office and interviews with researchers to ascertain their intended use of various archival media. Few people who pass through the Consultants Office receive significant service beyond the issuance of a research card. Only 11 percent (22) of those interviewed during the study week spent any time at all with consulting archivists beyond the front desk. Furthermore, 90 percent of the group of researchers was whisked through the process in five minutes or less. Twenty researchers consulted with archivists for up to fifteen minutes and two interviews took longer than fifteen minutes.

Referral by the consulting staff is largely a memory process. Over 93 percent (199) of all researchers are referred to the next step of the reference process by memory alone. The Guide to the National Archives and finding aids are consulted in 2 percent and 8 percent of the cases,

respectively. Occasionally, consultants place internal telephone calls to records specialists to get specific information (5.6%), but more typically front desk attendants refer researchers directly to a specialist or a reference branch. During the study week, no calls were placed to the Library, Records Center staff, Presidential Libraries, other federal agencies, or other archival repositories, and only two calls went out to National Archives field branches for information.

Once they are issued research cards, researchers are referred to a research room to consult records or to a reference branch for more specific information. In general, desk attendants and consultants ask only enough questions to make a reasonably accurate referral within the National Archives system. During the study week, all but one researcher was sent to a branch or office within the Washington, D.C., area. Observations of the registration process indicate that about 8 percent of those issued cards do not expect to make immediate use of the Archives, deciding instead to acquire a research card for future use. Most people, when they register for research, plan to get started right away.

In addition to observations of the consultant referral process, all people interviewed in the six reference rooms in the Washington area were asked if they had already used or expected to use National Archives holdings other than the media available in the research room where they were interviewed.

The findings of these questions on patron referral and intended use of multiple information media are displayed in Table 6. The first column lists the portion of researchers issued new cards who were referred to specific reference branches. The remaining columns reflect patron assessments of where they intended to do further research on their current projects within the National Archives complex.

	Referred	Microfilm	Special	Central	Suitland	TOTAL
Textual	49.8% (103)	57.2% (167)	32.9% (25)	N/A	N/A	32.7% (192)
Library	1.4% (3)	7.2% (21)	2.6% (2)	7.4% (14)	3.3% (1)	6.6% (38)
Microfilm	22.3% (47)	N/A	10.5% (8)	46.4% (88)	23.3% (7)	17.5% (107)
Motion	13.2% (28)	2.0% (6)	15.8% (12)	7.9% (15)	23.3% (7)	6.8% (40)
Still	11.8% (25)	8.2% (24)	31.6% (24)	25.4% (48)	33.3% (10)	18% (106)
Cartographic	1.0% (2)	9.6% (28)	2.6% (2)	11.1% (21)	3.3% (1)	9.0% (52)
Electronic ²	.5%	0	0	0	0	0
TOTAL	209	292	76	190	30	588

² Currently, electronic records are not accessible online to on-site researchers.

The responses reported in the table suggest that researchers tend to move freely among research rooms in search of information. Ten percent (22) of those who were issued research cards during the study week did not sign into any reference units in the Washington area within the following two weeks. Every person who was referred to the Central Research Room signed the registration book. Fourteen of these 28 also visited the Microfilm Research Room. Of the 47 people referred to the Microfilm Research Room, all but 5 signed in there. Twenty-four of the group consulted only microfilmed holdings in the next two weeks, and probably did not need research cards. Twenty percent of each group sent to Military and Civil Reference went to both branches. Ten percent of those sent to the Still and Motion Picture Branches went to both branches over the next two weeks. Only two of the seven research teams sent to Suitland and Pickett Street locations signed the registration logs at those locations within the two-week period after the study week.

The findings suggest that if a research complex as a whole provided for efficient internal mobility and if process and procedures were unified administratively, then the use of multiple research rooms for single projects would increase dramatically. It should come as no surprise that well over half of all researchers encountered in the Microfilm Research Room intend to use textual materials, and that nearly the same pattern exists in the other direction. Microfilm and textual holdings are closely related. The anticipated use of special media materials--motion pictures, still pictures, and cartographic materials--by those working with textual materials, however, is also relatively high, as is the close relationship between special media users and the Still Picture Branch. If these findings are representative of National Archives users as a whole, researchers can be expected to move frequently and fluidly among the various research rooms in Archives II. Systematic tracking is needed of the use researchers make of Archives II research facilities and the movement of researchers between the new building and the original building so that patron services can be administered efficiently and effectively.

