

ICR “Seed Money” Grant: Final Report

Background

In the late spring of 2005, the Executive Committee awarded us \$9,620 to develop a “Unified, Standards-Compliant System for Describing Archives and Manuscript Collections.” The project was intended to develop an open source tool which could be used by archives and manuscript repositories to manage collection information, publish it to the web, and produce MARC and EAD (Encoded Archival Description) records for exchange with other systems.

Initial Tool Development

Christopher Rishel, an undergraduate computer science major, was hired to develop the system as lead programmer working under our direction. Before the project began, Chris Prom attended a training session “MARC according to DACS: Archival Cataloging to the New Descriptive Standard” in Washington DC in May 2005, using a small supplemental grant provided from the ICR fund. The ICR money was spent during the summer and early fall of 2005, and resulted in the development of an alpha version of our “Archival Information System.”

After the ICR money was exhausted, we continued to internally develop the tool with funding from the Sousa student wage budget and University Archives revenue account (i.e. income from scanning and photocopy orders). We have sufficient funding from University and Sousa Archives accounts to continue development of the tool for the summer, and if necessary, for the next year. A stable release version will be demonstrated and made available to archivists who attend our presentation, “Developing an open-source and standards-compliant descriptive tool for lone arrangers,” during annual meeting of the Society of American Archivists to be held in Washington, DC August 1-6, 2006.

The project has been and continues to be a resounding success. What we are now calling the “Simple Archival System” (SAS) is a web application which allows archivists and librarians to easily create and publish descriptive information at the collection, series, file, item and other levels for all types of archival materials. The system is compliant with all current archival content standards and automatically produces a searchable and browseable end-user interface for public access. It includes support for authority-controlled creator and subject records and provides an inventory tracking/location system. Collections can be grouped into record groups, subgroups, or other classifications defined by archives which utilize them, making it an option for institutions which would like to provide archival staff and users a way to browse collections by provenance. Currently there are no collections management systems with this functionality that are commercially available or under development. In addition data from other stand-alone systems can easily be imported into the system. The system also exports data in MARC and EAD formats. Our newly developed program also enables repositories to build custom websites from their data using the system’s easily-modifiable HTML templates.

More information about the system and the project, including a ‘sandbox’ is available at www.sasproject.org. The site also includes both user and technical documentation for the SAS program. SAS uses a relatively straightforward object-oriented model which makes it fairly easy

to modify/extend. It is also an ideal candidate for an open-source project supported by other archives, manuscript repositories, and libraries. We will be talking to John McIntyre at OTM about licensing options.

Future Plans

We are pursuing several options for implementing SAS for the University Archives and SACAM and promoting its testing and use by other archives across the country. We firmly believe SAS's innovative functionality solves several collections management and access problems that have been encountered by other archives and manuscript repositories which are currently utilizing or developing other commercial systems for the management and access of their collections. We have publication plans in mind both to spread word about the innovative aspects of the tool and to lay the groundwork for potential grant applications.

Locally—An earlier version of the SAS program was demonstrated to Beth Sandore, John Wieble, Adam Lewenberg, and to the members of CAPT. Everyone seemed impressed and all agreed that the technical platform on which it is based meshes well with current systems supported by the Library. In addition they recognized the functionality provided by SAS exceeds other programs currently available to the library and archives user communities. One area where CAPT and systems office assistance would be needed is the creation of viable linkage between SAS and Voyager for dynamically uploading collection-level bibliographic records generated by SAS into the Library on-line catalogs. Since SAS's functionality creates raw MARC records, we believe it makes good sense to utilize SAS to automatically maintain and update catalog records for our archives and manuscript collections. Such functionality will enhance user access and integrate seamlessly into existing archival workflows, resulting in significant operating efficiencies. We plan to pursue this point with CAPT and Systems Office staff this summer.

Regardless of how the SAS-Voyager connectivity issue is resolved, the staff of the University Archives and SACAM believe it makes sense to adopt SAS as the production system for the Library's archival and manuscript materials. It is very stable, responds quickly to all public access queries, and the administrative interface is easy to learn for those who have a good understanding of basic archival arrangement and descriptive principles. The Sousa Archives is currently running a production version of SAS for its collections management and public access. The system is currently being tested with the University Archives' data and during the week of July 3, will become its production system. Shortly thereafter, the ALA Archives database will be migrated to the new data platform.

In addition, we have discussed the possibility of applying SAS to manuscript databases in the Rare Book Room (i.e. Sandburg), and will be pursuing this effort further in consultation with Beth and Valerie. Valerie has sufficient money available from her Delmas grant to import Sandburg and other databases that are currently less than optimally accessible. This will also provide a degree of standardization for their collection finding aids that will enable the public to access seamlessly different collections within the Special Collections Division. It may also be possible to implement the system for the Illinois Historical Survey collections.

Regionally— Information was submitted to Peggy Steele as part of CARLI's locally developed tools survey. We hope to demonstrate SAS to CARLI later this summer. We believe with the support of CARLI, SAS could play a role in the creation of some type of "Illinois Archives Online" Project. Illinois is woefully behind in consortia projects to provide access to archival information across the state, and we envision several ways this tool could be used as part of a potential CARLI project or grant.

Nationally— Usability testing is currently being conducted by the staff National Museum of American History's Archives Center, Smithsonian Institution, and an archival consultant, Pamela Coleman-Nye of Phoenix Research and Designs. A session on the results of the usability test will be presented at the Society of American Archivists meeting, on August 4 in Washington DC and a stable version of the software will be distributed to any archivist who attends this presentation. We are currently seeking other institutional partners from across the country to test our programming.

Publication Plans—We plan to submit two articles to Library Hi-Tech or D-lib, a contextual/system overview piece authored by Chris Prom/Scott Schwartz and a technical piece authored by Chris Rishel.

Grant seeking—We believe the software could be used as part of several possible grants. We do not believe additional funding should be sought to develop the tool itself, until such time as it is more widely adopted outside of UIUC. It would make more sense to focus potential grants on implementing it in Illinois and in other parts of the country, and to add additional functions to the tool as part of these possible implementation projects.

We will continue to explore options for possible grants by working with Beth Sandore, CARLI, and national leaders. We also seek advice from EC, CAPT and other appropriate committees on how our grant seeking activity could be related to the Library's strategic priorities.

Chris Prom, Assistant University Archivist
Scott Schwartz, Archivist for Music and Fine Arts