The Preservation Self-Assessment Program: A Tool to Aid in Preservation and Conservation Prioritization

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Archivists and other collection managers in smaller institutions must balance a great number of responsibilities, very often encompassing the preservation of collections in their care. While some may have a background and capability in this area, many have only the most basic knowledge of preservation needs. Add this to the fact that many of the collections they care for are mixed formats including not just papers but photographs and other image materials, books, audiovisual recordings, and, now, digital files. The preservation knowledge challenges facing the average archivist are staggering. While some are fortunate enough to work in institutions that employ preservation professionals or conservators, most are not at institutions large enough to afford such positions.

The Preservation Self-Assessment Program (PSAP, psap.library.illinois.edu) is a free, online tool developed through the generous funding of an Institute for Museum and Library Services (IMLS) National Leadership Grant and led by preservation professionals at the University of Illinois Libraries. Conservators, collection care professionals, archivists, and collection managers guided its design and functionalities, collaborating to develop a preservation tool to help their peers better understand the materials under their care and establish preservation priorities. Through guided evaluation of materials, storage/exhibit environments, and institutional policies, the PSAP produces reports on the factors that impact the health of cultural heritage materials and defines the points from which to begin care. The PSAP provides targeted preservation assessment of paper documents, books, photographic and image materials, and audiovisual media. Users perform either item-level or collection-level assessments through sampling, and the PSAP evaluates responses to the assessment to produce prioritized preservation needs, as well as provides textual and image-based educational resources to aid in the identification of different types of materials and their preservation challenges.

**Scope of Materials**

The PSAP was modeled after a successful smaller program, the Audiovisual Self-Assessment Program (AvSAP, also funded by the IMLS), which focuses exclusively on analog audiovisual materials preservation. Broadening the scope of the AvSAP, the PSAP covers the majority of materials found in a modern archives with the exception of digital media, though some rare formats may be omitted. Broadly, the PSAP was developed to evaluate the preservation needs and conditions of the following formats and classes of materials:

- **Audiovisual media**: Film; videotape (open reel, cartridge based, analog, digital); audiotape (open reel, cartridge based, analog, digital); phonograph records; optical media (CD, DVD); grooved cylinders; and wire recordings.

- **Photographic and image materials**: Photographic prints (black and white, color); negatives (glass, film); slides and transparencies (glass, film); daguerreotypes; ambrotypes; tintypes; photomechanical prints; digital prints; and microformats.

- **Paper (bound and unbound)**: Various ink/media on various paper types including documents; books; pamphlets; manuscripts; typescripts; office reprographics (xeroxes, carbon copies, etc.); architectural reproduction (blueprints, diazos, etc.); and more.

**How the PSAP Works**

The PSAP has two main interfaces for users, the Format Identification Guide (FIDG) and the Institutional Assessment tool. The FIDG is a free-standing web resource open to anybody and does not require a logon, but works in concert with the assessment tool to aid users in identifying the format of their collection materials. In it, materials are broken down into broad categories (for instance, for photographic images, this would be photographic prints, cased/direct photographs, negatives, or transparencies). Each individual format within the categories has a page with extensive photographic references, description of the visual appearance of the material, material composition, standard deterioration pathways, historical background, and ideal storage and display recommendations.
The PSAP assessment interface has been designed as a web application that is functional on both PC and Mac platforms and can be used on desktop computers, tablets, and mobile smart phones. All data is stored and backed up at the University of Illinois, which is committed to long-term support of the project. Users request a logon and an institutional affiliation and, once they are logged on, enter information about their institutional practices, repositories (various discrete archives within a larger organization, for instance), the locations where materials are stored or exhibited, their collections, and, last, the individual items within collections.

As institutions, repositories, locations, and resources (collections or items) are created, users are asked to enter limited descriptive information about each of these creations so that they can be identified later. Repositories, locations, and collections are all saved and available to be selected as options for further entries. For collections or individual items, a section of optional descriptive information may be used in place of a nonexistent catalog, inventory, or finding aid, thus also producing searchable (and exportable) descriptive metadata about the materials assessed.

While it is not possible to estimate how much time each evaluation could take a user, as the time needed varies greatly with experience and the complexity of the materials being assessed, the program developers have made every effort to minimize questions to the most critical to evaluate preservation effectively. The project goal is that each item take only a few minutes from start to finish once users are comfortable with the interface and their most common formats.

**Assessment Levels**

Assessment questions are asked at three different levels—institution, location, and resource/item. For each level, once the assessment questions have been completed, users can review the results of their responses by clicking on the “Score Summary” tab for each section, which not only gives the resulting score as calculated by the PSAP, but also shows the weight and score for each question, so users can identify areas where they scored poorly to better enable them to target areas of improvement. Questions at the institutional level focus on policies and practices that have broad influence on preservation, such as collection development policies, disaster planning, and security. The results of a user’s responses at the institutional level do not affect the individual scores and ranking of items assessed, but results can give an institution a better sense of its “preservation savviness” and can help identify larger programmatic areas that could be improved to help better support collection preservation efforts.