Search and Retrieval

In an effort to understand the process that researchers follow to retrieve useful information, interviews sought information on the deadline pressure that researchers feel, the status of their projects, and their use of reproduction services. In looking toward the future development of automated access systems, researchers working in the Central Research Room were asked a series of questions on their familiarity with computers.

Overall, just under one-quarter of all researchers interviewed report that they are working under a deadline imposed by a client or another person. A number of people who stated they faced no imposed deadline, however, felt considerable self-imposed pressure to work quickly or efficiently. In the Central Research Room, few personal or avocational researchers report feeling deadline pressure, while half of the occupational and academic researchers feel pressed for time. Not surprisingly, the closer a person gets to the end of a research project, the greater is the pressure to complete it. About equal portions of the people interviewed consider themselves at the beginning, the middle, and the end of their projects, reflecting the randomness of the interview selection process. Few researchers expressed any ambiguity about the status of their research projects.

Since the introduction of self-service photocopying services in 1986, researchers have increasingly taken advantage of this convenient form of capturing information. To learn more about the service, all researchers interviewed were asked a series of questions about their need for reproductions. Additionally, researchers in the Central Research Room were asked about their intended use of the service order system.

Reference staff have noticed a marked increase in the use of special note-taking equipment, including laptop computers and miniature tape recorders. In addition, researchers may use their own equipment to make direct duplications of holdings in the Motion Picture and Still Picture Branches. Almost 9 percent of new researchers interviewed in the Consultants Office express their intention to use their own equipment to take notes or make reproductions. In the six research rooms combined, about 10 percent of those interviewed were observed using their own equipment. In the Central Research Room, over 14 percent of the researchers were using special equipment, most typically laptop computers.

Table 7 reports the answers by 189 researchers in the Central Research Room to two questions about their use of self-service copying services and their intention to place reproduction orders. The first row includes people who neither photocopy documents themselves nor request the National Archives to do it for them. Only 10 percent of all researchers fall into this category, about half of whom were observed using personal computers or tape recorders. The second row includes researchers who state they plan to make self-service copies and who may also place reproduction orders. In the third row are people who indicate that they intend *only* to order reproductions. Overall over one-quarter of the people interviewed plan to have reproductions made for them. When pressed for their willingness to endure the costs and delays inherent in the reproduction order process, about two out of three mentioned the gains in research efficiency or the need for high quality or special format reproductions, while one-third noted limitations on self-service copying due to preservation considerations.

	Academic	Occupational	Personal	Avocational	TOTAL
None	9.5% (7)	9.6% (5)	8.9% (4)	6.7% (3)	10.1% (19)
Self/Order	86.5% (64)	80.8% (42)	84.4% (38)	72.2% (13)	83.1% (157)
Order Only	4.0% (3)	9.6% (5)	6.7% (3)	11.1% (2)	6.9% (3)
TOTAL	39.2% (74)	27.5% (52)	23.8% (45)	9.5% (18)	100% (189)

The tension between preservation needs and service to patrons is perhaps most readily apparent in the area of self-service copying. The combination of ready availability of photocopying equipment, deadline pressure felt by researchers, and the lack of consistent and rigorous monitoring in research rooms leads to occasional, yet unacceptable, abuse of archival materials. Typical problems observed in the Central Research Room and mentioned by researchers during interviews include jumbled files, misfiled documents, dog-eared and torn pages, and careless handling of materials while copying. One of the most telling findings of the series of interviews, however, is the overwhelming perception by researchers that preservation is not a problem. Ninety percent of all researchers interviewed in six research rooms indicated that the materials currently being used are in satisfactory condition and useable for their own purposes. Clearly it is the responsibility of archivists to educate patrons and take charge of the long-term protection of their holdings, since patrons have more immediate concerns and do not seem aware of preservation problems.

Looking ahead to the development of automated access systems at National Archives, the user study sought in several ways to assess the capability of researchers to make use of such systems and to express their research needs in ways that make feasible computerized search and retrieval. Patrons interviewed in the Central Research Room were asked a special sequence of four questions on their familiarity with computers: ownership or frequent use of personal computers, use of computer software other than word processing, experience with online searching, and familiarity with databases of archival records. The results should be heartening for systems developers.

