**Email Archives: Building Capacity and Community**

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# Project Rationale

The email messages that people send and receive leave behind an information and evidence-rich trail of activities, one that can and should be amenable to future historical investigation and interpretation. Over the past few years email preservation has become an increasingly feasible— though not yet routine or common—part of archives and digital preservation work. Both the possibilities and challenges of email archiving are detailed in the Report of the Task Force on Email Archives, which promulgates several preservation pathways, but also recommends significant follow-on work to develop the community’s ability to preserve email for future research use.[[1]](#footnote-1)

While most archivists acknowledge the importance of email, a relatively small number of institutions have made significant progress in preserving it for historical purposes. Some of our most well-respected records management and archives programs have suffered criticism for their seeming inability to better corral this troublesome resource.[[2]](#footnote-2)

A subset of repositories have tentatively wrestled with the responsibility to preserve it for the long term and launched some initial experiments, including institutions like Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis and Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi.[[3]](#footnote-3) Similarly, the vast majority of participants in a webinar that Kate Murray and I provided to the DLF Museum Archivists cohort on Feb 2, 2019 noted that they are simply acquiring and parking email accounts in their native export formats, as unprocessed and inaccessible collections. [[4]](#footnote-4) These records await future policy development and the implementation of specific processing strategies.

A smaller number of archives have developed policies, implementation strategies, procedures, tools and services that promise to provide future access to email. For instance, Harvard University Archives is developing long-term access pathways in accordance with University Policy.[[5]](#footnote-5) The US National Archives spells out its guidance in a series of helpful resources.[[6]](#footnote-6) Similarly, participants in the Council of State Archivists/National Historical Publications symposium (institutions including North Carolina State Archives, the Vermont State Archives, and the Massachusetts State Archives) noted the particular policy and tool challenges that they are confronting.

A handful of institutions provide access to fully appraised, arranged, described and processed sets of email archives. Examples include Stanford University Archives, the Smithsonian Institution Archives, Harvard University, and the Virginia State Library; their efforts are documented in *Future of Email Archives* Report.

As the *Future of Email Archives* report notes, information professionals such as archivists and records managers can choose from a range of tools, both open source and commercial, to complete the tasks of appraisal, disposal or acquisition, arrangement, description, migration, storage, and discovery. That said, the staff of archival repositories will typically need to chain several tools and processing steps together into custom workflows, a cumbersome process at best. Several potential workflows are detailed in the report, and many more are possible. Since email emerges from multiple sources and systems, and since archives and libraries use many different descriptive and preservation databases, which would preserve metadata about email and the email records themselves, this situation is unlikely to change anytime soon.

No single tool or even set of tools will meet all email processing needs. Accordingly, the archives and library community as a whole will benefit greatly if a wider range of institutions are able to engage with the tools that currently exist, by developing workflows, interoperable systems, metadata pathways, and archival package structures, then sharing the results in forums that will help others build a similar capacity to preserve email. A true community of email preservation is only beginning to emerge, and this proposal seeks to foster capacity within that community. It aims to do this through the following activities: 1) by soliciting proposals, 2) by evaluating them with a peer group (proposed members, who would commit to serve during the project duration, as well as their current positions and project roles, are listed below in the personnel section), and 3) by funding the best projects and the ones likely to have the greatest impact, using a specific set of criteria as noted in the draft call for proposals (Appendix A). Taken as a whole, this work will result in a set of community-defined projects that pick up and implement recommendations found in the *Future of Email Archives* report, as well as other potential ideas that build upon the report.

# Project Overview

To help address the challenges noted above, the University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign Library will administer an email archives regrant program, having three goals:

* Supporting specific process improvements to increase email archives tool functionality and interoperability.
* Developing capacity within communities of practice, so that archives, museums and libraries can establish a baseline of email acquisition, processing, discovery, and delivery services that is suitable to a wide range of archival repositories.
* Highlighting specific processed email collections, particularly those having widespread public interest, to demonstrate the value of email-based research as a public good.

Overall, the program will illustrate and build capacity for archives to process and provide access to email using community-supported tools, while also demonstrating the value of email collections for humanities, social science, or other research.

