

A Proud – and Practical – Preservation Legacy: The 2004 *Heritage Health Index* and the 2014 *Heritage Health Information Survey*

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Under the champion spirit of its President, Lawrence Reger, Heritage Preservation developed a reputation for identifying and spotlighting risks to American heritage collections and quickly responding to them with targeted and innovative collection care programming. Heritage Preservation’s enduring commitment to the condition and care of collections, has emerged as its proud – and practical – legacy as a result of two ambitious campaigns: the 2004 *Heritage Health Index*¹ and the 2014 *Heritage Health Information Survey*.² Designed to quantitatively assess and, a decade later, to measure progress in collection care, these documents have become indispensable references for those responsible for preserving billions of artifacts in more than 30,000 archives, libraries, museums, historical societies, scientific research institutions and archaeological repositories across the United States and its territories.

The *Heritage Health Index (HHI)* -

Based upon a 1997 President’s Committee charge that “public agencies and the private sector... support a national assessment of the nation’s preservation needs,”³ Heritage Preservation accepted the challenge to document the condition and care of America’s cultural heritage collections via a survey distributed in 2004.⁴ The comprehensive questionnaire was developed in consultation with a working group of more than 100 leading collections and preservation professionals and with the input of 35 national associations and federal agencies that represented collecting institutions. *HHI*’s summary report, released in 2005, *A Public Trust at Risk: The Heritage Health Index Report on the State of America’s Collections*,⁵ was the catalyst for focusing attention on the state of America’s collections ranging from works of art to vertebrate paleontology.

Getting the Word Out –

A Public Trust at Risk was distributed to more than 18,000 foundations, allied organizations, U.S. collecting institutions, media organizations, and members of Congress. News outlets included, among others, *The New York Times*, *San Francisco Chronicle*, *Philadelphia Inquirer*, *Columbus Dispatch* through an Associated Press story,

¹ <https://www.ims.gov/publications/heritage-health-index-full-report>

² <https://www.ims.gov/data/surveys-data/heritage-health-information-survey-hhis>

³ *Creative America: A Report to the President* by the President’s Committee on the Arts and the Humanities, 1997 <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED413276.pdf>,

⁴ *The Heritage Health Index Report*, 2005, p. 3.

⁵ Heritage Preservation and the Institute of Museum and Library Services jointly produced 2004 HHI with additional support from the J. Paul Getty Trust, the Henry Luce Foundation, the Samuel H. Kress Foundation, the Bay and Paul Foundations, the Peck Stacpoole Foundation, and the Gladys Kriebel Delmas Foundation. Heritage Preservation Chairperson, Debra Hess Norris; President, Lawrence L. Reger; Director, *Heritage Health Index*, Kristen Overbeck Laise. Heritage Preservation Board Members during the *HHI* project period were Debra Hess Norris, Mervin Richard, Julie Reilly, Nancy Schamu, Tom Claerson, Dennis Fiori, Doris Hamburg, Sheryl Ogden, Jerry Podany, Victoria Steele, Ingrid Bogel, Inge-Lise Eckmann, Barbara Heller, Maribelle Leavitt, Frank Matero, and Stephen Williams.

National Public Radio's *All Things Considered*, *Christian Science Monitor*, *Reader's Digest*, *American Libraries*, *The Art Newspaper*, and *KJO-ABC TV* in San Francisco.

Lectures, roundtables, and PowerPoint's that focused on the results of the HHI abounded on the programs of member association meetings and conferences nationwide as conservators and collection care professionals strategized on how to respond most effectively to *HHI*'s incisive recommendations that:

- Every institution recommit to providing safe conditions for the collections they hold in trust
- Every collecting institution develops an emergency plan to protect its collections
- Every single institution assigns responsibility for caring for collections to members of its staff
- Individuals at all levels of government and in the private sector assume responsibility for providing the support that will allow these collections to survive.

