NARA Historical Documentation Survey Review

Qualitative Data Clarifications, Summary, and Highlights

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February 2014

Question 1: Which of the following best describes your professional occupation?

A plurality of respondents identified as professors of history (44%), with the next largest group being graduate students of history (28%). Slightly more independent researchers than public historians took the survey (6.4 % vs. 5.7%). Respondents who selected "Other" generally fit into the follow categories:

- Professor, non-history
- Graduate student, non-history
- Post-Doctoral Scholar
- Archivist/Librarian
- Researcher
- Government or Military Professional
- Lecturer/Adjunct Professor
- Non-Profit/Think Tank Staff
- Education, other
- Writing/Publishing, other
- Retired
- Undergraduate student

These results may say more about the survey recruitment process and the networks of the survey team than the state of the field and/or the potential users of the National Archives. Nevertheless, it would be productive to discuss ways to engage more undergraduate students, public historians and non-profit researchers in archival research. It is fair to say, moreover, that the survey reflects the opinions of experienced researchers in history and other fields.

Question 2: Which best describes your area of expertise?

This question asked individuals to identify themselves as experts in U.S. foreign relations, U.S. history (not foreign relations), or "other." The graphic for this question may be a little misleading, because it depicts the breakdown between the U.S. foreign relations people and the non-foreign relations U.S. historians. In total, 778 responded, either by selecting one of the first two options, or by writing in "other." Respondents are not as U.S.-centric as the graphic suggests. The breakdown is as follows:
- U.S. Foreign Relations: 451 (58%)
- U.S. Other: 204 (26%)

- Other: 123 (16%)

Question 3: To what extent have you conducted archival research (at any archive)?

A clear majority (of two-thirds) of respondents have conducted extensive archival research – these are <u>experienced, expert users</u> of archives. Only 6% of respondents had very little archival experience. This indicates that the survey reflects the opinions of experts with extensive archival experience.

Question 4: When was the last time you conducted archival research at the U.S. National Archives?

Two-thirds of survey respondents reported using the National Archives in the past three years. More than three-quarters of respondents used the National Archives within the five years preceding the survey. The takeaway: survey data reflects responses by experienced researchers who are <u>very familiar</u> with the National Archives.

Question 5: How important are declassified documents to your historical research?

A clear majority of 70% of respondents considers declassified documents <u>indispensable</u> to their research:
- "Declassified material is critical for scholars of international relations. We simply cannot do our jobs without it."
- "It would be impossible to conduct useful historical research without access to declassified documents."

Some respondents framed their comments slightly differently: <u>Lack of access to classified documents is a serious problem</u>.
- "There are massive quantities of unprocessed materials that make it hard to get research done."
- "There is very little that needs to be classified."
- "While I understand that governments have the right and necessity to keep secrets, the US Government has gone WAY overboard in classifying documents. That too is understandable: The price for leaking classified information--even accidentally--is steep. But there needs to be a healthier balance between the government's right and necessity to keep secrets, and the US public's right to know what is going in its own government, and what that government is doing in its name."
- "While delays are necessary, the consciousness of transparency--the knowledge that their actions someday, at least, will be known and either praised or condemned by dispassionate and fair-minded analysts at some

time in the future -- is important for keeping government officials diligent, honest, efficient, and professional."

Several respondents agreed that access to declassified materials is not only essential for research, but <u>"essential to the formulation of effective future policy"</u> and "absolutely essential to the public discourse":

- "In today's America, it's not just the intelligence professional that needs to have an appreciate [sic] of the power and perils of the intelligence organizations and systems."

Even those respondents who do not rely on declassified materials for research lean on them heavily for <u>teaching</u>.

Some respondents pointed out that the U.S. archives hold essential documents for scholars researching <u>non-U.S. topics:</u>

- "The US archives hold material that has been destroyed by European archives and is indispensable for European historians."
- "NARA provided detailed documents on Indian and Pakistani post-independence history that are simply not available elsewhere. South Asian archives have limited collections and accessing them is very difficult"

Those who answered that declassified materials were not particularly important to their work tended to identify as pre-twentieth century historians whose access to documents has not be hindered by classification.

Finally, respondents commented on the experience of researching at the National Archives, some praising NARA, its staff, and its importance to American society:

- "The services available at NARA are invaluable."
- "I work on U.S foreign relations in the 1970s and 1980s. I could not conduct my research without the efforts of NARA employees."
- "Having done research in my foreign countries, I can say without fear of contradiction that the National Archives system in the United States provides great service to historians and other scholars. **I would even go so far as to say that its health and well-being is essential to the maintenance of the democratic system of government as well.**"
- "NARA is critical to understanding the policy options of the United States and where they come from and it is scandalous that they might be targeted for cuts. We only avoid remaking the mistakes of History by retaining institutional memory- and that is what NARA is- the institutional memory of the United States Government."
- "[T]he extended evening and weekend hours, along with regular weekly hours, have been indispensable to my research."

Others expressed their disappointment:

- "Researching at NARA is a very unpleasant experience. They are understaffed, which results in hours of wait time for ordered documents (sometimes even extending into the following day). Their holdings are difficult to research prior to arriving there, since not all of their finding aids are digitized, and the ones that are digitized are scattered across multiple online systems. And the backlog in making declassified records available is severely detrimental to the study of U.S. foreign relations history (as well as other subfields of history). NARA really needs help."
- "The service that the Archives provides has deteriorated markedly in the last thirty years. On-line guides do not replace flesh and-blood archivists who know their records. The Archives has too much of a management culture that ends up denigrating those archivists who have such knowledge."
- "I have been doing research at NARA form its days when it was NARA downtown to College Park NARA II. Over the years services have declined tremendously. There are few archivist available to direct researchers towards the right kinds of sources. the days of highly qualified and available records specialists such as John Taylor and Sally Marks, who actually welcomed researchers, are long gone. They just press finding aids in your hands -- go for it!   Most of the personnel growth in the past ten years seem to have come with security personnel. They search you repeatedly coming and leaving. America's obsession with security is easily disernible [sic] at NARA II. Meanwhile, more and more researchers seem to be coming."

Question 6: How important is the timely publication of the State Department's *Foreign Relations of the United States* series to your research and/or teaching?

A majority of respondents (about 70%) answered that the timely publication of FRUS was either important and necessary, or very important and indispensable. "No other country in the world can compare with this series for its continuous coverage: the series begins in 1861 and is currently available up to the 1970s."

Respondents who find FRUS invaluable indicated that it is important not only for research, but for <u>teaching</u>:
- "Students find working with FRUS and [sic] exciting and rewarding intellectual experience."
- When scholars and students are geographically isolated and far from Washington DC, the publication of FRUS "under one cover is essential."
- Database subscriptions can be too expensive for smaller institutions; that FRUS is "available full-text is invaluable " particularly for a "cash-strapped institution."

If anything, researchers want and need more – more volumes, more quickly, more recent subject matter:

- "The backlog is really holding up my research agenda, since I'd like to work on topics after the 1970s."
- "I am trying to encourage my undergraduate students to use FRUS, but they're more interested in the time period not released yet - 1980s-early 1990s, so they sometimes use "alternative" resources that aren't always dependable!"
- "FRUS tends not to cover the issues of cultural diplomacy I write about. I need the continuing declassification of documents to accomplish my work."
- "FRUS is absolutely VITAL and is the key starting point. One concern I have is why there are so few published every year, and why so many appear to be "In Production" but are not yet released. I sense that political timing is one factor. I noticed several volumes appeared in November-December in 2012, after the presidential elections."
- "The earlier they can be made available, the sooner the lessons of the past can be known and taught, the sooner the nation's trajectory altered as necessary in a more favorable direction. One is reminded in this regard of Eric Schlosser's recent book, Command and Control, about the history of the U.S. nuclear arsenal. It is decades late considering the urgency of the matters that he addresses--matters involving not just the well-being of nations but rather the safety of civilization."