Overall, 89 percent of the 189 people interviewed claim under careful questioning to either own a personal computer or use computer equipment frequently in their work. This level of response belies common stereotypes of research capabilities, and tracks favorably with the phenomenal growth of computer usage in the past decade.²¹ Of those who own or use computers frequently, over half use them for tasks beyond word processing, including database management, statistical analysis, and desktop publishing. These two findings indicate that the users of the National Archives, at least those who use textual materials, claim to be quite familiar with the advanced capabilities of computer technology and may welcome automated access systems.

Further questioning shows that 72 percent of all respondents to the survey have personally used a computer to search for information from an online library catalog, a database of books and articles, or a database of archival materials. Probing revealed much of this experience has been gained in relatively simple online library catalogs in academic or public libraries. Yet many respondents were quick to note the advantages and disadvantages of more advanced systems, including those at the Library of Congress (SCORPIO and MUMS), the Public Records Office, and Harvard University.

²¹ The federal government's 1990 *U.S. Statistical Abstract* documents this growth. The number of work stations (including personal computers, terminals and word processors) in use at U.S. offices and factories increased from 6.5 million in 1984 to 25.3 million in 1989. The reference book, which draws on an industry database, notes that the ratio of keyboards to desk workers is now 1.02-to-1, up from 0.61-to-1 in 1984.

The final question in the sequence demonstrates a broad unfamiliarity with the availability of two of the major national databases of archival information. The Research Libraries Information Network (RLIN) is a consortium of over 40 research libraries that have pooled their catalog listings, including archival collections. The National Archives contributes records to RLIN. The Online Computer Library Center (OCLC) is a database built from the collections of over 1200 academic, public, and special libraries and includes numerous records describing archival collections. The holdings of the National Archives library are included in the OCLC database. A total of 16 percent of the researchers interviewed report making some use of either RLIN or OCLC.

Table 8 reports the findings of a measure of computer familiarity created by combining the responses to these four topics. The first row includes researchers who claim to be personally unfamiliar with computing equipment and claim never to have searched for information in an online environment. Many researchers who fall into this category made statements like, "I stay as far away from computers as I can," or "My wife does all my typing." A disproportionate number of researchers involved in personal projects fall into this first category. The second row includes researchers who claim to be familiar with computers, but who confine their use of them to word processing applications. Well over half of the personal researchers interviewed either have minimal or no experience with computers. The third row in Table 8 includes people who claim to have had some experience in searching for information in a bibliographic database; over three-quarters of this group also owns or uses computers frequently for some purposes other than word processing. Further probing reveals that much of this experience with searching is on relatively simple online catalogs located in academic and public libraries, although a significant portion of the group described sophisticated searches undertaken recently. The final row includes people who satisfy all three criteria for a complex approach to computers: they own or use computers frequently, have at least minimal experience beyond word processing, and have retrieved information from an online database such as RLIN, OCLC, or DIALOG. Academic and avocational researchers, who most likely are undertaking projects requiring a breadth of information sources, are represented more strongly in this category than their occupational and personal counterparts.

	Academic	Occupational	Personal	Avocational	TOTAL
None	4.0% (3)	3.8% (2)	28.9% (13)	6.7% (3)	11.1% (21)
Minimal	41.9% (31)	48.1% (25)	24.5% (11)	33.3% (6)	38.6% (73)
Searching	40.5% (30)	44.3% (23)	42.2% (19)	33.3% (6)	41.3% (78)
Complex	13.6% (10)	3.8% (2)	4.4% (2)	16.7% (3)	9.0% (17)
TOTAL	39.2% (74)	27.5% (52)	23.8% (45)	9.5% (18)	100% (189)

Overall the findings suggest that the patrons of the National Archives may adapt well to a system of finding aids available online. A relatively small portion of research visitors may need serious assistance understanding the capabilities of a sophisticated archival information system. At the other extreme, an equally small group of researchers will probably be anxious to have direct access to automated finding aids, and may even use them from remote locations. Between these two extremes is a group of patrons that claims to be familiar with the computerized retrieval of information and that can be expected to respond well to an automated system whose user interface is responsive to the huge variety of patron questions.

Application

The ways in which people apply information they find at the National Archives to specific projects are as unique as the individuals who visit, call, or write. This section describes some of the distinctive patterns of use that emerge from interviews with patrons working in the Washington, D.C., area, including a summary of popular and emerging research topics, the types of end products envisioned, how researchers perceive the value of the holdings, and their success in finding relevant information.