Rather than focusing on a few large grants, the program will fund projects of $25,000 to no more than $100,000 dollars, seeking to develop a broad community of institutions that have developed expertise in email archiving, in using existing tools, and in sharing that knowledge back to the communities to which they belong and to the archives/library profession as a whole. Grants will be evaluated and funded based on grant selection criteria included in the draft call for proposals (Appendix A), which reflects the extent to which the projects speak to the three program goals listed above.

By funding a number of smaller projects and by aligning those projects with the recommendations laid out in the report of the Task Force on Technical Approaches to Email Archives, the regrant program will move the community much closer to the desired state, where email archiving is a systematic and expected institutional function of archival repositories. At the same time, it is projected that the regrant program would also fund a small number of pilot projects whose results are a bit more speculative in nature, but which also seek to build the capacity for the archives community to add new features and functionality to the existing suite of email archiving tools. In addition, project staff including the PI, co-PIs and project assistant plan to coordinate closely with staff from the University of North Carolina, who are leading the RATOM project.[[7]](#footnote-7) It is possible if not likely that institutions not formally part of that project may wish to use, test, or implement some of the tools being developed or tested as part of that grant project, since it is bringing forward recommendations in the report for the appraisal and processing email.

Specifically, the proposed regrant program will include the following elements:

1. **Regrant funding pool**, provided by the Andrew W Mellon Foundation to the University of Illinois Library. This pool of $700,000 would fund projects that speak to the three goals listed above and will be regranted by the University of Illinois to applicants whose projects are selected by a peer advisory body, following a competitive review process.
2. **An advisory committee,** which would meet intermittently and via teleconference. The advisory board will help refine the call for proposals, solicit and encourage applications to the regrant program, and serve as a peer review and advisory body regarding the applications. The advisory committee members would be provided a modest honorarium, to recognize the value of their contribution to the project.
3. **Project support**. The PI will employ an Email Archives Community Fellow to support the project and re-grantees, as described in more detail in the personnel section of this proposal.
4. **Call for proposals.** A specific call for proposals will be released in two stages, in the early spring first year and early spring in the second year. These would allow grants to be disbursed over two grant cycles, and grants would last from 12-30 months, including reporting, with projected grant start dates in the fall of 2020 and the fall of 2021.
5. **Application Review.** All grant applications developed for and submitted to the program would be subjected to a thorough review process, comprising resubmission review, two levels of peer review (including one blind review), and award decision making. The process will comprise these specific steps, taken during each grant cycle:
   1. Pre-submission: Project staff including the PI, co-PIs and graduate fellow will offer preliminary review and comment on the proposals.
   2. Post submission, stage one: Each grant application will be reviewed by two members of the advisory board as well as one subject matter expert from off the board. Written comments as well as scores will be provided. The Project fellow will aggregate all comments and scores, for distribution to the entire advisory committee.
   3. Post submission, stage two: The most competitive grants from each cycle will undergo a secondary ranking process. Every advisory committee member will read the grant applications, as revised after stage one comments have been incorporated by the proposers. The committee rank that grants and participate in a facilitate discussion, via conference call.
   4. Award Decision: Based on the ranking process, the PI and graduate fellow will recommend specific grant allocation awards and amounts. The final list will be reviewed and approved by the advisory board.
6. **Travel**. A modest amount of annual support is requested to promote the program and results at conferences. This funding will also help the project assistant become more deeply embedded into the digital library/archives community and to present project research.
7. **Dissemination**. The project will include notable efforts to expand the email archives community, and to increase the capacity for additional institutions (i.e. those not directly funded) to implement email preservation workflows. These include the following factors:
   1. Re-grantees will be required to undertake their own dissemination efforts and will be encouraged to do so with funding through the regrant process.
   2. The University of Illinois will develop and maintain a project website.
   3. The Project Assistant and PI will undertake a modest amount of travel to promote the grant opportunity and the project results.
   4. During year four of the grant, we will organize and promote an email archives symposium (to be held at the University of Illinois or another suitable location, such as Library of Congress), at which grantees can showcase their work, and at which other parties interested in email archives can also present their work and participate in discussion. A draft agenda is provided in Appendix D.
8. **Assessment**. Working closely with the project assistant and University of Illinois Library Assessment staff, the PI will develop assessment mechanisms (such as surveys, interview scripts, and sustainability checklists) The assessments will focus on two related matters: First, a rubric will be used to assessing the results of interim reports and progress toward grant completion. These assessments will provide the individual project PIs and staff interim feedback and help them fine tune projects midway through their grants, to make sure they are aligned with the overall program objectives that are noted above. Second, the overall regrant project will include a self-evaluation of progress within the email archiving community. Working under the PI’s supervision and direction, the project fellow will assess the current capacity and progress of email preservation in the archives and libraries. An open access version of the study will be included in the final report and project website, and will be discussed among stakeholders at the symposium, before being finalized and submitted to peer reviewed journal, such as *American Archivist*, for potential publication.

