

PLANNING AND PRIORITIZING

1.3 The Needs Assessment Survey

INTRODUCTION

Preservation needs assessment surveys (also known as general preservation assessments) are essential to preservation planning. A preservation plan is based on the preservation needs of an institution and the actions required to meet these needs. These needs and recommended actions are documented in the report of the survey. Many institutions choose to conduct a general preservation survey that looks at the needs of all the collections in general terms. For institutions with numerous diverse collections and complex planning needs, additional assessment surveys that address particular problems or the needs of specific collections or types of materials may be required.

Since assessment surveys are the foundation of preservation planning, conducting a survey that meets the institution's planning needs is critical.

- A survey must evaluate the policies, practices, and conditions in an institution that affect the preservation of all the collections.
- It must address the general state of all the collections, what is needed to improve that state, and how to preserve the collections long-term.

- It must identify specific preservation needs, recommend actions to meet those needs, and prioritize the recommended actions.

An assessment survey evaluates the entire building in which collections are housed. Hazards to collections are identified, considering such factors as environment, storage, security and access, housekeeping, conservation treatment, and policies and practices. It is important to note that the building in which collections are housed is often itself a part of the collections, as in the case of an historic or architecturally significant structure. In this instance, the actions required to preserve the building as well as the collections it houses must be considered.

All of these observations should be recorded in a formal survey report. The report should be written in clear direct language and should be formatted in such a way that information can be easily located and extracted from it. The report is the tool an institution uses to draft its preservation plan.

A preservation needs assessment survey can be conducted by an outside consultant or by qualified in-house staff. There are advantages and disadvantages to both, which should be considered before a decision is made to hire an outside consultant or to begin the process in-house. If contracting an outside person, be certain to check

their credentials and experience. Ask for and check references before hiring.

OUTSIDE SURVEYOR VERSUS IN-HOUSE STAFF

Outside Surveyor/Advantages

1. An outside surveyor may be more experienced than anyone in your institution. A consultant from the outside may have done more surveys, may be more familiar with the survey process, and may have dealt with more diverse situations. Also, an outside consultant may be more aware of outside resources that would enable projects to be accomplished. This gives the surveyor a broader, more comprehensive base for making recommendations.
2. The surveyor may be a specialist in a particular area or type of collection. This is useful in making recommendations.
3. An outside consultant comes without preconceptions and biases and can usually see situations objectively.
4. An outside surveyor can say things that may be interpreted as critical without fear of being penalized. Thus, a consultant is more likely to point out situations that need to be changed even if the change is an unpopular one. Likewise, a consultant is not constrained by the political situation within an institution.
5. Often an outside surveyor has more credibility with the staff and administration, even if this is not justified. The consultant is viewed as an authority.
6. Perhaps the greatest advantage to using an outside surveyor is that this person has the time to do the job. A consultant can be scheduled to come at a certain time and be expected to complete the survey and produce a written report by a specific date.

Outside Surveyor/Disadvantages

1. An outside surveyor does not know the history or institutional framework in which situations exist. A consultant is unfamiliar with institutional traditions and idiosyncrasies and, as a result, may make recommendations that are unrealistic or out of scope for a particular institution.
2. Hiring an outside consultant requires an outlay of money for consulting fees. This funding may not be available. This makes the surveyor seem more expensive even though in reality an in-house survey may cost as much, or even more, in staff time.

In-House Staff/Advantages

1. An in-house surveyor knows an institution's values and functions and understands the institutional framework and background of existing situations. For this reason, a staff member may be able to make more realistic recommendations than can an outside consultant.
2. An in-house surveyor tends to know where all the collections are housed, the peculiarities of the storage spaces, and how the facilities work. This enables the surveyor to work faster and to make more appropriate recommendations.
3. An in-house surveyor may be more thorough, if there are no limitations on the staff member's time, compared to the outside consultant whose time is limited.
4. Using in-house staff avoids an additional cash expense; an outlay of money is not required. This makes the survey seem less expensive, although it may actually cost more in staff time.

