IMLS, National Leadership Grant
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Final Performance Report Narrative

Project Title: Building an Alabama Alliance for Collections Care

A Statewide Planning Grant Awarded to the Alabama Historical Commission
and its Four Grant Partners:

Alabama Department of Archives and History
Alabama Museums Association
Network of Alabama Academic Libraries
Society of Alabama Archivists

March 2009 – February 2011

May 28, 2011
Project Overview

On March 2, 2009, IMLS awarded the Alabama Historical Commission and its grant partners to develop an alliance of Alabama organizations that care for collections. Grant activities were inclusive, offering organizations opportunities to participate. In building a network that crosses disciplines, we focused on common concerns. The grant enabled us to lay a strong foundation that will foster improved collections care for many years.

A strong brand played a pivotal role in the success of the grant. By forming the Alabama Cultural Commons, the five partners; the Alabama Department of Archives and History, Alabama Museums Association, Network of Alabama Academic Libraries, Society of Alabama Archivists, and the Alabama Historical Commission; promoted all grant activities using a recognizable name and logo. Our brand became an asset in developing a statewide collections care plan, in forging strong media relations, and in offering resources to 1403 Alabama collecting organizations.

Project Activities

During the two-year period of the grant, the partners implemented six, major activities that fulfilled two recommendations from the Heritage Health Index: 1) to marshal public-private support and raise public awareness and 2) to foster emergency planning. The subsequent IMLS initiative, Connecting to Collections: A Call to Action, included the Statewide Planning Grants that were offered to institutions that hold collections as a public trust. The recommendations became essential grant guidelines.

After a period of organizing, the partners initiated grant activities in May 2009. In the subsequent months, the Alabama Cultural Commons planned and implemented the following activities to enhance collections care:

1. Directory of Collecting Organizations (June 2009-September 2009): Starting with a data base of 1186 organizations from an online directory developed by the Alabama Department of Archives and History (ADAH), in conjunction the Alabama Historical Records Advisory Board; a student worker, under the direction of grant partner, Tracey Berezansky, added data from Alabama museums, historic sites and organizations that manage archaeological and Native American collections. These additions enlarged the directory to 1403 organizations.

   The directory was tested and launched on September 14, 2009. Known as the Alabama Repositories Directory, users can visit http://www.archives.alabama.gov/hrb/ to make a search. In addition, representatives of included organizations can modify basic information about their organizations, so that the directory can remain current. The directory will be managed by ADAH staff as a perpetual directory that is accessible to all.

2. Promotional Materials (June 2009-May 2010): The selection of a designer began on June 26th, when I distributed an RFP (Request for Proposal) to nineteen organizations identified as having the capability and the interest in providing promotional design services. We received six, strong proposals. After a series of reviews, we offered the design work to Open Creative Group of Birmingham, Alabama. The Governor signed our contract on September
11th, and we began to work with April Mraz to create our brand. Ms. Mraz produced the design deliverables that we identified in our grant proposal: a logo, a media kit, and a Web page template. We partners placed a great deal of trust in April Mraz’s skills and experience, and all of us took a keen interest in the branding activities that she led.

Because partners had developed a formal mission statement for our project, we began by selecting a name for our group. In subsequent meetings, and through the use of a wiki, we partners offered suggestions and made our choices. Ms. Mraz created a logo and a tagline for our statewide alliance (Alabama Cultural Commons), and provided us with a logo library and usage guide. She then produced a placeholder page that partner Jason Kneip (our partner representing SALA, the Society of Alabama Archivists) launched to our Web site, www.alabamaculturalcommons.org on December 16. He became our Web master for the duration of the project, and he continues to manage the Web site as an ongoing resource.

Ms. Mraz then presented design concepts for our media kit. They were strong designs that include information about our IMLS grant and the mission of our statewide alliance. The resulting media kit folder, stationery, and press shell also present seventeen different photographs that reflect our grant activities and our alliance. By the beginning of May, we had completed the project. This grant activity proved to be more complex than we had anticipated, but a clear and consistent identity has been a major, promotional benefit.

3. **Collections Survey and Survey Report (May 2009- September 2010):** The grant partners began to develop the Alabama collections survey in May 2009. We were aware that the national survey questions had been carefully considered, but we agreed there was room for improvement. Conducted during 2004, Alabama’s low rate of participation in the Heritage Health Index survey had not allowed data pertaining to our state to be properly analyzed. From the beginning, the partners were committed to an Alabama survey whose results could be compared to the national survey. With our direct oversight, we hoped for better results.