# Project Organization

The project will be led and administered by the Library at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

*Project PI – Christopher Prom*

The regrant program will be directed by Chris Prom, Associate Dean for Digital Strategies at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign Library. Chris was co-chair of the Task Force on Technical Approaches to Email Archives and author of the Digital Preservation Coalition Technology Watch Report, *Preserving Email*. (A second edition of that report was recently released for DPC member-only preview and will be widely available in November 2019). As PI of the project, Chris will be assisted and supported by other Faculty and Staff in the Library and University, as well as by a project fellow. He will be responsible for the following activities related to this grant:

* Overseeing grant operations and budget
* Drafting and refining call for proposal, grant evaluation criteria, and other key project documents
* Directing the work of the project assistant
* Overseeing grant review process and work of the peer review/advisory group.
* Communicating grant funding decision and managing grantee relationships.
* Overseeing grant monitoring, reporting, and dissemination.

*Co-PI’s*

Project co-PI’s, drawn from faculty and staff at the University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign, will assist with pre-submission review of grant applications, bringing their subject matter expertise to bear on proposed grants, and helping applicants to shape stronger applications for evaluation during the post-submission review process. In addition, they will review and provide feedback regarding grant materials, such as the call for proposals, grant evaluation rubric, and symposium agenda/program. Finally, they will help promote the grant opportunity and outcomes in their specific stakeholder communities.

*Email Archives Fellow/Assistant*

The email archives fellow will be a 20-hour per week graduate employee, appointed with a nine- month contract and provided both a monthly stipend and an in-state tuition waiver. (The waiver will be provided as an in-kind contribution by the University of Illinois and no Foundation funds are requested for this waiver.) Given the length of the grant, at least two and possibly three individuals will hold this position in a sequential fashion. In addition, a modest amount of funding is requested for summer hourly pay, at a reduced level of 10 hours per week for ten weeks, so that momentum is not lost over the summer months and project support can continue for grantees.

A draft job description is provided in appendix B. The assistant would help develop and administer with the call for proposals, develop a project website, promote the funding opportunity, support the proposal evaluation process, conducting project research, and reporting the results of the projects to the community. The project assistant would also support the Principal Investigator’s work on the project, conducting research regarding email archives issues and workflows. In recruitment, the project PI will would target students who are engaged in the dual MA/MLS public history program, making a particular and noted effort to employ a student who would increase the diversity of the profession.

*Peer Advisory Committee*

As noted in the activities section, I propose to recruit an advisory committee of ten non-Illinois archivists, digital preservationists, historians, and information scientists. This group will be diverse (by gender, race, region and professional affiliation) and will function as a group of subject matter experts in email, digital humanities, use of email collections (e.g. by historians), in project management, and in digital preservation/processing. The group will advise on the development of project materials and serve as a peer review body for the submitted proposals, providing advice to the project PI. Each advisory committee member would be provided a modest honorarium to acknowledge their contribution to the project, payable in two installments, at the conclusion of the peer review processes in year one and again at the end of year two peer review.

