

MODeL Focus Group Summary

Overview

Participation in the focus groups was excellent. We heard from 45 participants representing institutions from the six regions. The questions we asked fell into four broad categories. The broad focus areas were needs, funding, governance, and standards. In the pages that follow, the most representative comments are arranged by topic. Also included are some comments that, while not necessarily representative, seemed important. There was general agreement on many points. The comparison of a centralized system and a decentralized system as potential models may have occasioned the greatest discrepancy in views, but it seems that everyone could be fairly well satisfied with a mix of centralization and decentralization. As for funding, everyone acknowledged that MODeL must be paid for somehow, but it was unclear what the best, most equitable approach would be, especially in view of the fact that different institutions would require different levels of support. There was no strong feeling for any particular standard. The general feeling seemed to be that standards that would serve the needs of the system and be portable (that is be able to be carried forward as technology changed) should be adopted. A general need for guidance and advice was expressed. In general, an urgency to digitize collections was felt, but the urgency was tempered by a fear of jumping in and making costly mistakes. Providing digital access to collections was seen as a way to provide a leadership role for librarians in the online world.

Summary of Challenges

- Funding
- Standards for digitization and metadata
- Preservation assistance
- Infrastructure to manage and provide access to digital collections
- Quality metadata creation
- Staffing
- Expert assistance, guidelines, training, resources
- Security for collections
- Assistance with vendors
- Time
- Copyright / digital rights management
- Long-term sustainability
- Integration of existing collections
- Buy-in
- Publicity
- Patron education

Collections

Just about everyone who participated in the focus groups had some type of collection or collections they would like to see digitized and included in the statewide initiative.

Examples:

- Genealogy
- Local history
- Town archives
- Postcards
- Building plans
- Newspapers
- Primary historical documents
- Street directories
- Photographs
- Glass plate negatives
- Institutional history
- Slide library
- Oral histories
- Manuscripts
- Born digital documents (state and local govt)
- E-resources

Benefits of / Need for Statewide Digital Library

- Increase access to valuable collections
- Huge selling point for libraries and towns
- Increase quantity of digital collections
- Materials from each individual collection would be better served in a larger historical context
- Newspapers – single institutions don't often have complete runs, but together, multiple institutions may be able to fill in the blanks
- Much easier for users to have one place to look for materials than to try to discover which institutions have materials online, and then to search each individual collection
- Will help to remove the problem of having to know what's out there in order to be able to find it
- Setting statewide standards and providing guidance will make it easier for MA institutions to go digital
- The statewide project should provide
 - Training
 - Extra help for smaller institutions
 - Publicity materials to education end users about the scope and content of the database
- The state should set up the structure and system that all institutions can use
- The MA state boundary may be artificial in the world of the web, but it is a good place to start
- It is to be hoped that aggregating the power of many institutions will lead to economies of scale and increased efficiencies in production
- Could build a sense of a statewide library system, which does not currently exist – may help build legislative support
- It would be useful to have state and local government materials available through this system organized by region
- Digitization could allow some physical materials to be removed to remote storage, which would alleviate space problems at some institutions
- Digitization would help preserve valuable originals by reducing the physical handling of documents
- Would provide great resources for K-12 educational programs
- Having a statewide resource will expand the mission and reach of libraries

Desired Features

- Functionality like Google, Amazon, and the Colorado Digitization Program
 - Take a look at where these companies/projects are going
- For users, it should look like they are searching one collection, regardless of the architecture of the system
- Add records for digital collections to each institution's OPAC as well
- Be able to search multiple formats at one time
- Provide easy access to MODeL from library web sites across the entire state
- Require that all items contributed to the shared database lead to some sort of visual representation of the original item, not just a metadata record or description of the item
- Extremely important to offer options / service levels / tiered participation in project
 - Allow institutions to participate at their own level. They may decide to make a big digitization push one year, but not have the need, or the resources to do the same the next year
 - Provide a range of service levels to accord with the needs/skills of an institution
 - Decide to do a little or a lot as available resources dictate
 - Subscription or dues could be tied to level of participation
- Regarding content, start with materials that can't be found elsewhere – focus on Massachusetts' unique materials
- Everything must be well cataloged/described in order to provide good access to the materials and to support a functionally rich system (many institutions will need help with this)
 - Provide subject headings and descriptions
 - Provide full text where applicable/possible
 - Be able to search by proper names
 - Each record should indicate name of owning institution
 - Build good indexes
- Results should be organized and grouped in logical, easy-to-understand manner that enhances the search experience (don't take Google as a model in this case)
- The search engine for the database must be really good and take into account that not all users will be expert searchers/researchers
- Users need to be able to filter / limit searches to select types, or categories of materials they are looking for
- Consider providing pre-set themed searches such as Colonial America, the American Revolution, Salem Witch Trials, etc.
- Interface should be simple and intuitive
- Include a spell checker for search terms