All persons interviewed were asked to describe briefly the topic or focus of their research projects. Only six people had any reluctance or difficulty specifying a concise topical statement. When classed into broad categories, about 25 distinct topical areas of research are evident in the group of 587 interviews. Overall, the most popular research area is personal or family history, reflecting the large numbers of genealogical researchers who visit. Beyond this most obvious of topics, other predictable research patterns emerge from the data. Nineteen percent of all non-genealogical research concerns aspects of World War II, while the Civil War remains a perennial favorite (8%). Ten percent of all non-genealogical topics concern United States foreign policy and an equal portion are on the activities of foreign governments from a non-U.S. perspective.

Smaller clusters of research projects point the way toward innovative use of archival holdings. Architectural history and historic preservation projects appear to be popular among researchers using a variety of textual and special media materials. Environmental and health issues are being pursued by a variety of occupational and academic researchers. Finally, eight individuals were identified undertaking broad surveys of specific bodies of records with the expectation of launching or completing micro-publishing projects. These efforts to reproduce large volumes of records on either microfilm or microfiche, for sale or wide distribution, are unconnected to ongoing efforts of the National Archives to preserve fragile or heavily used record series on microfilm.

All researchers interviewed were asked to describe what they expected to result from the research project. Eighteen specific types of products were mentioned, ranging from books and dissertations to legal briefs and oral presentations. Researchers undertaking personal projects tend to acquire information for their own personal use or that of their family. Only eleven personal researchers expected any concrete product of their research to result, other than photocopies for personal use. At the other end of the spectrum, academic researchers tend to produce the written materials traditionally expected of them: books or book illustrations, dissertations, and published articles.

Fifteen percent of those involved in academic research expect to produce visual programs, and two persons expect no specific result from their current project. The expected outcomes of avocational researchers mirror those of their academic counterparts. Most claim to produce books and articles.

Occupational researchers are far more varied in their expected outcomes. Half specify written results, but few list books or extended treatises, intending instead to produce reports, legal briefs, newspaper or magazine articles, microform publications, and electronic databases. In the audiovisual domain, films, exhibitions, theater pieces, and similar non-traditional outcomes are the norm--and not just for occupational researchers working in special medial collections. Occupational researchers account for over two-thirds of all audiovisual outcomes.

Because of the current difficulty in tracking ongoing research projects, the potential impact of these and similar projects on people well beyond the on-site researcher is under-appreciated. Beyond the academic arena, which traditionally has been recognized and nurtured by archivists, projects are ongoing by persons with a variety of purposes in mind that affect directly the lives of many American citizens. Here are a few examples from among the many high-impact projects identified in the course of routine interviewing.

In the area of personal projects, one sociologist sought evidence of his dual Irish-United States citizenship so that he could do research in Third World countries where U.S. citizenship can be a personal liability. One public relations executive travelled to Washington from California to document her family's property claim for an upcoming law suit. Similarly, a faculty member was interviewed while seeking information on her father's death in Eastern Europe shortly after the Second World War, apparently under suspicious circumstances.

The work of many avocational researchers reaches even farther than the family level. One insurance salesman was encountered in the midst of an ongoing project to construct a community genealogy of Civil War casualties in support of his town's rededication of a central square monument. A retired engineer, a World War II veteran, serves as the unofficial historian for the ship crew planning a weekend reunion. In these examples, and many similar ones, the benefit of the National Archives to large numbers of people is immediate, significant, and potentially highly visible.

It is in the area of occupational research, however, where the significance and impact of the services the agency renders to its patrons is the strongest. Researchers scan historical aerial photographs of United States in search of toxic waste sites, now obscured by vegetation. Scores of film producers and directors find the audiovisual holdings to be vital cultural resources, valuable not only for their content but also by virtue of their public domain status. School teachers from all over the country make trips to the National Archives to identify original source materials for use in elementary school settings or simply to enhance their own appreciation and enthusiasm for American history. Thousands of Japanese-American citizens interned in camps during World War II owe their recent compensatory payments to the existence of archival documentation in the

National Archives. Tracking information about this kind of research is an essential tool for increasing support for the agency's mission.

