Statewide & Regional Stepping Stones To The National Digital Platform
A New Collaborative Michigan Initiative

March 4th & 5th Symposium White Paper

Background

In the Fall of 2018, Grand Valley State University Libraries launched a first-of-its-kind statewide survey for digital preservation. Working closely with several of the state professional associations for libraries (Michigan Academic Library Association), archives (Michigan Archival Association), museums and galleries (Michigan Museums Association), as well as with the Library of Michigan, the Michigan Council of Library Directors (COLD), and the Midwest Collaborative for Library Services (MCLS), the survey was disseminated to over 1000 different institutions across the state. The survey sought to better understand the scope and function of digital preservation at each of the responding institutions, including: 1) the size and nature of their digital collections; 2) what sorts of technologies they are using; 3) their use of standards and policies; and 4) how willing they were to engage in collaborations to make more progress in preserving our state's digital cultural heritage.

The survey yielded over 150 responses from all sectors and regions across the state.

Building on the success of the survey, GVSU Libraries launched a year-long planning initiative known as the *Statewide & Regional Stepping Stones to the National Digital Platform*. A project sponsored with generous funding from the Institute of Museum & Library Services (IMLS). The project aims to "proof-of-concept" the launch of a new model state/regional digital preservation community and collaborative, and to draft the tools needed to make such a venture sustainable and growing into the future. To extend the impact of the project to other states and regions, all of the project deliverables will be made comprehensive, generalizable, and adaptable. No two states and regions are the same, and the institutions that are located within them have very unique needs and collaborative dynamics. The goal of the project is *not* to promote a "one-size-fits-all" approach but rather to exemplify a process and coalesce best practices that can catalyze local planning and development.

You can read all about the project's research objectives and deliverables here:
https://www.gvsu.edu/library/stepping-stones-68.htm

To get this exciting work underway for Michigan and the surrounding regions, a two-day Symposium was planned to bring together as many as possible of the survey respondents who expressed interest in collaborating into the future. The goal of the Symposium was: 1) to hear and learn from leading experts in the field of collaborative and distributed digital preservation; 2) better understand the needs and priorities of our state institutions; and 3) facilitate discussions aimed at fostering connections to sustain the needed collaborations ahead. See the included presentation labeled Project Background & Overview for more on the Symposium objectives and outcomes.

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The Symposium took place on March 4th & 5th at GVSU Libraries. There were over 40 individuals in attendance from large and small institutions across the state with a variety of different collecting missions. Representatives from the Library of Michigan and the State Archives were also in attendance. It was a dynamic set of engagements. The ultimate outcomes were by no means guaranteed at the outset of the conversations. What emerged however were an impressive series of community-generated ideas for collaboratively supporting digital preservation within the state as we move forward. The following brief white paper summarizes the activities and outcomes of the event, and puts forward a roadmap for laying the foundations for a new technical and practitioner community at the conclusion of the project in late 2019.

Day One Summary

The first day of the Symposium was geared towards providing attendees with updates on the overall survey results and the current findings from focus groups being held with other external networks like the Texas Digital Library (TDL), the Council of Pacific & Prairie Libraries (COPPUL), Digital Virginias, and the Wisconsin Library Services Recollection Project to name just a few. These are digital preservation networks that are in various stages of operation across the country and in the hemisphere. They are serving as sources of best practice from which to learn and with whom to align, and the project has been grateful for their willingness to work with our project and with our state. See the included presentation labeled Project Research Updates for more details on the survey findings and focus groups.

Proceeding on from these updates, attendees were then provided with presentations from two major collaborative experts—Dr. Katherine Skinner (Executive Director, Educopia Institute) and Christine Wiseman (Head Digital Services, Atlanta University Center, Historically Black Colleges & Universities Library Alliance). Dr. Skinner provided an overview of Educopia's excellent resource *Community Cultivation: A Field Guide*, which is proving especially rich in helpful guidance for the two foundational stages that the state is poised to work through in this project—the stages of *Formation* and *Validation*. Skinner emphasized that one of the most important efforts that a community-based initiative can engage in is making sure that barriers to participation and input are lowered, particularly at the earliest stages of formation, and that every participating institution can have an ongoing seat and say at the governance table.