Stefanie Rookis, representing the Alabama Museum Association, produced a draft of the survey, and by June, Tracey Berezansky (ADAH) had adapted the questions to fit the format of SurveyMonkey.com. We also benefited from the experience of Jerry Ingram, the consultant whose firm, Southeast Research, Inc, had been selected to undertake statistical analysis and reporting services. Dr. Ingram joined the project in August. After a period of testing our questions, Ms. Berezansky launched our survey on October 23rd.

In an earlier grant activity, we had contributed to an online directory that gave us a complete data base of collecting organizations. It enabled us to communicate with our audience. Using **Constant Contact**, an e-mail marketing service, we asked organizations to complete our survey online. In addition, 179 organizations that had no Internet access received hard copies of the survey that they could complete and return in the mail. We found that the rate of response was sluggish, so we extended our deadline and continued to promote the survey. By the time we closed the survey on December 31, 2009, we had accumulated 99 completed surveys.
Based on the survey data, our consultant undertook a preliminary analysis. He presented his initial findings to the partners on January 12th. Despite the scrutiny that we had given our survey questions and despite the changes we made after testing, Dr. Ingram found anomalies in some of our survey questions. After resolving these immediate problems, we held a follow-up meeting with Dr. Ingram. At that meeting, we decided to launch the survey again. The survey was the keystone to our future grant activities, and viable results were essential.

Our new appeal was directed only to those organizations that had not responded to the survey in 2009. Based on our analysis of the questions, Ms. Berezansky made revisions, and with the help of a student worker, transferred data accumulated in the original survey instrument to the appropriate positions in the new survey. After testing, we launched the improved version on March 31, 2010. We encouraged participation with a series of e-mail blasts and follow-up telephone calls. Data collection ended on May 31st.

Dr. Ingram worked with the data, undertook extensive statistical analysis, drafted a survey report, and met with the grant partners to review the data and his draft. On September 27th, he presented the final survey report to the partners. We posted his report, *The Heritage Health Index Report on the Condition of Alabama's Collection*, on our Alabama Cultural Commons Web site and notified all Alabama organizations about the report. Since that time, we have promoted the results with the media, so that the people of Alabama could learn of the survey results. Survey materials and our media release are included in our grant products.

4. **Focus Groups (October 2010-December 2010):** The results of the Alabama Cultural Commons collections survey were pivotal to planning the final grant activities. The partners proceeded with the grant by organizing five, focus groups that were held in the meeting rooms of libraries and other cultural centers. At these sessions, the partners would collect the qualitative information that would supplement the quantitative data of the survey. Grant partner, Ron Leonard, director of the Network of Alabama Academic Libraries (NAAL) prepared the focus group questions and developed other activities to elicit comments from meeting participants.

Throughout November, we held meetings in locations throughout the state: Montgomery, Evergreen, Mobile, Moundville, and Huntsville. Each session was limited to 15 participants and lasted 2-4 hours. In teams of two, the grant partners led the sessions and posed questions that were based on the findings of the Alabama survey report. In these small group meetings, we encouraged group discussion and recorded comments. The information we gathered would be used in to develop our subsequent strategic planning meeting.

Representatives from 52 collecting organizations attended the focus groups. We compiled the comments from each session and posted them on the Alabama Cultural Commons Web site, where all participants could review them. During December, I (grant partner, Clyde Eller, Alabama Historical Commission) organized the observations into five, major categories in preparation for the facilitated planning meeting that would be held in January.

5. **Strategic Planning Meeting (June 2010-February 2011):** The Alabama Cultural Commons selected Elizabeth Barbaree-Tasker, an experienced facilitator and owner of
Tasker Design Build of Birmingham, Alabama. She was hired in October 2010, as the result of an RFP that had been disseminated throughout the state in June. To prepare for the strategic planning meeting, she studied the collections survey materials, and reviewed the focus group comments. She proved to be a capable advisor and helped the partners prepare for the planning meeting that would be limited to no more than 50 participants. A second facilitator, Mary Shell, the Alabama Historical Commission’s Preservation Planner; and the five grant partners would assist Ms. Barbaree-Tasker at the meeting.

As a result of the survey, the Alabama Cultural Commons had identified the location and the condition of Alabama’s cultural collections. The strategic planning meeting would lead to a formal plan of action that would address their preservation needs. The meeting was held on January 24, 2011 at the Alabama Sports Hall of Fame in Birmingham. William Miller, who in April 2010 became the grant partner representing the Alabama Museums Association, organized the meeting.