The value of reference and access services to the public is vested not only in the uniqueness of the holdings but also in the perceptions by researchers that the National Archives contains just the right materials to address the task at hand. When asked directly how important the materials they were currently using for the successful completion of their overall project, the overwhelming majority (93%) stated that the materials were either "essential" or "very important." Not a single person indicated that the materials were "only a curiosity" and only 2 percent stated that the holdings were "interesting, but maybe not useful." A small portion (5%) called the archival materials before them "possibly useful, but not important." Clearly, the people who visit the National Archives research rooms are pleased with the content of the records and consider the agency to be an essential resource for completing their projects, regardless of the nature of the topic.²²

Finally, researchers contacted in each research room were asked to estimate how successful they were, the day they were interviewed, in finding the information they hoped or expected to find. Such a question is premised, of course, on the assumption that researchers have realistic expectations. Table 9 reports the responses to the question as posed.

	Academic	Occupational	Personal	Avocational	TOTAL
Yes	70.3% (83)	69.9% (107)	60.9% (163)	70.8% (34)	65.8% (387)
Most	12.7% (15)	11.8% (18)	16.0% (43)	10.4% (5)	13.8% (81)
Some	2.5% (3)	8.5% (13)	7.4% (20)	10.4% (5)	7.0% (41)
No	13.6% (16)	9.8% (15)	15.6% (42)	8.4% (4)	13.1% (77)
TOTAL	20.1% (118)	26.0% (153)	47.5% (269)	8.2% (48)	100% (588)

In spite of a fairly cumbersome, time-consuming reference process, researchers report that they are generally successful in identifying relevant information in the holdings. Many of those who were most successful report that they found much more useful information than they had expected to find. More than half of those who were not successful in finding information were at relatively early stages

²² A sensible alternative view, one that will require further research to verify, is that the National Archives attracts only people who *must* have access to the holdings to complete their projects. Curiosity seekers and those who are able to find alternative sources of historical information choose not to visit or plan their projects in such a way so that they do not have to visit the facilities.

of their research and so did not have high expectations. Of those who did express frustration at not finding the information they were seeking, most placed the blame on gaps in the holdings rather than on the staff or finding aids. An important qualifier of the responses included in the table is that most researchers who were interviewed were at the end of the reference process. Success in retrieving relevant information may tend to erase, at least for the moment, memories of difficulties or frustrations encountered earlier in the research process.

Section Five: Toward Enhanced Access to the Nation's Archives

The National Archives and Records Administration is a premier national institution. The agency's status as an essential resource for understanding the roots of American culture and our growth as a nation is unquestioned by its users. An amazing variety of people visit the agency's research rooms in the Washington, D.C., area and call or write for information. These patrons recognize the extraordinary quality of the holdings. They appreciate the talent of the staff who serve the public. They grudgingly accept the complexity of the buildings that yield their treasures with effort and usually become familiar with experience.

Deeply rooted in the agency's history and culture, the current set of loosely connected policies and procedures has evolved in reaction to increasing demands placed on the agency by the complexity and volume of records requiring care and by the increasing number of sophisticated requests for information. Its "gatekeeping" approach to access (as described earlier and illustrated in Figure 2) places unnecessary physical and intellectual obstacles between patrons and the information they need to solve their historical questions. The agency rewards its expert archivists for their extraordinary knowledge of historical facts and records by promoting them to management positions. The dependence of patrons on reduced numbers of staff experts is further reinforced by a seeming inability to acquire significantly increased resources and a reluctance to devote scarce resources to the description of holdings in automated systems useful to patrons with a variety of information needs.