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Christine Wiseman then shared lessons-learned from fostering collaborations amongst the HBCU Library Alliance members as they seek to provide access and support preservation for the digital collections that document their institutional and regional histories. Wiseman emphasized the importance of supplying community-based digital preservation initiatives with strong leadership in the areas of technology management and community management—these can ensure that work does not stagnate over time or lose focus. A common theme across both these presentations, and a key takeaway, was that community change is never-ending and that sustained engagement can never be taken for granted—rather it should be anticipated and managed strategically over time.

With all of this helpful research data in hand and experiences shared from such seasoned practitioners, attendees had some starter context and information to begin dialoguing with one another in focused groups. Attendees were seated at tables with representatives from all of the different sectors—libraries, archives, museums, galleries, research centers, vendors, and others were all intermixed to ensure a diversity of shared perspectives.

In the first group exercise, attendees were challenged to openly identify their own institutional needs and priorities for accomplishing better digital preservation for their institution, and then make connections across sectors with others who expressed similar needs and priorities. Challenges and barriers to collaboration were discussed. All of these were documented from each individual and each table's perspective.

Later each table was challenged to build on what they had previously identified as a set of shared needs and priorities and to hypothetically co-develop a network/community to address the need(s). After some time of brainstorming and visioning, each table was then challenged to randomly send one of their members to another table and trouble-shoot the ensuing community changes. This was all an exercise in experiencing and weathering community change, which as stated above, will be essential to the success of a future network in the state. Each of the tables indicated that even though the community fracturing was disappointing at times that the process of adding new member perspectives invariably enriched the newly changed communities and the ways they approached addressing their area of need and service.

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The day concluded with attendees identifying specific shared activities that they agreed were worthwhile toward advancing digital preservation collectively within the state, based both upon the needs expressed from the survey responses reported earlier in the day (again, see included presentation Project Research Updates) and from the exchanges that took place throughout the day itself. These are all summarized below. They laid a foundation for the conversations to come on Day Two.

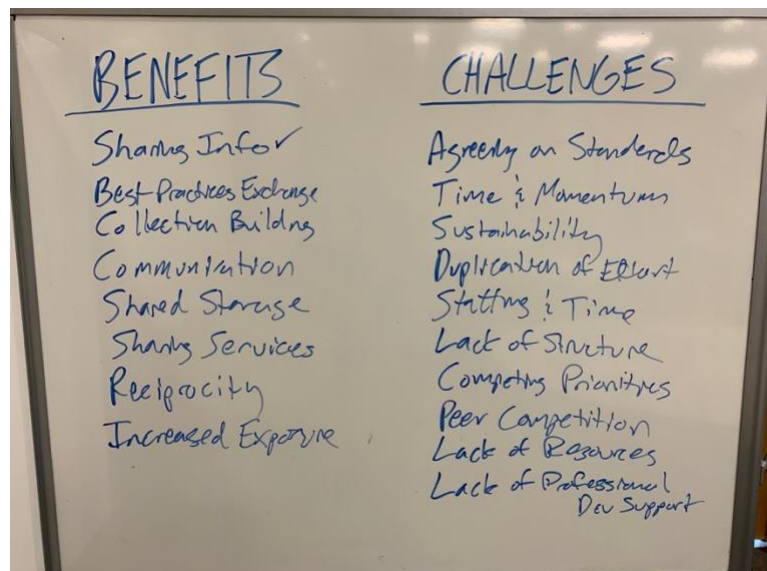## Day One Findings & Future Collaborations

Attendees identified with each other the following benefits and challenges when pursuing community-based approaches to accomplishing digital preservation.

Benefits
- Information sharing
- Best practices exchange
- Enriched collection building
- Improved communication
- Shared storage and services
- Reciprocity
- Raised institutional profiles