- The system should take into consideration the likely technological level of the end user
 - Provide multiple ways to view an image or document: PDF, text only, low-resolution images, etc.
 - Limit the number of plug-ins required to view resources
 - Provide manageable image sizes
 - Make the whole system browser-based
- Provide a mechanism to obtain user feedback
- Provide some kind of e-commerce capability to allow end users to order reproductions, etc. (see below for more on revenue generation)
- Patrons should be offered a range of customization options and searching levels to accommodate different needs
- General agreement that access should be free to the public
- OPEN ACCESS: Opinion was divided on this issue. Some felt that access should be completely open, others felt that users should be required to log in, perhaps using their library card number in order to establish the connection with the library and underscore its value. Some thought users would object to logging in and would have a fear of being their searches being tracked.
- Must be ADA compliant
- Some wanted to be able to “brand” collections as being from a particular institution
- Some would like to be able to customize the MODEL interface for local community, others would like it to look the same from anywhere in the state
- Would like to get statistics and reports relative to own collections in the database

Digital Collections as a Revenue Generator

- Opinion was divided on this issue. Some said, yes, absolutely, some said no, others saw potential here, even if not doing so now
- Need help with reproduction rights
- Contributed collections need to be secure
- Would need some e-commerce mechanism and means to credit money to owning institution

Questions

- Should MODEL include access to statewide (subscription-based) electronic resources?
- Should it include “born digital” items, or only special collections?

Support Needed

- Money
- Staff
- Guidance on choosing standards that will not be obsolete in a year, or even ten
 - Digitization
 - Preservation (digital and analog)
 - Metadata
 - Content selection
- Selection process / criteria
 - Develop statewide inventory
 - Types of materials
 - Types of institutions that can participate
 - Restrictions on topic/content, if any
- Expert assistance - need someone we can call for help
 - Don't want to learn complex software that changes all the time – would rather rely on an expert
 - Help with purchasing equipment or choosing a vendor for digitization / metadata creation
 - People to come on site to do the digitization – not enough staff do handle it themselves
- There was strong support for a “Scan Van” to bring a traveling team and equipment to individual institutions to digitize materials. This would allow work to be done on site, but would not require use of local staff or resources. There was also interest in finding vendors who would be willing to work on-site.
- Demonstrated commitment to this project for the long term
- Training and training materials – Very Important
- Infrastructure, technology, and software of a centralized system would be necessary for many institutions to be able to participate
- Tools (templates) and resources to facilitate metadata creation
- Documents and publicity materials that could be customized by each institution
- Need to know collections will be protected and secured from unlawful or inappropriate use

Governance

- Need funding and a business model
- Need a plan to add materials on an on-going basis
- Some bias against the BPL taking the central/lead role was noted
- Membership: will MODeL be restricted to libraries? How will other types of institutions be brought in? There is not an existing governance structure in MA that covers both libraries and museums, etc.
- Can this be just another level of service added to the virtual catalog?
- The system needs to be associated with an organization that has some authority in Massachusetts, to give it credibility in the eyes of the public
- It must be clear that the state system doesn't own the materials in the database. Keep ownership with individual institution
- No one wants another meeting to go to, so if this new effort could be incorporated into an existing system, that would be best
- Broad representation is important to this project. Don't let the heavyweights steamroller the smaller institutions. Find a way to make representation equitable
- Find a way to include patron representation
- MODeL will need a public relations arm to explain the scope, content, contribution policies, etc.
- We don't need another consortium or governing body – too many already. Add these new duties to an existing group's responsibilities

Reactions to Models

During the focus group discussion, we presented three models for the participants to react to. I have listed the relevant comments under each model, and included another section for comments that were more general, or applied to a fourth or fifth model. Some comments apply to more than one model. There were pros and cons attributed to each model, and conflicts of opinion. The general consensus seemed to strongly favor a system with a centralized component to support institutions that could not build a digital infrastructure on their own, and the flexibility to incorporate a variety of stand-alone collections developed and held locally by other institutions.

Centralized

A centralized system would consist of a single infrastructure into which all materials are entered (Maine Memory Network is one example of this approach).

- A large centralized system can have big costs associated with it
- There is a trade off between cost and dependability
- Need accountability at some level to maintain a high-quality system
- There was a strong expression of a need for someone to be in charge of maintenance
- There is a need for at least some centralized administration to handle quality control, technical issues, training, support, funding issues, etc.
- Centralized infrastructure, equipment, technology, and software will be needed to meet the needs of many smaller institutions
- A centralized system might be the best means to standardize access for users

- Centralizing all data in one single system is archaic, and should not be considered
- Centralization will make the process more efficient and uniform. Decentralization increases the chance of failure
- Centralized model may be burdensome to some institutions if it doesn't allow sufficient flexibility
- Some towns and boards would have to be sold on the benefits of the statewide database in order to authorize spending money to participate. "Our town may not let us participate in the statewide effort if it costs more than putting our materials up on our own website, even if there are other benefits to the statewide model."
- Establishing some standards for participation will ensure better quality collections
- A centralized system will be the most stable
- Offer centralized digital storage at the very least

Semi-decentralized

A centralized database composed of records gathered from collections housed at individual institutions (OAI based).