Question 7: How would you describe the availability of declassified documents pertaining to your research at the U.S. National Archives?

The good news: a majority of respondents described the availability of declassified documents to be adequate or better. The bad news: a quarter of respondents answered that the availability of such documents was disappointing or very worrisome. And only 10% believe the availability is actually excellent and/or plentiful. Comments from respondents fell into roughly three categories.

The first group expressed <u>frustration that more recent documents were not available</u>:
- "The 30 year "rule" is not being observed. I am still waiting for documents from 1977 -- 36 years ago!"
- "I would love to see more declassified documents, particularly pertaining to the foreign policy behavior of the last 30 years of presidential administrations. For my last major research project, I had to rely more on the holding of different Presidential Libraries because materials I needed were not in the National Archives."
- "The declassification process seems to be backlogged. Documents from after the mid 1970s are far less accessible than they should be. Imagine if historians of the early Cold War faced these limitations in the late 1970s and early 1980s."

- "Adequate for pre-1975 period but very worrisome for more recent years (including records that should be subject to automatic declassification under the terms of the national security information executive order)."

Others expressed frustration with the <u>de/classification system itself, including both declassification policy – with its overzealous embrace of secrecy – and the backlogs due to staffing shortages and an abundance of material</u>:
- "There is simply way too much that is still classified, and on issues that don't deserve it so many years after the fact."
- "[T]he public interest would be better served by a streamlined declassification process like that of the Assassination Records Review Board."
- "There is little systematic declassification, and the FOIA/MDR system is riddled with too many problems. Unfortunately, there has been a net regression under Obama, as reflected in redactions of documents."
- "Department of State and ACDA records are actually behind what's available and declassified in FRUS, in some cases by decades. They don't even have the files on hand for most subjects after 1968. It's embarrassing."
- "Some are really excellent, but some of the lesser known/requested fields have a significant backlog in declassifying material (such as i.e. USIA or AID)."
- Respondents also complained about <u>re</u>classification of materials under both Presidents G.W. Bush and Obama.

The real problem, many respondents pointed out, may not be declassification itself, but <u>access to records, which has been limited by poor organization, staffing shortages, and zealous redaction</u>:
- "Recent research in USIA records (RG 306) has been disturbing because of the way in which cataloging is haphazard; numerous times, the best option suggested by archival staff has been to call up each and every one of the boxes without descriptions and hope for the best."
- "Agency reviewers appear to lack understanding of declassification decisions made elsewhere. This means the "secrets" are out, but the documentation that would put decisions in context remains impossible to review."
- "System to pull records is archaic; some staffers are extremely unhelpful, yet without their help and knowledge it is impossible to get anything done; weekend pull times must be submitted during the week, which makes things even more difficult"
- "Many declassified documents are entirely blacked out making them almost useless."
- "The greatest gap is the lack of a truly searchable database - which is a major hurdle before we even get to the classified vs. declassified issue."

- "It's a difficult system to navigate, and the overworked archivists have a hard time helping everyone that needs help. It would be easier if these documents were digitized."

These complaints are perhaps the most distressing – the poor user experience of the archives may deter scholars, particularly younger scholars, from even attempting to access documents. Further, the structural problems of delayed and incomplete declassification, backlogs, and the political practice of reclassifying materials, as several people attested to, limit the kinds of scholarly questions that can be asked and addressed. That is worrisome.

Question 8: To what degree do you think the government over-classifies documents?

Nearly 80% of respondents said that over-classification of documents is either a very serious problem, or worse, an extremely worrisome and potentially damaging problem.

While respondents acknowledged the need for a classification system to protect government secrets and personal information, in general respondents felt that overclassification of archival materials was "rampant, routine, and ridiculous."
- "It shouldn't take longer than 25-30 years, in my opinion, to declassify information, especially considering the Cold War has ended."
- "Its not just the overclassification of documents, but also the use of sensitive, but unclassified markings (For Official Use Only and variants) which require equal attention despite not having warranted a classification in the first place."
- "While I am sure that overclassification exists, the bigger problem is declassification. There are simply not enough people working the issue in the intelligence community, at the archives or in the history offices."

Respondents described the frustrating and Kafkaesque process of working to access documents with no apparent national security consequences:
- "As a recent example: I filed a FOIA request for a . . . report commissioned by the State Dept. The report was obtained by journalists in 1977 but was withdrawn from the State Dept Country Files. I received word from NARA . . . --a year after my request--that the State Dept had sent document to NARA and now will have to wait at least another year for NARA to go through the declassification process."
- "Overclassification is a problem because it is time-consuming for researchers.   In the last year and a half, I have filed thousands of pages of Mandatory Review requests at the Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Johnson library, and requested thousands more documents be reviewed at College Park.   The declassification staff at the Libraries and College Park are, simply put, excellent. They clearly turn over my requests very quickly and

I've been pleased with the enormous quantity of documentation released. But it is clearly silly that so many of these documents, clearly believed not worthy of remaining classified, were unavailable to me for my first research visit. Now, the Libraries and NARA follow-up my requests with costly and wasteful letters (though just last week LBJ moved to an e-mail notification system).   This process works for me, but it is hugely wasteful of government employee's time, effort, and postage.   I will say that, of course, NARA has let me down here a little bit; several years ago I contacted someone in the consultant's room about a series I wished to be reviewed, but I received one curt e-mail in reply and no follow-ups. It is always better to bypass the consultants."

- "Recent example: researching a paper on US foreign policy in Vietnam in 1963, I discovered many documents declassified in 2004 and later blacked out/sanitized/censored extensively documents that were *already published* in the relevant FRUS volume in 1991! Needless to say, the sanitized materials did not appear even remotely sensitive."
- "Key issue is de facto requirement for page-by-page review for all records, including unclassified ones, to screen for other agency equities, Kyl-Lott requirements, and sensitive but unclassified information, not the starting classification level of documents. In effect, government treats all records as classified regardless of whether they are marked as such."

The problem, of course, affects much more than scholarly research:

- "Seriously, you don't have to be a historian of US foreign relations or of political history to think this. The federal government becomes increasingly opaque and this is a tremendous problem for the political culture of the US, not only for professional historians."
- "Examples of over-classification are myriad. Often documents remain secret that post no threat to national security. The lingering secrecy of these documents, moreover, poses a threat to the American people's ability to hold their government accountable."

Comments also suggested taking a closer look at the recent report of the presidential commission on this topic – not widely discussed but "stunning."

Question 9: Which should be a higher priority: digitizing archival records or accelerating the review and release of records to the public?

Both options have to do with access, and the best way to facilitate access to information. Respondents can be divided into two groups. "Digitizers" believe that it does not really matter if a document is technically available if few people are able to travel to College Park, navigate the confusing access system, and actually get to see the document. On the other hand, "Releasers" believe review and release of records must be the highest priority; they are willing to navigate the system and travel to

the archives to access documents, but they have been most frustrated at the slow speed of document release.

Releasers dominate. <u>Three-quarters of respondents believe that accelerating review and release of records must be a higher priority than digitizing records</u>. The survey answers breakdown shows that this ratio holds true for the subgroup of graduate students. Only about a quarter of these presumably younger "digital natives" prioritized digitization over release.

Although the answer shows a strong majority, many respondents' comments reveal a less stark breakdown. Many believe that both digitization and release are important, and that asking to choose between them is akin to "asking for the Judgment of Solomon."