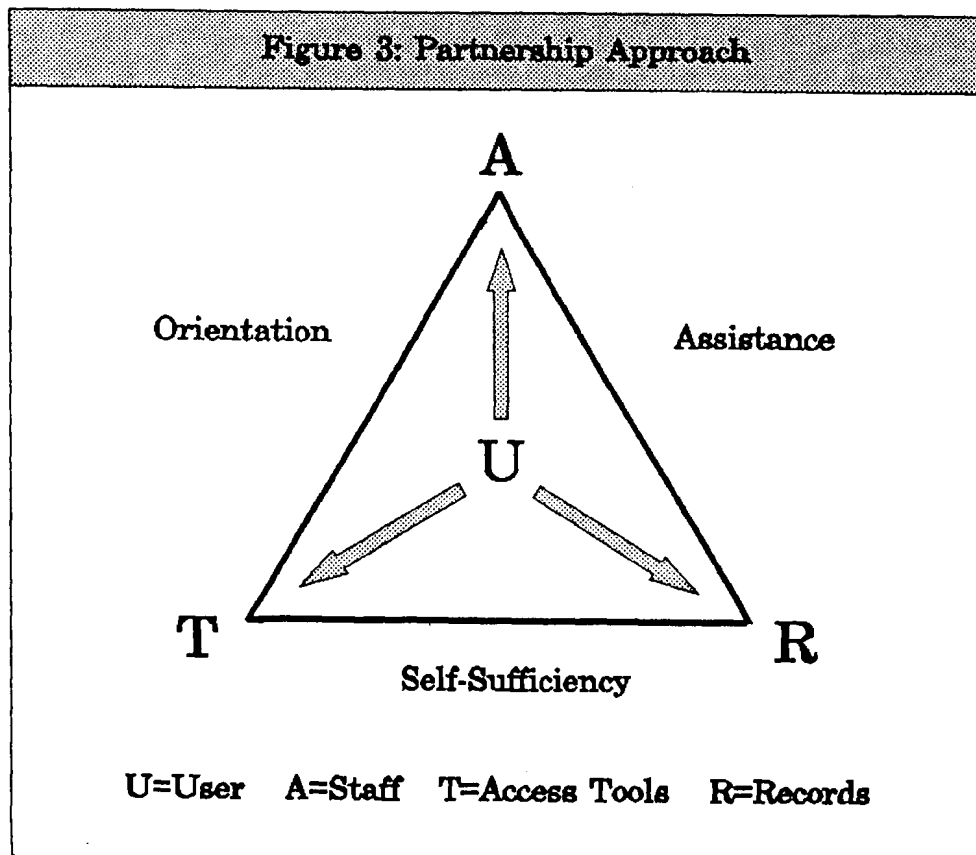
In the last decade the National Archives absorbed severe budget cuts by disproportionately reducing reference staffs and narrowing the range of reference support. Today researchers who contact the National Archives apparently comprehend these limitations, expect very little service, and generally do not complain, thereby inadvertently contributing to a continuing downward spiral of service. Veteran researchers, when pressed to compare their experiences over the years, admit a longing for the personal attention of subject expert archivists.

The findings of this study, however, point away from the notion of increasing researchers' dependence on archivists. A complex portrait of needs and opportunities emerges from interviews with hundreds of visiting researchers, discussions with staff, and assessments of information gathered in the normal course of reference service. Patrons generally have clear purposes and motivations for contacting the National Archives. As a group they are task oriented, well focused, enthusiastic, and capable intellectually of doing their own work. They will go to great lengths to obtain the

information, in whatever form available, that they judge to be essential to the success of their research projects. And yet researchers who contact the National Archives encounter a reference system that mirrors the structure of the records it houses, on the misguided premise that the vast majority of patrons require the personal services of archivists who have mastered specific portions of the archival record. The National Archives' approach to serving its patrons limits its ability to understand its clientele and respond efficiently and flexibly to the variety of patrons who visit, call or write.

To meet successfully the present and future demands placed on it by a nation of potential patrons, the National Archives should move toward the adoption of a "partnership" approach to service that encourages the self-sufficient use of the holdings, while preserving the quality of professional support that has been the agency's heritage for half a century. In partnership with patrons, archivists are but one component of an integrated system of facilities, staff, and computer-supported access tools that guarantees equal access and yet is capable of delivering a variety of services at a level commensurate with stated needs.

Figure 3 illustrates the basic components of an access system arrayed in a partnership approach to service. In the model, users are at the center, free to move as their needs dictate among the other components of the system--staff, including archivists with various specialties, archives technicians, and other supporting personnel; access tools, which may include traditional and computer-based finding aids and additional reference materials in a flexible mix; and the records themselves.



Any three of the components in the model combine in a sub-system of the overall reference process, symbolizing one of the three primary functions of the partnership approach:

- * **Orientation** is users familiarizing themselves with the full range of access tools and staff resources that can assist them in satisfying their search and retrieval needs.
- * **Assistance** is users moving fluidly among records experts and technical support staff and the historical record, depending more upon archivists than the upon finding aids.
- * **Self-Sufficiency** is users functioning independently as researchers, making full use of access tools and the structure and content of archival records to solve historical problems.