Challenges
- Inconsistent standards
- Sustaining momentum
- Duplication of efforts
- Devoting time and staffing
- Maintaining structure
- Competing priorities
- Competition
- Lack of resources
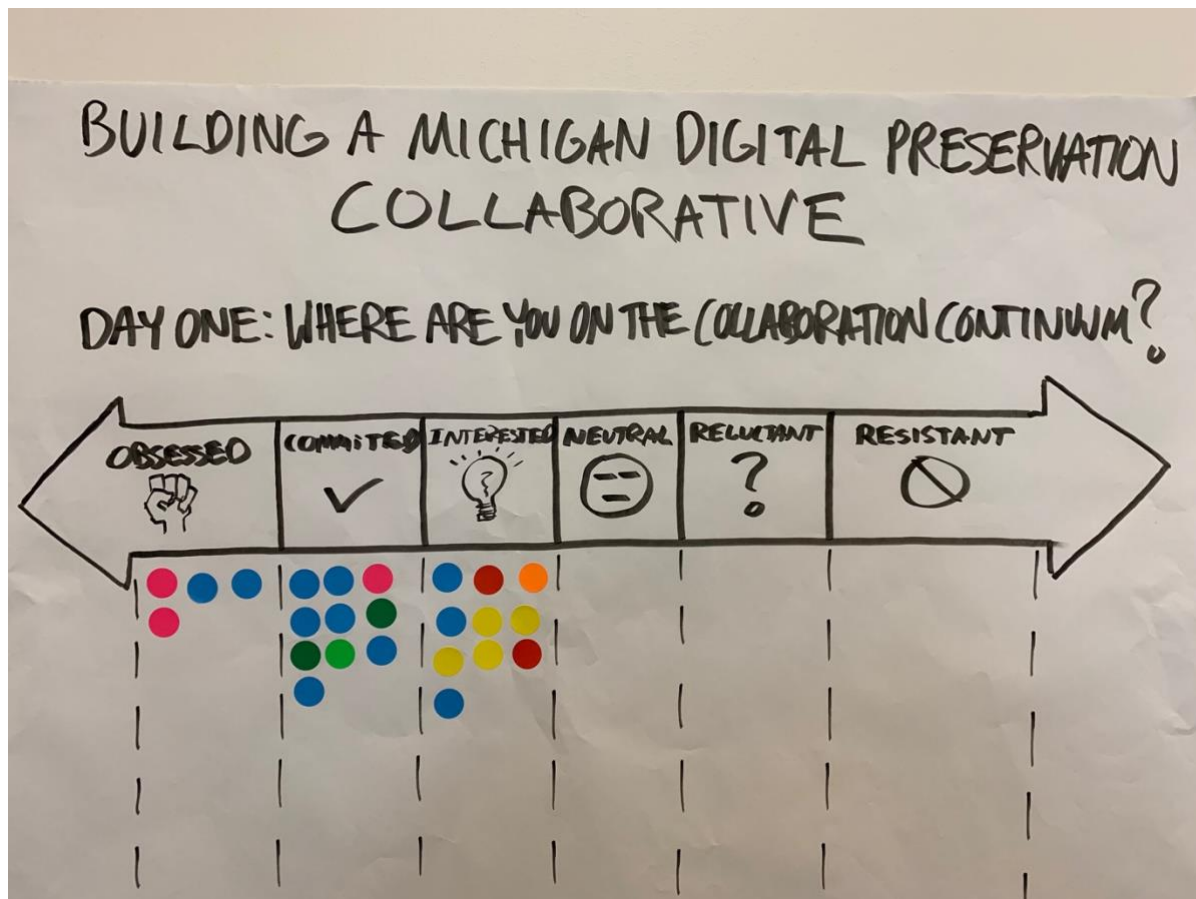- Providing support and professional development

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Attendees then spent time practicing community development around the following self-identified shared activities—these activities formed the basis for exploring future collaborations on Day Two.

- **Advocacy & Training Network**—collectively developing business case resources for digital preservation, digitization, and metadata development and coordinating a peer professional network to perform outreach to institutions in need of support and capacity boosting
- **Policies & Best Practices**—an open knowledge and resource sharing community to co-develop and share policies and advice on improving digital preservation workflows and technologies
- **Innovating Models**—exploring and testing new economic models for underwriting and sustaining the institutional work of digital preservation
- **Shared Repositories**—piloting new functional digital preservation storage networks for collectively preserving digital heritage and assets within our state/region
- **Annual Forum**—exploring the launch of a new annual state/regional professional meeting to foster the new network/community into the future

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Day Two Summary

The second day of the Symposium commenced with a brief recap of the shared activities that had trickled to the forefront of the community's interests and priorities. Being a half-day, the goal of the second day's sharing and activities was designed to efficiently move discussions in the direction of developing a plan for next-steps and the future collaborations mentioned above in order to begin progress in each of those areas.