Despite the unusual and severe winter weather, 22 representatives from Alabama libraries, archives, museums, and other cultural centers met with the 5 grant partners and our facilitators to participate in strategic planning. During the four hour meeting, the participants broke into groups to discuss alternatives. Then they came together to develop the elements that were essential to the plan. Their recommendations are organized into five categories that address the common needs of collections care.

Elizabeth Barbaree-Tasker compiled their recommendations; and in the weeks that followed, she wrote a formal report that became the strategic plan. She completed *A Collections Care Plan for Alabama’s Cultural Collection* on February 22nd. The partners posted it on the Alabama Cultural Commons Web site and disseminated it throughout the state.

With the completion of this important plan, the activity that marked the end of Alabama’s Statewide Planning Grant, the partners created a media release, which proved to command widespread attention throughout the state. Copies of *A Collections Care Plan for Alabama’s Cultural Collection*, the media release, and media coverage are included in work products.

6. **Disaster Preparedness Workshops (April 2010-September 2010):** Because of a prolonged delay in completing our Alabama survey of collections, the grant partners turned to the disaster preparedness workshops. We had included the workshops in our grant proposal because the grant enabled us to present them and because we could offer a service that is important to Alabama collecting organizations. During the course of the grant, we were asking Alabama organizations to participate so that we could fulfill our grant obligations. By presenting the workshops, we could demonstrate the benefits of an Alabama alliance. An alliance could be responsive. It could address the common needs of a broadly based network of collecting organizations. In addition, the Alabama grant partners saw an opportunity to reach out to organizations in every region of the state.

Using a procedure described in earlier sections of this report, I disseminated an RFP by e-mail to 23 sources that could present our workshops, including: centers that organize disaster preparedness workshops; networks of conservators, museum specialists, and library
personnel whose members teach disaster preparedness; professional membership organizations; conservation laboratories and training centers; and to private conservators and other capable, experienced consultants who might have an interest in submitting a proposal. The RFP that I distributed April 14-15, 2010 produced an extraordinary response. We received six, strong proposals; and in July, the Alabama Historical Commission signed a professional services contract with Randy Silverman, a preservation librarian from Salt Lake City, Utah. We then moved forward with planning.

The partners began to confirm workshop locations. We wanted to hold the workshops in underserved communities, where workshops were not often presented; yet we wanted them to be accessible to everyone. Another objective was to choose workshop locations that would cover the state—offering one in every direction.

In addition, we selected workshop venues that could accommodate 25 participants and offered facilities that would allow for a successful presentation. The ability to provide a classroom setting, with tables and comfortable chairs would be important to the participants who would attend these 8-hour sessions. We also included mid-morning and mid-afternoon breaks in the workshop schedule, and offered an opportunity for participants to order food and beverages for lunch. By August 4th, we had completed these arrangements, and the Alabama Cultural Commons began to promote its free disaster preparedness workshops to every collecting organization in Alabama.

- August 30  Gadsden  Mary G Hardin Center for the Cultural Arts
- August 31  Tuscumbia  Belle Mont Mansion
- September 2  Bay Minette  Baldwin County Archives
- September 3  Selma  Cordova College Library

We succeeded in holding the workshops in widespread Alabama regions, including: the eastern part of the state; North Alabama near the Tennessee River; the Black Belt in the western part of the state; and Baldwin County, close to Mobile Bay and the Gulf of Mexico.

Seventy people signed up for the workshops. The participants represented public and academic libraries, archives, historical societies, museums, historic sites, archaeological repositories, and government agencies. Because of our grant resources, we presented every participant with an Emergency Response and Salvage Wheel and a Pocket Response Plan Template. We also provided a protective cover for the pocket template and a copy of Field Guide to Emergency Response to every organization.

From all reports, the workshop participants appreciated his hands on approach and learned a great deal from his first hand experience. Randy Silverman was engaging and provided practical information that allowed the participants to assess conditions at their own institutions. He distributed both pre-workshop and post-workshop evaluations, and 60 participants completed the forms. The good news for the Alabama Cultural Commons was that 80 per cent found the workshops to be affordable and convenient, a valuable introduction to a serious subject. Materials associated with the workshops; their promotion, presentation, and Randy Silverman’s 18 page assessment are included in our grant work products.
Project Analysis

Admittedly, this project was ambitious. Our goal in undertaking this planning project was to stimulate interest in an Alabama alliance that could address shared preservation and conservation needs. In so doing, we identified five, specific outcomes. In all cases, the Alabama Cultural Commons successfully achieved each outcome.