Respondents who answered that digitization was more important added comments, indicating that (1) digitization seemed <u>more *likely*</u> than accelerating review and release, (2) digitization was a <u>greater public good</u>, enabling broader access to what has already been released, and (3) "Digitizing archival records <u>at risk of natural decay or destruction</u> is the highest priority." As one comment put it: **[I]n the end, if materials are declassified but difficult to get, there isn't much improvement in accessibility."**

But another comment shows the other side of the same coin: **"While lack of access (digitization) is a major concern, records that have not been reviewed and released cannot be accessed at all."** Respondents who believe review and release must be the top priority also tend to believe that digitization is an important goal, but one that is necessarily secondary to making the documents accessible at all.

A few respondents were outright <u>critical of digitization</u>, however:
- "Non-systematically processed collections at more recent presidential libraries – e.g. the speechwriter files at George HW Bush or Clinton - have been the biggest impediment to my research so far."
- "How they [records] were originally classified and grouped is also important, and this is often lost when they are republished in digitized collections."
- "Digitization has been a "cure-all" for the historical and archival community for fifteen to twenty years. The unrecognized problem is that technical situations for documentation and records required more resources, not less. Nor is there a more durable and lasting solution than paper records and old-fashioned filing... It's more important to promote transparency that to stick stuff online."
- "Digitization is a money pit. The digitizing is easy, but creating meta-data is really hard and expensive."

Others believe digitization will ultimately happen, but should not be the immediate concern of NARA. Perhaps we should investigate a crowd-sourced model for digitization:

- "Most researchers are able to digitize their own documents at this point and, more importantly, the NARA should tap the resources of researchers to work together in the digitization process."
- "[W]ith digital photography of documents so predominant now, a grassroot/open source strategy of digitization will be the path forward. A grassroots review and release strategy is impossible."

Others who prioritized review and release pointed out that *some* digitization is absolutely essential, including: the **digitization of finding aids** ("The contrast with the British National Archives catalog – entirely digitized and full-text searchable – is glaring here."); the digitization of records that might be damaged or harmed otherwise; and digitization or records that NARA does not have the physical space to store. "Ideally," one respondent wrote, "new technology would make the process seamless so that the documents would be released in digital form from the start, obviating the choice."

Question 10: How important is a detailed description of those documents that have been withheld from declassification?

Nearly 90% of respondents replied that this would be important or very important, with nearly half of all respondents answering that it is "very important" and "indispensable." Comments fall into two camps. People believe either that detailed descriptions should be a secondary priority, or they think that detailed records descriptions save time, promote transparency, and are therefore very important.

Key comments from voices in the minority that is agnostic on detailed descriptions:

- "I don't know; it's having a plate of Oreo cookies and saying you can't have one. What's the point?"
- "I don't trust these descriptions. Given limited time, my advice would be not to waste time on them."

Comments in support of more detailed descriptions:

- "This is very important. In many cases, such as documents marked "intelligence cable," I am forced to request the document because it _might_ be relevant to me. If a very general or broad description of the document were available, I could decide whether it was worth everyone's time to request it. I have unfortunately had too many - to me, unhelpful - CIA documents on West German domestic politics in the 1960s partially released after I requested them based on their home folder in the archive."
- "Especially because the FOIA and Special Review Request process are so time-consuming, with the potential to hold up entire research projects, it

would be useful to have better descriptions of documents before beginning the FOIA process."
- "Without it, how will researchers know what to submit for review?"
- "When you request a declassification, you have to give the reason why and as detailed a description as you can manage. The archivists react badly to applications that request multiple boxes with little detail, but that is often all that is possible!"
- "Really, the least that could be done."

As in other questions, respondents argued that better detailed descriptions for documents would <u>promote transparency and nourish our democracy</u>.

Finally, a plea for better finding aids: "It is more important to have good finding aids and box lists for records that have been fully processed and available. It is amazing to me that NARA not only does not do this well anymore, but neither do they put existing aids online." [sic]

Question 11: How would you rate the ATTENTIVENESS of the archivist with whom you worked on your last research trip to the U.S. National Archives at College Park?

The pie chart on this one looks like respondents were quite evenly divided. But remember that over 30% of respondents either skipped the question or answered that they couldn't say or had no opinion.

Removing those answers from the chart, 86% of respondents with an opinion who answered rated their College Park archivist to be satisfactory or better in terms of attentiveness. Only 14% of respondents with an opinion rated the College Park archivists poorly, in terms of attentiveness.

The comments complicate this positive portrayal, however. Those respondents who had bad experiences with archivists, who rated archivist attentiveness negatively in other words, had strongly negative responses.

On the other hand, many respondents who had satisfactory or better interactions with archivists tended to grade on a curve: <u>the archivists, they seem to argue, are doing their best, but they are overworked and understaffed, making the job that much more difficult</u>. Some comments also mentioned that the combination of overly stretched archivists and the outdated and confusing finding aid system was particularly fraught; archivists could better serve researchers if researchers could do more leg work themselves more easily with better finding aids.

A handful of respondents found the attentiveness of archivists <u>excellent</u>:
- "The help I have received at CP has been exceptional every time I have been there."

- "The archivists have always been first rate. Clearly one of the great resources of the archives. I've always been extremely impressed with their knowledge and helpfulness."
- And several respondents singled out specific archivists for special praise, including Nathaniel in the Modern Navy Records, Trevor in Old Military Records, Tim Nenninger, Carrie Tallichet, David Langbart (mentioned multiple times), Eric a Japan specialist, Eric Vanslander, the supervisor in Still Pictures, and Tab Lewis.

Many comments can be roughly grouped as <u>"Good, BUT" or "It depends."</u> Respondents had fairly positive experiences but noted that archivists were overworked, undertrained, overwhelmed and unsupported:
- "[T]he entire staff seemed concerned about their ability to continue to do their respective jobs."
- "I can't blame any individual archivists for the general lack of archivist assistance at NARA--the main problem is that they are severely understaffed."
- "The reference archivists I worked with were simply overworked, too few to oversee all researchers needs. They were distracted by all the researchers who needed their help."
- "I think the attentiveness of the archivists is as good as it can get. The problem is that there is too few of them."
- "The answer to this prior to 2000 would have been EXCELLENT. Now, it's hit or miss depending upon who helps you. At times it has been tremendous. Other times, let's just say not so much. Part of the problem is that NARA is simply horribly understaffed."
- "The overall picture is dire. Archivists are so swamped and overwhelmed they barely have time to explain to me how to look for records, let alone think through with me as to which records would best answer my research question. On my last visit archivists were still swamped as usual, endlessly and hopelessly trying to appease ten researchers in the same time, resorting to throwing random tips and folders at us, which I can understand since they have no time. But one of them went really beyond any of my expectations by going down himself to the holdings and fetching a military publication that the storage facility claimed 'gone'. He sort of fought the system for me, which was heroic. It is strange to see how much capital was invested in the architecture, cameras, automatic doors, x-ray machines, cafeteria, parking garage, security, etc., and how understaffed and over-worked the most department in the national archives (the one made of archivists) is."