The group will include a mix of people both with some experience with email archiving and digital preservation, along with these representing managerial and line experience in the archival and library professions. It is my belief that such a group will allow for a much more dynamic peer review process than if the project were to rely only on subject matter experts from the email archives community. By drawing on a group that includes practicing historians, managers of special collections units, processing archivists, digital preservation staff, we will be able to judge the relative value of projects across the entire range of activities that need to be addressed in developing a true community of practice for email archiving. For example, the group includes generalists well placed to assess projects that attend to baseline repository needs, as opposed to the more advanced functionalities that might be desired by the specialist or advanced email archives implementors.

This approach is particularly important because many archives are acquiring email collections but have not yet streamlined their management in existing workflows for the management of digital collections, within their broader institutions and the user communities. When email processing is integrated alongside existing workflows, archives and libraries will be in a better position to integrate more advanced email processing techniques, such as the application of machine learning or entity extraction, to enhance the discoverability of materials in email collections.

# Schedule of Activities

*Year One (2020)*

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Month | Activities | Responsible Party |
| January | Hire fellow, welcome advisory team  Launch project website. Begin refining project documents such as call for proposals and grant evaluation rubric. | PI  Graduate Fellow, reviewed by PI |
| February | Distribute draft call for proposals, rubric, project website to Advisory Team and PIs  Project kickoff meeting (review grant objectives, call for proposals and evaluation criteria).  *PI, Graduate Fellow, Advisory Committee*  Incorporate feedback to documents.  Release call for proposals. Promote program at relevant conferences such as IDDC, as well as on listservs and social media. | Graduate Fellow  Everyone (led by PI)  PI and Fellow  PI and Fellow |
| March-May | Publicize call for proposals.  Provide pre-submission feedback to potential applicants | Fellow  PI and co-PIs (with support from Fellow |
| May 30th | Final grant proposals due (round one) | Applicants |
| June-July | Coordinate stage one review process  Complete stage one review rubrics  Hire or rehire project assistant | PI and Fellows  Co-PI’s and advisory board  PI |
| August 1 | Evaluations due for stage one ranking via rubric | Advisory board |
| September | Compiled reviews and rubrics sent to advisory committee for second-level review  Conference call to discuss results and conduct secondary review | Fellow  PI, fellow, advisory board |
| Throughout fall | Promote program at relevant conferences such SAA, iPRES, etc. as well as on listservs and social media. | PI and Fellow |
| Oct 1 -15  Oct 30 | Finalize recommendation and transmit to board; solicit feedback, and make adjustments  Final results communicated to applicants, for grants to | PI and Fellow  PI and Fellow |
| November to December | Coordinate grant logistics with awardees and University Library business office; announce awards on project website.  Transfer funds to awardees for Jan 1 subaward start | Fellow  Library Business Office |

*Year Two (2021)*

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| *Month* | Activities | Responsible Party |
| January | Year Two Project Kickoff Meeting  Refine project documents such as call for proposals and grant evaluation rubric, for year two awards | PI  Graduate Fellow |
| February- April | Release and Publicize call for proposals, year two..  Promote program at relevant conferences such as IDDC, as well as on listservs and social media.  Provide pre-submission feedback to potential applicants; | PI  PI and Fellow  PI and co-PIs (with support from Fellow |
| April 15 | Second Round: Final Proposals Due | Applicants |
| April - May | Coordinate stage one review process  Complete stage one review rubrics | PI and Fellows  Co-PI’s and advisory board |
| May 30th | Evaluations due for stage one ranking via rubric; | PI and advisory board |
| June -July | Compiled reviews and rubrics sent to advisory committee for stage two review  Conference call to discuss results and conduct stage two review | Fellow  PI, fellow, advisory board |
| Throughout fall | Promote program at relevant conferences such SAA, iPRES, etc. as well as on listservs and social media. | PI and Fellow |
| July 15  August 1 | Finalize recommendation and transmit to board; solicit feedback, and make adjustments  Final results communicated to applicants, for second year grants | PI |
| September to December | Coordinate grant logistics with awardees and University Library business office; announce awards on project website.  Transfer funds to awardees for September 1 or Oct 1 subaward start date | PI, fellow  Library  Business Office |