To kick things off, attendees were treated to another series of excellent presentations from experts in collaborative digital preservation, namely Aaron Trehub from the Alabama Digital Preservation Network (ADPNet), and Cinda May from the Indiana Digital Preservation Network (InDiPres). The focus of Aaron's presentation was on the best and appropriate cost models and ways of pooling resources for new and burgeoning communities. Aaron underscored the importance of being judicious with the amount of grant support underpinning the basic operations of any network, as this support inevitably dries up and becomes unavailable.

Cinda's presentation highlighted the importance of building a network incrementally in well-planned stages and making sure to put in place the proper policies and agreements to cement collaborations. InDiPres is the most recently launched of all the networks that were tapped as expert consultants for the project and the symposium. Several attendees noted that it presents itself as an excellent template and example for our state/region and clearly the culmination of the work of each of the previous networks spotlighted. Both presentations provided attendees with incredibly helpful insights to orient their attitudes and perspectives on collaboration and community-building.

To contextualize the cost and resource information that Aaron Trehub shared with the attendees, the community spent a brief amount of time reviewing two recent and major network case studies—that of the recently sunset Digital Preservation Network (DPN), and the technical layoffs at the Digital Public Library of America (DPLA). The major takeaway from the DPN case study is that it can be all too easy for the business model of a digital preservation network to lose pace and connection with the real-time needs of the institutions it was designed to serve—there needs to be more transparency and open governance to guard against this. The major takeaway from the discussions of the DPLA layoffs was that over-reliance on rotating, short-term funding can contribute to sudden budget shifts, causing instability and some erosion of confidence within the community—planning and diversifying of revenue is critical.

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Attendees were then encouraged to seat themselves at separate tables set aside one for each alignment area that was settled on the first day. At each table, attendees were tasked with brainstorming how they would structure governance, incentivize sustained engagement, and provide for transparency within their community collaborations. The ideas that were generated were captured and recorded.

Finally, over lunch each of the tables were encouraged to reflect on whether their alignment area had reached a point of discussion and maturity of concept to be a good fit within a larger statewide network of community support, or whether it would be best handled as a short-term working group on its own.

Day Two Findings & Next Steps
Attendees worked together within groups to explore transparency and sustainability measures for each of the future collaborations identified on Day One. These included:

- Providing regular reporting and statistics on health and viability of the community
- Maintaining a culture of open planning and engage in piloting for new projects
- Support a diversity of communication strategies within the community
- Ensure a stable administrative infrastructure and review/vet policies frequently
- Diversify revenue streams
- Perform ongoing outreach to state legislatures and other government sources

Attendees unanimously agreed that each of the future collaborations identified and explored over the course of the two days warranted further work under the auspices of a broader digital preservation community initiative within the state. The focus of subsequent meetings will be to identify the specific governance and community support structures that are needed, and the policies and other resources that should be developed to guide the initiative going forward. Some institutions that proposed and strongly advocated for specific collaborations acknowledged that they may not be suited to take a leadership role, but committed to further engagement around the issue nonetheless. All agreed that the door needs to remain open for institutions who were not able to attend the symposium to both affirm and critique all of the proposed future collaborations and provide new ideas to this base of shared activity.

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The following timeline and roadmap were then proposed as a means of accomplishing the objectives of the ***Statewide & Regional Stepping Stones to the National Digital Platform*** project and laying the foundation for the launch of the potential new state/regional digital preservation community.

Spring 2019

- Community review and incorporation of feedback on Symposium White Paper
- Next steps outreach and planning meetings (see events below)

Summer 2019
- Beginning of community development workshops (see events below)
- Community check-ins & project research updates (open virtual calls)

Fall 2019
- Final community development workshops (see events below)
- Community launch and implementation planning (dates/host TBD)

To make progress with this roadmap the ***Statewide & Regional Stepping Stones Project*** will be presenting at and holding workshops in conjunction with the following events throughout 2019. As you review the findings from this White Paper please consider joining us to further the initiative.

- Michigan Archival Association Annual Meeting—Pre-Conference Workshop (June 16)
- GVSU Shared Digital Repository Planning Meeting (June 27)
- Michigan Museums Association Annual Meeting—Workshop (October 2-5)
- Digital Preservation 2019—proposed talk (October 16-17)

If you would like to host or encourage additional project meet-ups throughout 2019 please contact Matt Schultz (schultzm@gvsu.edu).

This Project and Symposium are proudly sponsored by