Finally, some respondents were <u>extremely frustrated</u> by a lack of attentiveness by archivists at College Park:
- "They are losing specialists who know the records and generalists do not prove to be very helpful...or even capable of being helpful [sic]"

- "Having worked in archives around the world I have to say that the assistance at NARA is the worst I've experienced. The archivists are surly and very unhelpful which does not help with such an antiquated call and catalogue system in place."
- "Research room understaffed. Attention of archivists limited as a result. A number of archivists on duty in research room frequently leave after very short periods, rendering continuous consultations problematic."
- "They were all disgruntled because of a disrupted shift schedule and a decrease in staff. It used to be that an archivist would grab onto a problem of yours and work with you to solve it--I haven't experienced that lately."
- "[S]adly, my last experience at College Park was not inspiring. Archivists were at times quite rude and sanctimonious... Perhaps if the staff at College Park were better paid and less overwhelmed the overall experience would improve."
- "Bar very few exceptions, the staff is generally unfriendly and unforthcoming. Some are plain rude. I would frankly fire most of them."
- "Absolutely terrible. These are the worst customer/client service professionals I have encountered in any part of my life."
- "I say satisfactory solely because David Langbart is so horrendously overworked that there is no possible way he could devote any more time to researchers. It is unconscionable that he is the only archivist with sufficient experience available to scholars of foreign relations."

Question 12: How would you rate the SUBJECT EXPERTISE of the archivist with whom you worked on your last research trip to the U.S. National Archives at College Park?

The answer breakdown to this question is roughly the same as the previous answer. About 30% of respondents had no opinion or skipped the question. Of those who had an opinion, about 85% rated the subject expertise of archivists to be satisfactory or better and 15% rated it poorly. Yet comments reveal a lot of frustration and worry about the future of the corps of archivists at the National Archives. While respondents with ample archival experience may be able to locate their own records or seek out an archivist with subject expertise themselves, many are concerned that NARA staffing policies and funding restraints will lead to a dramatic fall in the quality of subject expertise of archivists in the near and foreseeable future.

- "Lots of volunteers, vets, and **individuals without real archival education are, I think, one of the main weaknesses of NARA. If properly funded, NARA could be a HUGE employer of young historians and archivists**, would, with a little shifting of procedures, work on processing and digitization of materials at a desk, helping clients on an as-needed basis."

- "On all of these questions: I would never question the motives or professionalism of these archivists. **They are overwhelmed** with the volume of material and researchers, and need help."
- "I've worked at various NARA branches since 1987 and since then I've noticed a decline in expertise NOT because archivists don't care or are incompetent but because **as veterans (who had intricate knowledge of the record groups under their jurisdiction) retire, they are not replaced, and the remaining people have to cover far more record groups**. Plus, turnover seems pretty high and so researcher's first encounters are often with someone quite inexperienced."
- Another respondent linked the diminishing quality of archivists' subject expertise with the difficult organization of the archives themselves. This combination is particularly problematic: "The biggest obstacle to efficient research was the arcane organization and filing system. It was not intuitive, the finding aids were largely on paper, and even the support staff were unfamiliar with how much material might be found."
- Another wrote, "Most of the very knowledgeable and eager to help staff members are near retirement or have recently retired, e.g. George Briscoe, Robert Ellis, Mary France Morrow Ronan. It has gotten to the point that if you do not know your own way around the Byzantine classifications, or do not have the time in DC to learn your way around, the chance of doing thorough and accurate research is greatly reduced."
- Several respondents singled out David Langbart as a model archivist with excellent expertise.

Question 13: How would you rate the FINDING AIDS at the U.S. National Archives at College Park?

While respondents seemed inclined to give staff at NARA the benefit of the doubt, few rated the finding aids better than satisfactory. In fact, respondents had few positive comments on this subject. Those individuals who had good luck using the finding aids at NARA generally required and received good assistance from archivists in order to make sense of the finding aids. This is, I think, a key point: having both overstretched/undertrained archival staff AND poorly organized and confusing finding aids makes the process of researching at the National Archives that much more difficult.

Poor finding aids make researchers more dependent on staff, which drains staff time and resources and makes it less likely that staff will have the time to invest in mastering the archives, processing documents or applying their subject expertise to aid scholars. At the same time, poor finding aids make having great archivists such as David Langbart much more important.

Respondents who commented <u>positively</u> about finding aids tended to note that some record groups and finding aids are better than others – and in many cases useful finding aids were made so by skilled archivists:

- "NARA's task in this area is multiple orders of magnitude larger and more complicated than for any other archive in American history, where the collections are much smaller and arrive at the archive in much better condition. Yes, the finding aids are not always so good, but this is to be expected and comes with the territory, and there are ways to work through this challenge -- IF there is an adequate archival staff, to get back to my point above. And all of this really argues for much GREATER resources being expended on finding aids."
- "I think this varies widely by collection. In my experience, the RG 59 and 60 finding aids are fairly well organized and helpful. The finding aid for RG 65 (the FBI), beyond a few very specific sub-collections, is a organizational nightmare."
- "This quality varies greatly. The older finding aids are quite good. The newer ones less so."

Many respondents, however, were <u>extremely critical</u> of the state of the finding aids:

- "Finding aids in the main record room at NARA are in poor condition and are, in many cases, almost indecipherable without extensive assistance. It's hard to believe that the main research facility of the US Archives relies on fragile binders full of difficult to interpret shelf lists as its primary source of information for researchers."
- "The system is designed for them--not for researchers. Ordering records is confusing and cumbersome. It's ridiculous that you have to look in a paper book for the record group and box--and then in another book for the location of the records in the storage facility. At the very minimum, the researchers should not be responsible for writing down the second part. I shouldn't have to tell them where to find their records. I also fail to understand why an electronic record ordering system isn't in place. The UK National Archives is decades ahead of NARA is customer service and ease of records use."
- "Is there a ranking below Poor? Maybe "Atrocious"? Or "Worse than Useless"?"
- "I have felt like I was searching for a needle in a haystack while blindfolded."
- "The finding aids are very hard to understand and follow. They are counter-intuitive and hide more than they reveal, which seems to be the exact opposite of their purpose. They are by far the worse I've seen in any archive."
- The system seems "deliberately opaque" – "the worst" of any archive - "extremely confusing" – "a morass!" – "Embarrassing" "makes NO sense" "not intuitive" – "Confusing and difficult to use" – "Horrific." – "AWFUL." – "impenetrable" – "Shameful." – "abysmally awful."

- "They can be basically unusable without an archivist to guide you through them, or long expertise in a specific record group. Also, the disconnect between the paper copies and the online catalog is the highest of any archive I've worked with."

Finally, a common complaint for respondents was that <u>finding aids are not digitized</u> and the National Archives is in great need of <u>a good online database</u>. Not only is the present system cumbersome at best, but the physical binders are falling apart, and covered with handwritten notes. As a result, researchers feel they waste time traveling to the archives, trying to master a confusing system, and draining the time of overworked archivists in order to begin to get a handle on the finding aids. Researchers want to be able to do more legwork themselves ahead of time.
- "They should be more available via the Internet to save time at the archive, and also searchable."
- "If there's one thing that needs to digitized, it is the finding aids. Would save so much time to be able to know what to order *before* going to the archive."
- "I had to consult two or three finding aids folders simultaneously in order to locate the all the file codes that are required to process documents request. At the same time, the staff in NARA has access to these codes on their computers, but that database is unavailable to researchers - for unclear reasons. Some staffers are happy to find the code for you on their computer and just give it to you. Others don't offer any help and send you to excavate in the aforementioned folders. It seems that the biggest toll on the archivists time is explaining the complicated finding aids system to the researchers, which barely leaves them time to help with other things, like suggesting relevant documents repositories. Simplification and complete digitisation of the finding aids could have made the experience so much easier and make the work with archivists more productive."
- "Although I understand that NARA is reluctant to publicize finding aids and box lists that may be modified as collections are processed or reprocessed, there does not seem to be a compelling reason why the Archives can't post (and update) current research tools to its website or enable researchers to submit and schedule pulls via a web interface in advance of their arrival at Archives facilities."
- "They are disorganized, largely in paper, and generally not searchable by computer. All finding aids should be posted online - there is no excuse for this not to have already been done."