In this ideal model, users may locate themselves variously in the process at different points in time, depending on their purpose for contacting the archives, their experience with reference procedures and the content of the record, and their own assessments of the importance of the information they seek which may simply be a function of the time available for the search.

As with the gatekeeping approach to reference services, the partnership approach suggests a variety of intellectual and practical roles for archivists that have equally value-laden assumptions underpinning them, including at least the following four:

- * Archivists compensate for procedural weaknesses by teaching users how to function within the system under the assumption that most researchers know what they want, they just do not know how to get it.
- * Archivists assist the user in thinking through the types of evidence that may address their question under the assumption that most researchers are not particularly interested in pursuing a historical problem in depth but instead are seeking specific pieces or items of information.
- * Archivists facilitate the use of archives that to some degree are machine-dependent under the assumption that many researchers will seek relevant historical information wherever they can find it and are not particularly concerned about the medium upon which it is stored or the equipment required to gain access to it.
- * Archivists develop access tools that embed the knowledge gained in acquiring, preserving and otherwise handling archival records under the assumption that useful access tools can be created that enable users to identify relevant information without necessarily requiring the direct assistance of highly specialized archivists.

Archivists in partnership assist the user in functioning self-sufficiently. In a self-sufficient reference system, in contrast to the self-service system common in most libraries, staff teach researchers, using a variety of direct and indirect techniques, how to define research questions in terms that relate to the records and show them how to navigate creatively between access tools and the historical record. The efficiency of the system is driven by the efficiency of the user, measured and monitored on a routine basis.

The responsibility of archivists to establish and maintain intellectual control over the holdings in their custody in no way implies that they must also control intellectual access to the materials. The

primary challenge in moving from a gatekeeper to a partnership approach to public service is to overcome the historic tendency to link the structure of reference services to the structure of the records themselves. Administratively released from their gatekeeping role, archivists are free to embed their special knowledge into consistent tools that mediate the problems of access to archival materials. Additionally, by drawing on knowledge of the process that researchers actually use to locate, retrieve, and make use of historical information, archivists are able to respond flexibly to patron needs rather than requiring patrons to conform to procedures designed to shield and protect the records.

Recommendations

The new research complex under construction on the College Park campus of the University of Maryland, Archives II, affords an opportunity to develop a more responsive patron-service system than currently exists. Plans for this state-of-the-art facility-- at 1.7 million square feet the largest archives in the world-- call for a research complex with the potential to support a flexible, unified system of access services. When Archives II opens to the public in 1994, the National Archives and Records Administration should have in place, or be well on its way toward establishing, a user-oriented system of resources, programs, and services that builds on the agency's half-century of service to the historical record.

The objectives of a user-oriented system are unified procedures, integrated, multi-layered access tools, and a knowledgeable staff that together:

- * guarantee equal access to the agency's holdings to all who visit, call, or write;
- * enable self-sufficient consultation of the holdings while protecting them from damage; and
- * provide personal services commensurate with identified needs and that are flexible enough to compensate for inexperience.

Outlined below is a set of five goals for the coming decade that if attained could move the National Archives toward the objective of user-oriented reference and access services. The first goal implies that the image projected by the agency in its dealings with the public should emphasize accessibility. The second goal is oriented toward the management of reference services overall and calls for a great degree of integration. The third goal balances the natural tension that exists between encouraging use and preserving the integrity of unique records. The fourth goal supports the need of records specialists to extend and record their expertise. The fifth goal expresses the fundamental responsibility of the National Archives to encourage researchers to satisfy their own information needs by providing adequate research tools and the training to use them.

Goal 1: Promote Accessibility

At every turn, the National Archives should seize opportunities to demonstrate to the American people how useful archival records are for providing insight into everyday problems requiring some form of historical understanding; how available the records are to all who need them; and how

important it is to make use of original sources where possible. Getting this message of usefulness and accessibility to the potential users of the National Archives is an important outreach activity that needs to be reinforced by the physical appearance of the facilities, the attitudes of the staff who interact with the public, and the design of the tools (traditional and computerized) that provide access.

Goal 2: Unify All Reference Services

The National Archives should present to its users a system of services unified across all administrative units. Regardless of the method by which researchers contact the agency, the format of information that interests them, or the grade-levels of the staff who respond to their requests, patrons should encounter an access system whose administration is consistent and transparent. By unifying all reference services at the division level or above, and by replacing most of its paper-based administration with a computerized monitoring system, the agency may overcome the current impression among users of being a number of loosely-knit units, each with their own distinctive facilities, staffs, holdings, finding aids, and procedures.