- Some institutions will not want to house their collections in a centralized system
- Many institutions will insist upon local control of their collections
- It should be possible to support a local system and participate in a shared statewide system
- A decentralized model will allow the incorporation of many more collections and types of collections, including those already built and being maintained in MA
- How would the "do your own thing" model be funded? The approach would disenfranchise smaller institutions with less money and less experience, but with valuable collections

Decentralized/Softwareized

Each institution maintains its own collections and a third party software product is configured to search each participating collection in real time (such as WebFeat)

- A decentralized system might be cheaper in some ways, but may lead to a poorer quality product and service. Dead ends and technical glitches might degrade the overall quality of the system if individual institutions are left to their own devices with no oversight
- Using a configured software product might have lower administrative costs, but it will have potentially higher capital costs to license the software year after year
- Software vendors have a history of being somewhat unreliable and often unresponsive
- Decentralization puts a lot of pressure on individual institutions
- This project will not happen if a decentralized approach is taken. Need the structure and support of a guiding body

Other

- With the climate in New England, we will need a mix of centralization and decentralization, including flexibility and options for participation
- Have a centralized component for those who need it plus the ability to bring in decentralized collections
- Patrons don't care where the stuff is, as long as they can get to it
- The available technology will determine the model to use
- Look to national institutions and organizations and follow their lead
- Must make it possible to incorporate all the digital materials that have already been digitized
- Individual institutions must be able to build collections in the way that best suits their needs and then translate to statewide standards, or configure system to contribute to the state project
- A federated model that incorporates a centralized component will be the best way to link together what each little village is doing
- The process should be allowed to grow organically and should build slowly over time – not everyone has to get on board from day one
- Some feel they will need a lot of hand-holding and support
- Build in flexibility with data and technology so we can maneuver as new technologies and opportunities arise

Potential Models Suggested by Participants

Many existing governing bodies were suggested as models, or as existing structures that could be adapted to incorporate new digital services. Some that were suggested had both supporters and detractors.

- Automated networks
- C/W Mars
- NOBLE
- Minuteman
- MassCat
- Regional library system
- MBLC (probably the choice most often mentioned)

Questions

- How and where does this initiative fit with existing state efforts?
- Who decides what collections are added and when?
- Who decides where the money comes from and how it is spent?
- Membership: Who can join? Will historical societies, museums, etc. be invited to participate? Sturbridge Village; SPNEA; DeCordova Museum; Codman House, etc. Will the large institutions / academics participate (Harvard, MIT)? They have a lot of experience and expertise. Is anyone working to bring them on board?

Funding

Funding to get this project started and to keep it going into the future was a huge concern for almost every participant. More questions were asked than answered.

- Will need a solid, workable business plan. We're talking about a huge quantity of materials here
- The costs for this type of project have been described as a "digital mortgage" - the costs go on forever
- May have to charge fees according to level of participation / need, but that may mean poorer institutions will be priced out of participation.
- Would hate to see another good program get going, then be curtailed or cancelled when funds get tight. Are we building a house of cards here?
- Will future budget cuts stop it in its tracks, or diminish it severely?
- Some people see a role for corporate sponsorship, other have concerns about it.
Concerns:
 - Sustainability (how long will it be in the corporation's interest to providing funding, and what happens when they stop)
 - Image (linking for-profit corporations with non-profit libraries) - private versus public
- Users expect materials on the web to be free, and they expect materials from their public library to be free
 - Need to meet users expectations, or educate them about why things they think should be free cost money
- Making resources openly available on the web increases one's user base beyond traditional boundaries. Can we afford to serve larger user populations? Should we?
- What will happen at the end of this grant? Will funding depend upon the state? Can't rely on government funding.
- Will we make cuts in physical access to support increased digital / virtual access?

Challenges

- There will be a lot of resistance to giving up control
- Resistance to letting the “great unwashed” know what we have because they will want to use the stuff and they will wreck it
- Need to accommodate existing collections not necessarily created to MODeL standards
- Create an equitable environment for participation by small and large, rich and poor, have and have not institutions
- Ensure that the thrust is providing access to materials from diverse institutions in a way that does not diminish ownership by originating institution

Impact

- This will open up a vast resource to people 24x7
- If it's a positive experience, more and more people are going to want to use it
- An issue for small organizations with no staff: what will happen if the world finds out what we have? Who will facilitate requests? We don't want to be overwhelmed
- If people see a little, they want more
- Whenever we make something available in a digital format, we see an increase in traffic both on the web and in person. This increases the work of our staff
- Digitization of some materials has increased interest in materials not yet digitized, and puts them in increased physical jeopardy
- Making resources openly available on the web expands our audience. How will we handle requests from California at 10 pm?
- Having the materials organized and digitized saves staff time which can be used to handle increased requests
- It will change the way library services are offered and used. We'll expand our user base