Question 14: How would you rate the effectiveness of the SEARCH ENGINES at the U.S. National Archives at College Park?

Many respondents seemed surprised by the question: they simply did not know that there were search engines available for probing the archives. More respondents

chose "can't judge or no opinion" than any other answer. Again, few found the search engines excellent or even good. <u>Confusion reigns</u>:

- "The catalog is extremely frustrating to use and not user-friendly."
- "I did not use these services, but also was unaware/not made aware that they existed."
- "Not helpful - ARC is too disconnected from the finding aids and the ways material are organized. On my last trip I did extensive ARC searches before going and still spent just as much time in the room with the finding aids."
- "The online search engine is much less helpful than it could be, since you still have to go to binders usually to figure out where the boxes are to get your pulls. Far too much time is taken up by this cumbersome process."
- "Online info did not correspond to Finding Guides or to info needed to pull documents. Results from search engines looked good on the screen but was basically useless; everything I did in advance online needed to be redone."

We asked respondents to suggest alternative search engines:

- Overwhelmingly respondents suggested looking to the UK's National Archives at Kew as a model. (http://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/SearchUI/) "Not only is it efficient and very clear, but you can order your documents ahead of time and have them waiting for you when you arrive."
- One respondent noted that PRESNET system at the Gerald Ford Library works well. One respondent noted that the German system ARGUS worked better than ARC.
- Several people suggested Google would work better than the present system(s).

Several respondents noted that, in particular, <u>the disconnect between search engines and actual organization of the archives</u> is very problematic.

Question 15: With respect to archival research only, how would you rate the OVERALL RESEARCH EXPERIENCE at the various types of facilities in the United States listed below?

Respondents rated their experience at the National Archives, Presidential libraries, State or local historical societies, University archives and other public libraries. Respondents were most positive about experiences at <u>presidential libraries</u> and <u>university archives</u>. Respondents rated the overall research experience at the National Archives to be satisfactory or better, with a plurality of respondents ranking the experience "good." This suggests that, for all its frustrations, <u>researchers have come away from the National Archives richer for the experience.</u>

Respondents highlighted a few <u>positive things about the NARA experience</u>, perhaps neglected by the other questions of this survey. What is working well right now should be preserved in the future.

- "The physical facilities at NARA are very good, which makes up in part for some of the deficiencies of the finding aids and the idiosyncrasies of the pull time schedule."
- "I like the fact that the National Archives allow free photo-taking, whereas most universities don't."
- "I appreciate the long opening hours at NARA II."
- "Research experience at National Archives was excellent in terms of materials available but atrocious in terms of archival assistance available, especially compared to presidential and university archives."

Others highlighted <u>negative experiences at NARA</u>:

- "The worst part about NARA II was the excessive security and barriers to accessibility. The rural location was terrible, and the security measures were irritating and time-consuming. I was irritated by the multiple checks when entering reading rooms, and rules prohibiting wear warm sweaters and scarves despite uncomfortably cool room temperatures. As a Canadian used to multicultural federal institutions, I was disappointed by the distinct racial divisions between NARA's security and service staff on one hand, and the higher-level archival and State Department staff on the other"
- "I have had mostly very positive experiences at NARA College Park but I would rate the NARA branch in New York City as poor. Worst treatment, low competence, very unsatisfactory."
- "My worst NARA experiences, hands down, have been at NARA II. I have had good experiences at NARA San Bruno and NARA Chicago. At the former, professional NARA staff were exceptionally helpful. At the latter, elderly docents were helpful. I have done research at NARA and NARA II in the Washington, DC area about ten times from 2001 to present, including a five day trip in the past year. Staff at the NARA II library and microfilm room are helpful and knowledgeable. Accessing archival holdings at NARA II, on the other hand, has been a nightmarish experience. Expert staff seem to be available to only a few and never to me, even when I have requested an appointment well in advance of a trip. Staff covering the research room from which requests for materials are made and covering the desk at which archival holdings are delivered have very little interest in interacting with the public."

While several respondents were frustrated by the broadness of this question – answers vary tremendously within as well as between categories – others argued that differences in **<u>funding</u>** and **<u>expertise</u>** make all the difference in the world. Well-funded, well-staffed institutions can be a pleasure to work in:

- "Presidential library staff seem to have a much deeper knowledge of the archive's holdings (no doubt due to the much smaller scope and size). Receiving documents is also much easier."
- "In University and Public libraries the archivists gave me the sense they are actively working on my project, which was amazing. In Presidential libraries I sometimes had the same experience, but in the National Archives you always feel like a lonely wolf!"

Finally, respondents highlighted specific **<u>excellent</u>** archives by name:

<u>Presidential Libraries</u>
Hoover Library
FDR Library
Harry Truman Library
Eisenhower Library
John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum
LBJ Library
Nixon Presidential Library (also noted as having a good website)
Carter Library
George H.W. Bush Presidential Library

<u>University Libraries/Archives</u>
Princeton's Mudd Library
Hoover Institution, Stanford University
Union Theological Seminary (Columbia)
John Hay Library (Brown)
Radcliffe Library (Harvard)

<u>State/Local</u>
Wisconsin Historical Society
California State Archives

<u>Other</u>
U.S. Army Heritage and Education Center (AHEC) at Carlisle, Pennsylvania
Library of the Marine Corps Archives Division in Quantico, VA
Smithsonian Archives
Library of Congress
British National Archives
Hong Kong Public Records Office
British Telecom (BT) Archives London
New York Public Library
Newberry Library Chicago IL
Marshall Foundation Archives
Rockefeller Center Archives

Some libraries/archives where individual respondents had **<u>negative</u>** experiences include:

> Reagan Presidential Library*
> Pennsylvania State Archives
> John F. Kennedy Presidential Library*
> Library of Congress*
> UC Berkley
> Archives in Latin America and the Caribbean
> Archives in some sub-Saharan African countries

- Starred places were noted as good or excellent by some respondents, while others reported negative experiences.

Question 16: With respect to archival research only, how would you rate the USEFULNESS OF THE FINDING AIDS at the various types of facilities in the United States listed below?

Responses to this question did not vary wildly from the previous question; respondents rated finding aids at Presidential libraries and university archives to be good or excellent., Many found finding aids at NARA to be satisfactory or good -- but more people reported that the National Archives finding aids were "poor" than any other archive category.

Comments illustrate two main points: (1) <u>Finding aids must be digitized</u>: "This really seems to be an area where digitization improves content." Being able to plan and prepare for a visit to the archives using digital online finding aids is vitally important to researchers; and (2) <u>A bad finding aid can be forgiven if archival staff is excellent, informed, helpful and easy to communicate with</u>: Archivists can help "ease the pain of the finding aids." The opposite is also true: Great finding aids are even more important when staff is stretched thin.

<u>Institutions with admired finding aids:</u>
> Library of Congress
> George H.W. Bush Library
> The newer finding aids at the Huntington Library
> Older finding aids at NARA
> Smithsonian NMAH
> Marine Corps History Division
> Marshall Foundation
> Army Heritage and Education Center
> British National Archives at Kew

<u>Criticism of some finding aids:</u>
- Reagan Presidential library "far far behind"

- "Ford finding aids have some disastrous areas - classification is totally unspecific and archival staff doesn't really understand their own system."
- "Talking about the University of Kansas archives here. Sorry KU. Your finding aids stink, and the idea that only your archivists can look at them is really too bad."
- "Department of State finding aids almost impossible to decipher. Without very hard-to-find assistance from an archivist, it was almost impossible to determine which documents were classified and which were not."
- "Finding aids need to be digitized as well. Many have obviously not been updated since their creation--often decades ago-- and are either cumbersome to read (full of unintuitive codings) or spread out over several binders on a shelf that need a guide just to find the binders in the first place."