1. We did in fact develop a comprehensive data base of Alabama collecting organizations. The *Alabama Repositories Directory* is available online and includes the names of 1403 institutions. Visit: [http://www.archives.alabama.gov/hrb/](http://www.archives.alabama.gov/hrb/)

The repository directory proved to be a powerful tool in implementing the grant activities. In addition to providing a comprehensive list of collecting organization that would receive our Alabama survey, it also supported regular communication with our audience. Because the 1403 organizations identified in the directory were linked to *Constant Contact*, the Alabama Department of Archives and History was able to send regular e-mail blasts on behalf of the Alabama Cultural Commons. Although each grant partner and other cooperating organizations willingly promoted our programs to smaller segments of our audience, the event marketing capability that *Constant Contact* offered was widespread and immediate.

2. The Alabama survey of collections did prove to be useful for our subsequent grant activities, and we foresee that the data collected, the statistical analysis, and the recommendations included in *The Heritage Health Index Report on the Condition of Alabama's Collection* will support the development of future collections care projects.

The grant partners initiated the Alabama survey with the hope of obtaining results that improved the statistical reliability of the national survey (+/- 9-10%). At that time, the Heritage Health Index was sent to 246 Alabama organizations; 59 completed the survey (a response rate of 24%). An analysis of the survey data for Alabama was not available.

The Alabama Cultural Commons conducted its survey during 2009 and 2010. We sent the survey to 1403 collecting organizations that included a large number of archives representing municipal and circuit clerks, county commissions, probate officers, and other educational institutions. Of the surveys that were completed, 120 were usable (a response rate of 8%). Despite the margin of error (10.4% overall), our consultant was able to provide the analysis that we needed, an analysis that can be compared to the results of the national survey that was conducted in 2004. The survey serves as a worthy document that enlarges our knowledge of the location, the current condition, and the needs of Alabama’s cultural collections.

3. With the participation of Alabama’s collecting organization, the Alabama Cultural Commons did complete a strategic plan that addresses collections care. The partners successfully conducted five focus groups in order to gather the kind of qualitative information that supplemented the data gathered in the Alabama survey. As the result of
its strategic planning meeting, the Alabama Cultural Commons, with the support of IMLS, has enabled Alabama organizations to develop a comprehensive plan that includes measurable goals and objectives.

The plan, known formally as *A Collections Care Plan for Alabama’s Cultural Collection* addresses five, broad areas of concern. Each affects the preservation of Alabama’s cultural assets:

- Sustainability (effective fundraising and ongoing support)
- Facilities (suitable and stable environment)
- Staff (technically capable and aware)
- Managements (proper collections policies and procedures)
- Preparedness (ready for disasters and other emergencies.)

In addressing these issues, the plan specifies WHAT, WHO, HOW, and WHEN that will be required in order to realize the benefits of the plan. With the plan in hand, an organization, or a group of organizations (such as the Alabama Cultural Commons) can identify projects that will enhance collections care. The plan provides the kind of credibility that can marshal needed support: public and private. It will enhance stewardship.

4. Because of its attention to branding, its collections survey, and its successful strategic plan; the Alabama Cultural Commons has been able to promote the kind of stewardship that can leverage support. Effective promotion, as the result of our grant activities, has led to an extraordinary response:

- At the strategic planning meeting, held in Birmingham on January 24, a representative from a major, statewide cultural organization encouraged the Alabama Cultural Commons to apply for a special award (amounting to $50,000) from a prestigious foundation.
- In April 2011, at the annual retreat of the Network of Alabama Academic Libraries (NAAL), the representative of regional support organization approached us at the end of our presentation to offer support in implementing our strategic plan.
- On February 28th, the Alabama Cultural Commons sent a release to 70 major, Alabama media. Written by Ron Leonard (the grant partner representing NAAL), several local newspapers and television stations reported on our activities. In addition, a reporter, Jay Reeves, representing the Associated Press covered our story. In our press release, we offered information about our collections survey that documented the precarious state of Alabama’s important cultural collections. Our focus, however, was on solutions, including the benefits of our alliance and the strategic plan that we had just completed. The press release will be included in the Work Products that have been produced in the course of implementing our *Statewide Planning Grant*.