Metrics Matter

Those responsible for preserving America's vast and irreplaceable cultural and historic holdings finally had metrics – numbers and percentages - that could be used to justify grant applications, reallocate institutional operating funds, persuade CFOs, and motivate communities to improve the capacity of museums, historical societies, libraries, archives, and specimen repositories to preserve collections. Data proved to be far more convincing than empirical – and often emotional - observations for swaying decision makers, legislators, and actual stakeholders in the years that followed the release of *HHI*.

Promoting Successful Outcomes

Directly supporting the directives of *HHI* were programs that were subsequently augmented or newly created to promote collection care either directly, through condition assessments and improved facilities, or indirectly, through staff training and education. Many of these successful programs continue to thrive under slightly different iterations and organizational auspices, including the *Conservation Assessment Program*,⁶ *Connecting to Collections*,⁷ and the *Heritage Emergency Task Force*.⁸

⁶ Today, the program is the *Collections Assessment for Preservation (CAP)* program, which provides small and mid-sized museums with partial funding toward a general conservation assessment. CAP is supported through a cooperative agreement between the Foundation for Advancement in Conservation (FAIC) and the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS). <https://www.culturalheritage.org/resources/collections-care/cap>

⁷ Today, the program is *Connecting to Collections Care (C2CC)*, a program designed for all types of small to mid-sized cultural institutions to provide resources, professional development opportunities, and support for caring for collections. The program is administered by the Foundation for Advancement in Conservation (FAIC) with assistance from the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) and private donations. <https://www.connectingtocollections.org/>

⁸ Today, the program, *Heritage Emergency National Task Force (HENTF)*, co-sponsored by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and the Smithsonian Institution, is a partnership of 42 national service organizations and federal agencies. <https://culturalrescue.si.edu/hentf/>

The *Heritage Health Information Survey (HHIS)*

In Fall 2014, Heritage Preservation distributed the *Heritage Health Information Survey (HHIS)* to a sample of nearly 7,000 cultural heritage institutions.⁹ The study, timed to coincide with the tenth anniversary of the *HHI*, was meant to capture data on the current state of preservation and conservation and to study the changes in preservation conditions and practices in the intervening decade. While the *HHIS* survey was modeled on the *HHI* survey, the growth of digital preservation activities at collecting institutions led to the expansion of the survey to include questions about digital preservation. In February 2019, the Institute of Museum and Library Services published, *Protecting America's Collections: Results from the Heritage Health Information Survey*. The report's finding that preservation is part of the mission of the vast majority of U.S. collecting institutions is encouraging. Some progress has been made: 50% more institutions have undertaken collection assessments and the number of organizations with emergency plans has more than doubled. In looking at the big picture, however, too many institutions, especially smaller ones, have no written emergency/disaster plan, nor have they made a significant commitment to preservation through usual indicators such as increased numbers of collection care personnel or bigger collection care allocations included in annual budgets. Hopefully, *Protecting America's Collections*, like *A Public Trust at Risk*, will provide metrics that matter!

Next Steps

The information garnered through the initial 2004 *Heritage Health Index* and its 2014 successor, *Heritage Health Information Survey*, comprises the only available body of reliable data on the state of American collections today. Utilizing the data from the *HHI* as a benchmark, the *Heritage Health Information Survey* concludes that disappointing progress has been made in the face of continuing and serious preservation challenges. The survey's compelling message underscores the importance of continuing, if not expanding, direct, hands-on programs, such as *CAP*, *C2CC*, and *HENTF*, that are specifically designed to reach small to mid-sized cultural institutions.

The year 2024 will soon be here. Who will step up to advance the legacy of Heritage Preservation and provide the practical tools needed to formulate future preservation policies and practice?

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⁹ *Heritage Health Information 2014* was initiated and led by Heritage Preservation in cooperation with the Institute of Museum and Library Services, the National Endowment for the Humanities, the National Endowment for the Arts, the Peck Stacpoole Foundation, the Getty Foundation, the Schloss Family Foundation, and the Samuel H. Kress Foundation. Heritage preservation Board Members included Julie Allen Page, Tom F.R. Clareson, Inge-Lise Eckmann, Debra Hess Norris, Elizabeth Schulte, Margaret Holben Ellis; Director, *Heritage Health Information Survey*, Lesley A. Langa.