Question 17: With respect to archival research only, how would you rate the ATTENTIVENESS OF THE ARCHIVISTS at the various types of facilities in the United States listed below?

What is most striking is the number of respondents who rated the <u>archivists at Presidential libraries to be "excellent."</u> While respondents generally rated Presidential libraries highly, it is in this aspect – the staff – where Presidential libraries outshine other types of archival institutions.

The same thing is true of university archives, when we compare responses from Question 16 to Question 17. The same is true, to a less dramatic effect, at the U.S. National Archives, where many more respondents found the experience excellent, and many fewer found the experience poor, when asked about archivist attentiveness rather than finding aids.

Comments on this one tended to be <u>negative</u> and repetitive of some of the previous points. But some takeaways:
- <u>NARA needs more expert archivists</u>: they are stretched too thin, and even courteous staff can be limited in how helpful they are due to working conditions and lack of subject expertise. "Attentiveness isn't the problem; it's lack of expertise."
- <u>Mileage can vary</u>: "I have been happy with College Park but extremely unhappy with NARA NY. One I would rate good, the other poor." "With regard to NARA, in the 2-3 months I spent at Archives I in DC, I'd say excellent. In the (cumulatively) 8-9 months at Archives II in College Park, I'd say below poor."
- "I would rate the manuscript librarians at the Library of Congress as excellent in terms of both their knowledge of their collection and their attentiveness."
- "As a young female researcher, I have received unwanted attention from US National Archives staff on multiple occasions."

Question 18: How do your experiences at the U.S. National Archive compare to those in the government archives of other nations?

More than one-third of respondents couldn't judge or offer an opinion in response to this question. Respondents with experience at state archives outside the United States reported in <u>roughly equal numbers better, similar, and worse experiences compared to the U.S. National Archives</u>. This question begs for a closer examination of the optional comments, of which there were 139 (for 697 respondents – a high proportion on this survey.) Nearly every comment put NARA somewhat in the middle of the pack - better than some countries' archives and worse than others - although many respondents who said NARA was worse than others found it nearly universally so.

Some respondents complained that the question was not answerable since non-U.S. archives vary so much, and experiences at archives vary from year to year or record group to record group.

Overall though, some countries' archives appear to be <u>much better</u> than the United States:
- No foreign archive received more positive accolades than the **British Archives**. Even people who rated NARA fairly well pointed to Kew as doing much better.
- Netherlands
- Germany
- France
- Australia
- Taiwan
- Norway
- Canada (particularly before the recent budget cuts)

Respondents named quite a lot of countries where archives are worse, although several pointed out that that is not because NARA is doing well but because many countries lack resources or transparency:
- "Compared to National Archives in Latin America, NARA is better. But NARA could and should be much better than it is - particularly in the training, expertise and general disposition of some of the staff in the consultation room and in the elaboration of usable finding aids for the less transited record groups."
- "Although I am extremely disappointed with the deterioration of the research services at NARA and sluggishness of declassification, I must concede that my experiences at NARA have been superior to my experiences in India and the former Soviet Union… The United States CAN and MUST do better."
- "Compared to Russian archives NARA is HEAVEN"

- "This is to some extent a question of apples and oranges. Comparing US with developing-country archives is mostly unfair. As a huge and rich country, with a proud tradition of government openness and accountability, and also a rich twentieth-century tradition of minding other countries' business, **the United States' national archives should be the most complete and accessible archives anywhere in the world, able to benefit researchers from everywhere in the world.** I can learn more about many aspects of Cuban history, for example, in the US archives than from the Cuban archives. Compared to most Latin American archives, the holdings in the US are so much deeper and more comprehensive and much better organized. But this is no great feat, given our respective national histories and economies.   A point of comparison. The British National Archives allow keyword searching of their entire holdings. This means that I can have a list of every document in the archive relevant to my research in hand before I arrive, and can plan the length of my trip accordingly. No such luck at College Park, although this is closer to a reality at the presidential libraries with their digitized finding aids down to the folder titles."
- "I can only compare to my experience in Mexico; the archives themselves at NARA are MUCH better kept, and far more modernized in all respects. However, my experience with the archivists, and the amount of time they were willing to spend to help me find things, to follow up on questions, etc., was far superior in Mexico than any experience I have had at NARA in the last five to ten years."
- "In my view, the problem is that NARA management has disempowered its hard-working archivists. In Europe, the professionals are treated with greater respect and given more responsibility."
- "I'd rather have food poisoning than willingly conduct research at NARA."
- "I cannot overstate how bad my experiences at NARA have been."

Question 19: To what extent should the U.S. National Archives focus its limited resources on each of the priorities below?

This question asked respondents to prioritize several different initiatives, including:
- accelerating declassification
- improving the subject expertise of archivists
- enhancing the attentiveness of staff/archivists
- digitizing documents
- improving finding aids
- providing annotations of withheld documents
- search engines

In a world with financial and temporal restraints, the survey asked respondents to set some priorities. However, the survey did not ask respondents to truly rank the options. As a result, respondents could respond that multiple initiatives should be

the top priority, or important. Few respondents thought ANY of the initiatives should be low priority.

When averaged, the highest priority initiative appears to be "accelerating declassification" while the lowest priority is "enhancing staff/achivists' attentiveness." Declassification is clearly a top priority for survey respondents.

Yet there are other ways to read the data. For example, only 9 out of 683 respondents said that "improving finding aids" should be a low priority; yet respondents overwhelmingly ranked that initiative "important" and "extremely urgent." Honestly, all of these are important, and survey respondents believe they should all be prioritized.

Suggested strategies that focus on technology and comments on staffing issues warrant particular attention. Several comments note that these categories are entwined. Creating a more robust database/search/pull system will help researchers better help themselves. In turn, this may provide the necessary space, time, and resources for NARA to focus on retaining more trained archivists and experts who can use their expertise to both review and release documents, and to provide specialized help to researchers who are informed enough to ask sharp focused questions.

On digital solutions:
- "It's hard for me to say which problem is a greater priority: the inadequacy of finding aids and search engines or the inability of the staff to make up for these inadequacies. I mark improving finding aids and search engines here because I am doubtful that NARA II will be able to solve their staff issues."
- "I only place "enhancing the attentiveness of staff" at lower importance because I have always received exceptional help. If staff members believe they need more resources, I would be in favor of deferring the order of priorities to them. I do, however, believe that digitization is extremely important and that all avenues should be explored to facilitate the process."
- "I didn't see a category for computerizing the document request system. There are efficiencies to be had with relatively lower costs than some of the above categories."
- "By taking a lesson from KEW, which means digitizing your database so that your files are searchable, you then free up the staff to declassify documents at much faster rates. Presently, the system is antiquated. Investment money up front in making a good database--the rest of the research process will fall nicely into place."
- "I'd like to say that their number one focus should be improving their webpage. This would mean improving the ways to identify finding aids

and the content within the aids. Their webpage right now is practically useless."

- "To me, if search engines and finding aids are improved such that it is more possible to work independently, expert archivists aren't as necessary. The reverse also holds true."

On staffing:
- "Why is this framed as enhancing attentiveness of the staff? Give them more help! Understaffing is a problem."
- "Digitization is a boon to genealogists. Serious researchers do research onsite, in original documents, and are dependent on knowledgeable and helpful staff. We are often looking for series that have not been pulled in 50 or 100 years. Many staff do not care to help if your request is more challenging than a routine pull of a much used RG/Entry. The few who stand out take it as a special intellectual challenge when asked to find something off the beaten track. That sort of staff member was common 25 years ago but has become rarer and rarer."
- "HIRE YOUNG PEOPLE WITH MLS AND HISTORY DEGREES"

Question 20: Would you recommend an overhaul of the declassification system?