5. We offered successful disaster preparedness workshops in five underserved locations. In the narrative presented above, I described these workshops that were offered in August and September of 2010.
Our consultant, Randy Silverman developed questionnaires that 60 workshop participants completed. He compiled the results and produced an 18 page analysis. Of significance to this final report are the responses to the following questions:

- On a scale of 1 to 5 (5 representing the highest ranking), 58 participants deemed the workshop to be worthy of a 4 or 5; 2 ranked the workshop at level 3.
- In responding to a question pertaining to plans to complete a specific action within 4 months; 44 planned to meet with first responders and 41 plan to assess their facilities. Other choices were selected by 12-35 participants, who intended to initiate steps to improve disaster preparedness.
- In recent conversations, I learned that one workshop participant (representing Alabama’s public libraries was working to complete disaster preparedness plans for all libraries; still another at a large university in North Alabama was working with library staff to revise their disaster plans. )

Mr. Silverman’s analysis will be included in the Work Products Section that will be sent by Federal Express to IMLS, so that it can be annexed to this final report.

**Project Lessons: Setbacks and Successes and What We Learned**

As the project director, I believe that these observations are well worth noting in a separate section:

- The Survey: From the beginning, we partners were keenly aware that Heritage Preservation and IMLS hoped to compare the results of our Alabama collections survey to the national Heritage Health Index of 2004, and we had agreed to repeat the survey in composing our grant application. When we met in May of 2009 to develop our work plan, we discussed the survey. Some partners wanted to develop our own survey, yet none of us know how a completely new survey could be effectively compared to the earlier effort.

We did everything we could to make it work: we streamlined our survey questions, we provided oversight, we offered incentives, we revised, and we gave it extra time. The Achilles heel was that the survey was too long. We were able to overcome the poor response, only because we persevered and because our survey consultant was experienced and capable. Because the survey results were essential to the outcome of the grant, we were fortunate that he had the skills we needed to produce viable results. Was this a major setback? Yes, but we succeeded nonetheless. Lesson learned. Lengthy surveys can be counter-productive.

- Our Consultants: The rigorous selection process that the State of Alabama requires in order to offer a contract for professional services added three months to our project activities. The Alabama Historical Commission’s selection process includes RFPs and numerous assessments. The consultants that we hired, however, proved to be worth the effort. Was this a time consuming setback? Perhaps, but the quality of our selections led to successful outcomes.
• Change: During the course of the project, three of our partners made personnel changes. Although we missed the skills of the original project participants, we found that the partnership thrived. Change enabled us to offer a Web site, an unexpected resource that was not a part of our grant proposal; our focus group questions proved to be very effective, reflecting the point-of-view or an experienced, corporate trainer; and the venue for our strategic planning meeting was well-organized, thanks to our experienced event planner. Could change have been a setback? Perhaps, but it wasn’t.

• Flexibility: One of the best decisions we made was to move our promotional activity, which had been planned to be undertaken much later on the grant timeline, so that branding took place at the very beginning of the project. This was a wise, strategic decision, and one that IMLS thankfully supported. Our project benefited greatly from the logo and supporting media package that enabled us to present a consistent and recognizable face on the activities that we pursued. Without the Alabama Cultural Commons, this project would have been more difficult to manage. Did early branding contribute to our success? Definitely.

The Future: What’s next?

We submitted our Alabama Connecting to Collections grant proposal in October 2008, at a time when our country had entered an economic crisis of major proportions. When in March of 2009 we learned that our proposal was successful, I found that the grant partners saw the grant as absolutely essential. We all were willing and able to proceed. Now, more than two years later, the State of Alabama is facing severe financial challenges. Our futures are uncertain.

All of us, who have undertaken Alabama’s Statewide Planning Grant, work for state institutions that will see reductions in funding in the coming fiscal year. Two of us represent major state agencies that have been threatened with 45% cuts, while a third partner works for an organization that may lose state funding entirely. This bleak, financial picture affects the commitments that we can make to future projects. We will continue to offer resources on our Web site, and we will seek alternatives for funding future projects.

Since February, after completing our Statewide Planning Grant, we have been searching for organizations that are willing to join us and take strong, leadership roles. In April, at the NAAL retreat, which I have referred to earlier in this report, we made our first appeal. We plan to meet soon, so that we can discuss the possibility of pursuing an implementation grant. The success of the Alabama Cultural Commons and the strategic plan that it pursued, offer Alabama organizations an opportunity to enhance collections care. Our goal is to implement our plan

Ms. Clyde H Eller
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