In-House Staff/Disadvantages

1. In-house staff come with their own prejudices and agendas, which may cloud their interpretation of situations and influence their recommendations.
2. It is harder for an in-house person to be an instrument of change than it is for an outsider. In-house staff may be reluctant to recommend certain changes because of the negative impact this may have on themselves or others. Also, they may be reluctant to recommend a change because they assume, based on previous experience, that changes will not be made.
3. In-house staff may take longer than an outside consultant to conduct a survey and produce a report, because they must carry out their regular job responsibilities while doing the survey.
4. An in-house person may be viewed by the administration and other staff as not having the same level of expertise and knowledge as an outside consultant, even if this is not true. A staff member may not have as much credibility.

SOURCES OF HELP

Outside Consultants

Funding for assessment surveys is available from local, state, and federal agencies, many of which are listed on NEDCC's *Funding Opportunities* webpage at <https://www.nedcc.org/free-resources/funding-opportunities/overview>.

Federal funding for assessment surveys is available through the following:

- *Collections Assessment for Preservation (CAP) Program*
Foundation for Advancement in Conservation
Email: cap@culturalheritage.org

Web:

<https://www.culturalheritage.org/resources/collections-care/cap>

- *Museum Assessment Program (MAP)*
American Association of Museums
Web: <https://www.aam-us.org/programs/accreditation-excellence-programs/museum-assessment-program-map/>
- *Preservation Assistance Grants for Smaller Institutions (PAG)*
National Endowment for the Humanities
Web: <https://www.neh.gov/grants/preservation/preservation-assistance-grants-smaller-institutions>

Referrals for consultants who provide assessment surveys can be obtained from the granting organizations listed above.

Non-profit preservation and conservation organizations that provide consultation services are listed online:

- *Regional Alliance for Preservation*
<http://rap-arcc.org/services/consultations>

Independent consultants may be identified through these online directories:

- *Directory of Archival Consultants*
Society of American Archivists
<https://www2.archivists.org/consultants>
- *Find a Professional*
American Institute for Conservation
<https://www.culturalheritage.org/about-conservation/find-a-conservator>

In-House Surveys

For assistance in conducting an in-house survey, see *Assessing Preservation Needs: A Self-Study Guide* by Beth Patkus, published in 2003 by NEDCC and now freely available online at

<https://www.nedcc.org/assets/media/documents/apnssg.pdf>.

For assistance in surveying archival collections, see the *Archives Assessment and Planning Workbook* edited by Paul H. McCarthy (2010), which is freely available online from the Society of American Archivists at <https://www2.archivists.org/sites/all/files/ArchivesAssessPlanWkbkAug2010.pdf>.

Additional resources that may prove helpful are *Benchmarks in Collection Care for Museums Archives and Libraries: A Self-Assessment Checklist* (2018) from the Collections Trust, available at <https://collectionstrust.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/Benchmarks-in-Collections-Care-2.1-1-1.pdf>, and the related Benchmarks 3.0 self-assessment checklist (2021), available for download at <http://www.ncs.org.uk/benchmarks3.php>.

Another useful publication is *A Preventive Conservation Calendar for the Smaller Museum*, published in 1997 by the International Centre for the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property (ICCROM) and available online at https://www.iccrom.org/sites/default/files/Manual-A_preventive_conservation_calendar_for_the

[smaller museums_OPT.pdf](#). In particular, see the “Discovery” section that begins on page 15 and includes a list of “spot-checks.”

Online needs assessment tools have been developed for collection-holding institutions such as archives, libraries, and museums. For example, see the *Preservation Self-Assessment Program (PSAP)* from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. It is available at <https://psap.library.illinois.edu/>.

Lastly, for assistance in surveying digital collections (which are typically not included in a general preservation needs assessment survey), see NEDCC's *Digital Preservation Assessment Handbook* and *Digital Preservation Peer-Assessment* (2019) both available for download at <https://www.nedcc.org/preservation-training/digital-preservation-assessment-training>.

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