Over 90% of those with an opinion argued for reforms, either moderate or radical, to the declassification system. 73 people made suggestions for what could be done. More than 100 people, however, voiced no opinion. This may be related to several comments that noted how little they know of the de/classification system in the first place; this opacity might be something for the survey creators/ NARA to tackle head on. Several respondents suggested involving trained historians and scholars in overhauling the declassification system. How about a WPA-style project to tackle the failing infrastructure of the declassification and archives systems?

On opacity:
- "I do not know much about how the process is conducted. It is, however, inevitably a subjective process. Accordingly, subject matter experts are vital, and they must approach the process aware that it is paramount that the public have maximum access swiftly, and that, concurrently, information that legitimately should not be declassified is protected, and that a strong explanation is provided."

On complexity:
- "End the "equity" system in which every agency that had a part in generating a document takes part in the review process. Give ownership of documents to one and only one agency."
- "The different declassification procedures need to be harmonized to keep specific agencies (i.e., DOE) from misapplying laws and regulations. This

would require effective interagency coordination, presumably led by NSS."
- "Just publish everything that is 30+ years old and non-technical in nature"
- "How about starting with a radical narrowing of the classification system?"
- If NARA is not funded well enough to declassify documents after 25 years, then everything should be automatically declassified after a certain period of time: 25, 30, 35 years, 50 years at most. Period. No exceptions. No politics. Just public access."
- "Imposing time limits. Unless the agencies involved can justify withholding the document within a reasonable time frame, the document should be automatically released."

On overclassification:
- "Reduce the thirty year rule to 20. Based upn my experience of holding a "top secret" classification . . . , I can state that documents are often over classified."
- "Radical but not necessarily complicated - narrow the scope of what's truly sensitive and focus on protecting that! It's the culture that's hardest to change."
- "the speed with which innocuous things are declassified is troubling."
- Less classification: "I had a soldier tell me once that they just stuck a classification sticker on the copy machine and everything, including the pool schedule and DFAC menu, was classified. That is crazy."
- "Apply more sensible standards in FOIA requests. I have received documents - in some instances covering material from sixty, seventy, or eighty years ago - where almost all of the text is redacted. This is absurd."
- "What would be even better would be a radical overhaul of the classification system. There are no penalties for anyone who overclassifies or simply classifies to cover up a mistake or something that is embarrassing."
- "The classification system seems Kafka-esque."

On volume, digital and the future:
- "The current system does not work. The growth of digital records will cause catastrophic failure and huge backlogs."
- "My first concern is who is assuring that all electronic data is being stored from recent administrations for use by scholars within 25-years? Has a user-friendly method of accessing or requesting release of those materials been created?"

Models or Ideas?
- "1. declassify documents unless there is individual cause not to do so - err on side of openness after 30 years (the Clinton rule) 2. follow the law on declassification deadlines; where resources are insufficient, increase pressure in exec & legislative branches for sufficient resources to comply

with the law 3. standard for not declassifying a document: not embarrassment but tangible damage to US interests"

- **"See the recent presidential commission. The work has been done!"**
- "Use the Assassination Records Review Board as a model for a Records Review Board. The ARRB worked efficiently and responsibly. The current declassification system is neither efficiency (being far too slow) or responsible (keeping documents secret far past any rational reason to do so)."
- **"It is far too cumbersome[sic]...there were great hopes for the NDC and there has been progress, but so much more could be done, and the backlog keeps growing.   More staff is a priority!"**
- "Undertake systematic re-review of all withdrawn documents in the Central/Decimal files for the period up to 1963 with less risk adversity - especially to documents that are Confidential or lower - even most Secret can be released - these withdrawal decisions were made in the 1990s . Consider instead of the automatic 25 years which is not working an accelerated release for Confidential or lower (say 20 years) make Secret 30 years and the only docs still classified beyond 30 to be those that are Top Secret, those with Restricted data or intelligence related. Personally I think only records revealing weapons technology or and intelligence records that would clearly expose SIGINT human intel sources still living or in use should be classified more than a half century."
- "**Hire more historians and archivists to do the work.** There's plenty of work for both groups and there's plenty of people jumping at the chance to do the work, yet there are no jobs."
- "Most important would be a date-certain system for declassification of documents--and automatic review of withheld documents--rather than the reverse, currente system of processing every document individually before it can be released. This is simply not sustainable given the falling level of government resources and the exponential increases in the volume of records produced. It would also force agencies dealing with national security issues to determine REAL priorities to review materials that genuinely may contain sensitive material, and perhaps devise a more rational system for classification to start with."
- "**I think there should be more well-respected historians from all sides of the spectrum involved in developing declassification criteria**. I don't necessarily think that a Chelsea Manning or an Edward Snowden is the right person to make these decisions, but if their superiors in the hierarchy don't take this issue more seriously, then there will be trouble down the road."
- "Repeal the Kyl-Lott amendment and revise the Atomic Energy Act to provide for the automatic declassification of formerly restricted data. Restrict intelligence sources and methods exemption to the identity of human sources (eliminate exemptions for intelligence presence and liaison information). Strengthen automatic declassification provision of

the executive order and require higher-level certification of declassification exemptions within the agencies. Delegate presidential government-wide declassification authority for 25-year old or older documents to an official or commission accountable to the public (allowing for agency appeals of official/commission decisions to the president for final decision). Adopt procedural reforms that involve acceptance of looser risk management constraints."

Question 21: Would you recommend that members of Congress allocate more funding to the U.S. National Archives?

Respondents overwhelmingly believe that Congress must allocate more funding to the archives:

- "I strongly feel NARA deserves more money. Better access to public records is vital to the strength of our democracy."
- "Essential to our ability to understand our own country!"
- "This is our history, and is a national treasure every bit as valuable as any park or monument and without its continued evolution then future generations will never really understand some of the most defining events in this nation's development. This is the story of us all. It must be saved, and used."
- "And I would be glad to pay higher taxes personally to make this happen!"
- "Given the explosion of government documentation, much of it in digital form that will not last indefinitely (or will not be readable long term given changes in technology), there is no way that NARA can keep up with the river of documentation without greater resources. Congress needs to put its money where its laws are. Congress understands that Democratic government rests on the ability of citizens to know what their government does; it just needs to realize this foundational principle through providing the necessary resources."

Many respondents made the thoughtful point that a request for more funds should be accompanied by plans to spend the money carefully, which can only happen if policies are changed and systems are updated:

- "The problem of insufficient staff is urgent. Archivists cannot at the same time follow the researchers, filing finding aids and review documents. This is possible only through a faster and lighter review process, more staff and higher digitalization"
- "A drastic restructuring of spending is probably more important. There needs to be a reduction of security and young retrieval staff in the reading rooms, and an increase in knowledgeable archivists and support staff devoted to digitization."
- "Identifying efficiencies, misaligned organizational incentives, and changing problematic policies should precede attempts to throw money at a problem."

- "Yes, though they could save a lot of money by taking steps to discourage the overclassification of documents."