Goal 3: Balance Preservation and Access Needs

A user-oriented reference system preserves the integrity of unique holdings while encouraging their use. Reference procedures must be designed to guarantee that routine and sometimes painstaking holdings maintenance actions are not compromised through improper handling by patrons and staff. Important balancing actions are the consistent application of existing procedures, the periodic review of the effectiveness of policies designed to identify fragile items, and the allocation of new resources to making machine-dependent records available in a timely fashion. Ultimately, the surest mechanism for balancing preservation needs and access responsibilities is the continuous willingness of all National Archives staff to demonstrate to patrons their concern for the health of the materials.

Goal 4: Protect Existing Records Expertise

The National Archives' greatest resource is its staff. Each staff member who works with historical records on a daily basis inevitably acquires a unique level of expertise. Records experts master the content and context of records and understand the most appropriate strategies for efficient access. Currently, researchers recognize that they are highly dependent on direct access to this personalized expertise. Even under the most optimistic forecasts, however, the National Archives cannot afford to develop sufficient expertise to meet growing demand while maintaining the current gatekeeping approach to reference service. The National Archives should protect the existing knowledge of records experts by providing incentives and mechanisms for building the specialized knowledge of records experts into manual and automated access systems.

Goal 5: Encourage Researcher Self-Sufficiency

Every person who contacts the National Archives for information has a right to consult the record, but not everyone has a need to be served personally by records experts. The key to user-oriented patron services are procedures that, first, recognize the level and kinds of services patrons need and, second, guide them toward functioning self-sufficiently. Reference service should primarily teach researchers how to relate their already-defined historical questions to the structure of the records and to navigate among the records and existing access tools in search of evidence to address their questions.

Continuing Research Needs

This research project was designed to outline an approach to understanding the users and uses of the National Archives and to describe the people who use the agency's research facilities for a variety of purposes. Ultimately the study compromised depth for breadth of understanding. As a result there remains a continuing need to extend the research beyond its present scope with the goal of explaining why the agency's resources and services are used and not used by the nation's citizens. At least four research areas are derived from the findings presented above.

- * **Subject access.** The findings provided clues, but no firm answers, about how people define historical questions in specific terms. The challenge of obtaining access to archival materials by subject requires that the concept be explored more fully, including how historical question definition relates not only to the purpose of the research but also to the specific "mental models" of the individuals who define their information needs in historical terms. The value of such research is to assist in the definition of key access points in automated databases of archival records and in the definition of appropriate levels of description of archival records.
- * **User Interfaces.** The key link between the user and sophisticated information technologies is the software and hardware components that combine to facilitate meaningful communication between humans and machines. Given the many user interface options currently available and the serious lack of knowledge of the processes that people follow to search for information stored in computers for purposes of historical understanding, significant research is required to determine the most effective combination of technologies in interactive user interfaces.
- * **User Training.** The user study demonstrated that a significant portion of researchers, on a continuing basis, lack experience with primary research methodologies in general and with specific agency procedures. To assist users in making efficient use of the holdings without significant direct assistance, practical research should be undertaken to determine the most effective mechanisms and procedures for compensating for inexperience.
- * **Non-Users.** This report describes only those patrons who contacted the National Archives in person and by telephone or mail, and provides no direct insight into why people who may benefit from using the holdings choose not to contact the agency. Beyond the obvious explanation of lack of time and money to travel, research should investigate the impact on the perceived information needs of potential researchers of the image of the agency, its physical location, and the physical forms of its holdings.

Archivist of the United States Don W. Wilson explained in 1989 why the National Archives must invest in quality. "Every advance in historical scholarship depends on the resources of an archives and on its ability to respond to the researcher's needs."²³ The user study reported here has shown that the agency's ability to respond to its researchers depends, first, on knowing what those needs are, and second, on developing a comprehensive system of resources, including facilities, staff, and searching tools, all oriented toward enhancing access to the nation's archives. In the future, the National Archives will protect America's historical memory only to the extent that it supports broad historical understanding in partnership with those who use its resources.

²³ National Archives and Records Administration, *Annual Report for the Year Ended September 30, 1989* (Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, 1990), 1.