The next level of questions focuses on the environment, whether storage or exhibit, where the materials reside.
The Institutional Assessment

Information collected on each location focuses on its temperature and relative humidity controls as well as its disaster response infrastructure such as fire suppression and alarms. Once information is added about a given location, it is saved and available to be linked to from item-level assessments. Scores are also produced for the generalized preservation quality of a given location; however, certain formats may or may not be appropriate for all storage environments, so the score is based only on a generalized aggregate collection scenario.

The Location Assessment

A view of the “top level” help in assessing condition of an ambrotype—more detailed information pertaining to the condition of ambrotypes can be accessed by clicking on the “more information” link

Score Generation

Scores are generated at each of the three levels of assessment: institution, location, and resource. The institutional score is independent; however, the location score does have
an influence on the final resource score. Overall, scores are generated to give a final value between 0 and 100, though scores at either extreme of this range are nearly impossible to attain, and most final scores fall between the values of 40 and 90. The final resource score weighs the condition of an item as half (50%) of the score, the format of the resource as 40%, the location of the resource as 5%, and the temperature and relative humidity of the location are each 2.5% for a total of 100%. The project team developed this weighting of scores to represent the understood balance of the current condition of an object with the inherent vulnerabilities of an individual artifact (format) and the effects of the environment on that particular format (location, temperature, and RH).

Reports
The final output format of the PSAP assessment is a report. The report both numerically and graphically summarizes the assessment performed, including grouping items by collection, if collection-level aggregation was included. For easy sharing, the reports can be easily exported, either individually or all together, into PDF format.

Added Functionalities
Every effort has been made to make this application both user friendly and useful. To that end, several functionalities internal to the program make entering data more simple, and others help share information in the PSAP with other systems. Internally, the PSAP is equipped with a cloning functionality that allows users doing data entry to re-create a record, either with or without the condition assessment, so that data need not be fully re-entered if a group of materials shares many similar characteristics, such as location, collection, date, and format (for instance, a run of compact cassette recordings of a particular event). In addition to cloning, the PSAP also offers the ability to virtually “move” collections or individual resources to a different location. This can be useful in several ways. If a collection is moved to a new location, the PSAP records can be updated en masse, saving time while keeping data current. Also, users can virtually move collections to various locations programmed into the PSAP to see if particular formats or collections are better preserved in one location than in another. Externally, the PSAP has been designed to interface or export to other commonly used collection management tools. For those institutions using ArchivesSpace (www.archivesspace.org), the PSAP has the capability to import EAD-XML files exported from the ArchivesSpace software, thus cutting down on necessary descriptive data entry, most often at the collection level. Unfortunately, at this time, data developed in the PSAP cannot be imported directly into ArchivesSpace; however, data entered into the PSAP can also be exported in a variety of formats (CSV, XML, and JSON) to be utilized in other applications. One export specifically outlined in the user manual is how to
export the PSAP data into CSV and map that information over to import into PastPerfect 5.0.

Additional Resources

Last, while the PSAP project very purposefully does not provide prescriptive next steps toward preservation, the website does offer many helpful resources to let users better understand the application as well as preservation.

In direct support of the application, the PSAP website contains an extensive help page including short tutorial videos, a quick start guide, and a complete user manual. A full bibliography and glossary of terms are also available.

In assisting users to take next steps toward preservation, the PSAP offers a range of Supplementary Guides (presented within the user manual) which offer current advice on topics such as how to select and understand preservation storage materials, when and how to bring in a preservation professional or conservator, finding disaster recovery services, and what grant opportunities might be available for funding preservation projects.

Learning More about the PSAP and the Future of Assessment Programs

If you are interested in learning more about the PSAP, please visit the project website at psap.library.illinois.edu and either create a logon, or feel free to use a pre-established test user logon (logon ID: “TestUser,” and the password: “Password”).

We envision the PSAP as being designed in stages, with the current release being the completion of stage two. We imagine additional modes of the PSAP to potentially include natural history specimens, anthropology/archaeology collections, fine art, textiles, and/or digital media.

Notes

1. The PSAP would not have been possible without the leadership of project staff (Ryan Edge, Amanda Eisenmann, Jamie Wittenberg, and Alex Dolski) and our tireless Advisory Committee members (Jenny Arena and Teresa Martinez, Heritage Preservation; Christa Deacy-Quinn, Spurlock Museum; Sandra Fritz, Illinois State Library; Bill Kemp, McLean County Museum of History; Russell Lewis, Chicago History Museum; Patricia Miller, Illinois Heritage Association; and Anke Voss, Urbana Free Library).

2. Many thanks to all who helped by contributing images to this part of the project, most importantly the Image Permanence Institute, which allowed us to use many of the images from the Graphics Atlas project for the photographic section of the FIDG (graphicsatlas.org).