OASIS ANNUAL REPORT, 2001-2002

Steering Committee: Kate Bowers, University Archives; Leslie Morris, Houghton Library (chair); Susan von Salis, Schlesinger Library; Julie Wetherill and Lee Mandell, OIS; Susan Lee, ULC.

Background: A publicly available Harvard catalog since July 1998, OASIS provides centralized access to a small but growing percentage of finding aids for collections at Harvard. These finding aids are detailed descriptions of collections that contain a wide variety of materials, including letters, diaries, photographs, drawings, printed material, and objects. The search engine behind OASIS is OpenText 5, accessed through a Harvard-customized version of a web gateway that was originally developed by the University of Michigan's Digital Library Production Services.

OASIS began with seven participating repositories; this year, membership reached 13 (up from 11 last year), with the addition of the Theodore Roosevelt Collection and the Special Collections Department of Countway Library.

The Steering Committee meets every other month, alternating with the OASIS Liaisons Group, which also meets every other month.

As of July 1, OASIS included 560 finding aids (75.4 MB total file size), up from 347 in June 2001.

Developments in 2001-2002

The OASIS support site. http://hul.harvard.edu/ois/systems/oasis/. This web site encompasses information on how to participate in the system, standards documents, historical material, training and support information, and “tips and tricks” with authoring software. It continued to be refined and developed this year, with new sections added: encoding examples, Houghton’s guidelines for working with Pacific Data Conversion Corp., and revised HOLLIS record guidelines (see below).

EAD workshops. Training workshops, taught by Susan von Salis and Kim Brookes of the Radcliffe Institute, have been offered eight times since 1998, and are now on a twice-yearly schedule administered by OIS. This year, 23 individuals were trained, bringing the total to date to 113. The Workshop is a prerequisite for OASIS participation.

Standards documents. Perhaps the most important, and time-consuming, work done by the Steering Committee (which also serves as Harvard’s EAD Standards Committee) lies in developing standards and “best practice” for OASIS participants. Two areas received particular attention this year:

♦ HOLLIS record guidelines. MARC 21 changes (1999) made linking possible from fields other than the >856, and the archival community has moved to using the >555 (Indexes/finding aids note) as the location for links to electronic finding aids. The advent of Aleph, standards compliance, concerns about alerting users to finding aid file size, and
the desirability of assigning “persistent ids” (URNs) to finding aids were all factors in the need to update the guidelines for HOLLIS records <http://hul.harvard.edu/ois/systems/oasis/hollis.html>. The guidelines were approved by the HUL Bib Standards Committee in April 2002. Unfortunately, unbeknownst to the Steering Committee, the Bib Standards Committee, and the Aleph Indexing Group, Aleph does not support >555 links; indeed, none of the MARC 21 linking fields can be used in Aleph except >856. The guidelines will need to be altered once more (>555s were active in HOLLIS Web), suggesting duplicate links in both >555 and >856.

♦ Linking guidelines. OASIS has supported links from finding aids to external documents or images, but from the SGML document only. This required the user to install a SGML viewer, Panorama, a cumbersome and difficult process. With implementation of a new stylesheet for displaying the full finding aids, linking was incorporated in the HTML version. There are many different linking elements incorporated in EAD, all of which can be modified by multiple attributes. In order to ensure consistency, simplify any future stylesheet/system changes by documenting how linking is done, and (most vitally) simplify options for contributors, guidelines were necessary. The Steering Committee, assisted by Robin Wendler, worked intensively on the guidelines during winter and spring, presenting a draft “for experimentation” to the OASIS Liaisons in May. Houghton and the University Archives have completed test finding aids incorporating thumbnails linked to larger versions of the image. If all goes well during testing, the production system will support such links by the end of July. Examples can be found at: http://oasistest.harvard.edu/html/hou00121frames.html (search for daguerreotype) and http://oasistest.harvard.edu/html/hua99999frames.html (test document for the linking guidelines).

System enhancements.

♦ New stylesheet for full finding aid display. Perhaps the most visible enhancement to OASIS this year is the new stylesheet to format finding aids for full display; this became part of the OASIS production server in November 2001. The SGML finding aids are now transformed to XML; then, using an XSL stylesheet, the finding aid is “published” in HTML. The new display adds color; a dynamic Table of Contents frame; a persistent title frame; and search and help facilities. User response has been very favorable.

♦ XML support. OASIS can now accept both SGML and XML EAD finding aids. As yet, only University Archives is submitting in XML, but authoring software development is moving in that direction.

OASIS User Survey Working Group. One of the Steering Committee’s priorities last year was to undertake a user survey, to inform both minor redesign of the existing user interface, and to provide guidance for anticipated system reimplementation. Following preliminary discussions with Professor Terry Tivnan of the Education School about surveying techniques, a Working Group was formed: Kate Bowers (chair, University Archives); David Ferris (Law); Virginia Hunt (Countway); and Connie Mayer (Loeb Music). The Working Group has completed an initial round of interviews, gathering comments about the interface that are reflected in the OASIS Enhancement List. Next steps include the development of a questionnaire, to be administered to a wider user population.
**Retrospective conversion projects.** Both Houghton and Schlesinger have embarked on retrospective conversion projects funded by LDI Access Grants. Both project managers are keeping careful records concerning methodology, time, and relative cost. In the fall, following completion of the first year of both projects, the Project Managers will meet to compare notes, and the Steering Committee will discuss the implications for an all-Harvard retrospective conversion project.

**Steering Committee priorities for the coming year**

**Reimplementation of OASIS.** OASIS now runs on OpenText 5, software that is no longer supported. The user interface is a slightly customized version of a web gateway developed by the University of Michigan, an interface that is under-documented and in some aspects intractable to change. Coupled with the rapid increase in the number of finding aids, and thus search “hits”, caused by the two retrospective conversion projects, the limitations of the present software and interface have become increasingly apparent. After five years, the system needs a refit.

The interim report (May 2002) of the User Survey Working Group strengthen this perception. Comments include: it’s difficult to differentiate/navigate between sessions; it’s hard to know which browser session I need to look at; why can’t I save my previous searches; I want to combine my searches; I’m confused by the “hits in context” screen, why can’t I go directly to that part of the finding aid; I want my search terms highlighted; there needs to be relevance ranking in the search results; I get too many hits to be useful; etc.

The Steering Committee has incorporated minor interface changes in its Enhancements List. But it must be emphasized that these are just patches; many enhancements suggested by the User Survey are beyond the capability of the current software. OASIS will only be used, and useful, if researchers can quickly and easily find pertinent materials. Increasingly, that is not the case. What worked well when the database was quite small, is not working well as the database grows.

Submitted July 12, 2002