Question 22: Would you care to make any additional comments with respect to the importance of timely declassification of documents? (optional)

- "The **over-classification** of federal government documents is a serious problem in this country. A democracy cannot function effectively without governmental transparency."
- "In recent years, virtually everything has some level of classification so an ineffective declassification process doesn't just mean that you can't write about sensitive issues; **it means that you can't write about anything.**"
- "While certainly not a popular political pitch in a political climate that fetishizes government spending cuts, it must be remembered that the open access to all government records should be considered a pillar of any modern democracy. The **timely declassification** of records is a vital aspect of this process, and the current backlog well before the "30-year rule" is shameful. Similarly, the extent of redacted passages in de-classified intelligence records is also shameful, and without sufficient explanation appears arbitrary."
- "[T]imely declassification of documents is hugely important; however, it does little good unless they are **accessible to the public**. There are files at NARA from the lat 1960s that have been declassified but are not yet accessible to the public b/c of **NARA's backlog** of getting everything into the system. Please allocate greater funding to NARA. Enable them to **hire more staff** (archivists AND declassification experts) so that the experience and quality of the available offerings improves."
- "Very, very disappointed with responses to my **FOIA requests.** I have a request that is now over 10 years old."
- "I request as many documents as I can after each visit by submitting entire withdrawal slips from almost every folder I see. This practice is encouraged by the archivists I have met. **Perhaps SHAFR members should be encouraged to request documents proactively or as part of a larger organized campaign**."
- "Part of the trick is to get in front of the problem by **making sure historians and allied academic groups have a place at the table** when government agencies are creating the criteria for documentation/messaging systems in the future. As long as the task is left entirely in the hands of computer experts, they will always favor creating systems that maximize current user operability with little attention to how the material might be used/retrieved in 10 or 20 years' time when the supporting computer systems have all changed. Part of NARA's problem is that they must build a lowest-common-denominator system for making born-digital documents available to the public. **If the federal government had a common set of standards and common**

platforms for electronic messaging/retention, it would go a long way to simplifying the process of declass, release, and retrieval at the back end of the lifecycle."

Question 23: What topics or issues do you think the National Archives should prioritize with respect to declassifying documents from the 1980s and 1990s? List the top three.

Since this was a free-form question, people answered with varying amounts of specificity. What follows is my attempt to combine responses under an umbrella heading and create headings for similar responses. If multiple responses employed a similar vocabulary, however, I grouped the responses together and kept it separate from even closely-related categories. For example, many people want State Department records declassified, and many people want records related to U.S. Foreign Relations declassified: these people may want to see the same records. But I include them below as different categories to preserve to some extent the language used by respondents. Many people wanted to see records related to the Soviet Union, and U.S. foreign relations with the Soviet Union – this response appears under Country headings. At the same time, the many requests for records related to the fall of the Soviet Union are grouped separately because this was a specific request shared by multiple respondents.

For the Region/Country categories, people mentioned specific places and they also mentioned U.S. foreign relations with those places – I combined these under more simple headings, e.g. "Japan."

Top picks include:

- Presidential Records, especially the Reagan Administration
- State Department Records
- Nuclear Policy, Strategy, etc.
- End of the Cold War
- Collapse of the Soviet Union
- Economic Policy
- National Security & Military Interventions
- U.S. Foreign Relations, especially:
  - Relating to the Middle East
  - Gulf Wars
  - Iran-Contra
  - Iran-Iraq War
  - Russia/Soviet Union
  - The Balkans
  - Latin & Central America
  - China

But it is crucial not to neglect the entire list: Human rights and humanitarian interventions, Intelligence & CIA records, Cold War Foreign Policy, Terrorism and more are eagerly sought-after categories of records.

Records Related to Specific Administrations or Departments

Executive, including specific administrations
Presidential (10)
Reagan Administration, including diplomacy, national security, covert actions (5)
National Security Council (5)
Treasury Department (1)
domestic agency records (1)
Carter Administration, including nuclear policy (1)
George HW Bush Administration (1)
Clinton Administration (1)
Executive-Congressional discussions (1)

Diplomatic Records
State Department Records, including central files, cable traffic, Lot RG 59, LOT files, post files RG 84, cable traffic (16)

Intelligence
CIA papers (5)
Intelligence records, general (4)
NSA (2)

Military/Defense
Department of Defense (6)
Military Records (1)

Records Related to Broad Issue Areas
Nuclear Policy, Strategy, Arms Control, Proliferation (20)
End of the Cold War (18)
      Collapse of the Soviet Union (9)
Economics, including domestic, international policy, globalization and deregulation, and multinational corporations, trade relations, WTO and NAFTA (16)
U.S. Foreign Relations (13)
National Security and Defense, including Military (10)
Human Rights & Humanitarian Interventions, including under Clinton, including NGOS (9)
Cold War U.S. Foreign Policy, including military, trade, and Cold War Summits (8)
Military Interventions, operations, and war (8)
Terrorism and Counter-terrorism, Radical Islam (7)
Intelligence, including Intelligence estimates, and of surveillance allies (7)
Science, Science Policy, Technology, R& D, Data Security (5)
Public & Cultural Diplomacy, including through the 1980s and 1990s (3)

"War on Drugs" (3)
Covert Operations (3)
Environmental Issues (2)
U.S. AID (2)
Immigration Policy (2)
Ethnic Cleansing (2)
Email & Electronic records (2)
Energy Issues (1)

Records Related to Geographic Regions and Nations, including U.S. Foreign Relations in areas

Middle East (15)
     Gulf War (14)
     Iran-Contra (9)
     Persian Gulf (8)
     Iran-Iraq War (8)
     Iran (5)
     Iraq & Saddam Hussein (5)
     Israel (5)
     Lebanon, Lebanon War (3)
     (Overall: 72)

Europe (5)
     Russia/Soviet Union, including 1980s and 1990s (20)
     Balkans, including breakup of Yugoslavia, Kosovo, Bosnia (12)
     NATO, including Able Archer (6)
     Eastern Europe (5)
     Germany, including reunification (3)
     (Overall: 51)

Latin America (10)
     Central America, including 1980s/90s (11)
     Caribbean (2)
     South America (2)
     Operations in Granada (2)
     Operation Just Cause in Panama (2)
     Cuba
     Nicaragua
     Guatemala
     El Salvador
     Mexico
     (Overall: 34)

Asia (2)
     China, including USFR, Taiwan, 1989 unrest (13)

Afghanistan (6)
Japan (3)
North Korea, including nuclear (3)
Pakistan, including nuclear (1)
South Korea (1)
Southeast Asia (1)
(Overall: 30)

Africa (4)
Rwanda (4)
Somalia intervention (3)
North African relations
Angola
South Africa (end of apartheid)
Democratic Republic of the Congo
(Overall: 15)

"Third World" (4)
United Nations (1)

<u>General Recommendations</u>
- **Backlog:** Finish declassifying documents from the 1940s and 1950s that should be declassified, and WWII documents.
- "Reform the Presidential Records Act so that archivist in libraries from Reagan onward can process systematically and thoroughly and not being forced to jump through hoops in response to unreasonable FOIA requests."
- "Fix the broken FOIA system so that there is a timely review of documents"
- "A protocol for batch declassification is needed due to volume. 2) Approaching the 90s some documents will already be digitized. Again protocol should be in place. 3) Moving forward, digitization of the finding aids would decrease workload over the long term."
- "Making and keeping an electronic record of the dates on which particular documents have been declassified."
- "We need investment to deal with the current backlog and to figure out a way to deal with the imminent avalanche of electronic records created in the 1980s and 1990s."
- "One issue not covered in this survey was the excessive time that it takes to get responses to FOIA and similar requests for declassification of documents. I have many requests that have never been answered. The presidential libraries are better at this."
- "I feel like some agencies are better than others about being transparent. Ironically, the CIA, DoD, and FBI seem to make more efforts in this than places like the Department of State. There is very little open documents

on the State website, no FOIA reading room, and it's difficult to pull IG and GAO reports regarding the DoS from their website or even the IG or GAO."

- "Getting the finding aids in order, putting them online, and ensuring that the search engines yield results that can actually be used to request documents. It will save a lot of time for researchers Declassification Making more documents available online"