*Year Three (2022)*

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| *Month* | Activities | Responsible Party |
| January 10 | Interim Report Due, first cycle grants | Sub-awardees  Graduate Fellow |
| January -Feb | Review interim reports and develop feedback | Graduate Fellow, assisted by PI |
| March | Post narrative section of interim second cycle reports to website and send feedback to sub awardees  Report project results at appropriate conferences | PI and Fellow  Sub-awardees, PI, Fellow |
| April -May | Begin Planning Capstone event (reserve dates and facilities, etc) for spring 2022. | Graduate Fellow |
| June-August | Begin drafting email archives research article (community assessment) | PI and Fellow |
| *Throughout fall* | Promote program at relevant conferences etc. as well as on listservs and social media, blogs etc.  Continue Planning for Symposium, develop website and promote events  Continue research and drafting research article (community assessment) | Sub-awardees, Fellow, PI  Fellow  Fellow and PI |
| *Oct 10* | Interim Report due, second-cycle subawards | Awardees |
| October - November | Review interim reports, second cycle and develop feedback | Graduate Fellow, assisted by PI |
| December | Post narrative section of interim first cycle reports to website and send feedback to sub awardees  Submit interim report to Andrew W. Mellon Foundation | PI and Fellow  PI |

*Year Four (2023)*

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| *Month* | Activities | Responsible Party |
| January – April | Continue planning for and promote symposium. Accept registrations and coordinate logistics (site, hotel, travel). | Graduate Fellow |
| January 10 | Finals Reports due, first cycle subawards | Awardees  Graduate Fellow |
| January -Feb | Review Final Reports, first cycle subawards | Graduate Fellow, assisted by PI |
| March | Post narrative section of final reports, first cycle, to website  Report project results at appropriate conferences  Circulate draft of research article (community assessment) for discussion at symposium | PI and Fellow  Awardees, PI, Fellow  PI and Fellow |
| April | Hold Symposium | Graduate Fellow, PI, advisory committee, awardees, others |
| June-August | Finalize email archives research article (community assessment) | PI and Fellow  Co-PI’s and advisory board |
| *Throughout fall* | Promote program at relevant conferences etc. as well as on listservs and social media, blogs etc.  Submit research article to peer-reviewed journal  Begin writing final grant report | Sub-awardees, Fellow, PI  Fellow  Fellow and PI |
| *Oct 10* | Interim Report dues second cycle subawards | Awardees |
| October - November | Review final reports and post to website | Graduate Fellow, assisted by PI |
| December | Submit final grant report to Andrew W. Mellon Foundation | PI and Fellow |

# Outcomes and Benefits

This project is expected to have several tangible and immediate outcomes. Most obviously, it will fund practical work to preserve email at a wide range of institutions. At an average projected grant of $50,000, 14 projects would be supported. As these institutions develop increased comfort with email processing and preservation, using and refining the tools and techniques described in the *Future of Email Archives* report, they will begin to more fully shape out the community of practice described in that report.

During the terms of these projects, this work will benefit the archives community and its users in several tangible ways. First, the Future of Email Archives Report recommends that specific tool improvement and testing be undertaken. As such, the tools described in the report will be more deeply tested and refined by the grantees. In addition, work will be undertaken by grantees to chain tools together in new and valuable ways, as email processing workflows are developed, tested, and refined in specific circumstances. This work will improve email preservation and access pathways within the archival community.

In addition, we anticipate that grantees will propose modest refinement and improvements to existing email archiving tools. Through the grant making process, institutions will suggest specific enhancements that might be built into the next generations of email archiving software. For example, an institution might propose to enhance the ability of a specific tool to output emails in PDF format, containing additional metadata that will help users better judge the authenticity of the messages contained in the email archives. Similarly, an awardee might propose a project to improve the interoperability of two specific email archiving tools. The regrant program does not seek to predetermine which tools are worthy of improvement or support. Instead, the grant application, development, review, and reporting process will allow the community of archivists, librarians, and museum curators collectively determine the next generation of email archiving tool functionality and workflow design.

The project will also benefit the end users of archives and special collections. To date, relatively few collections of processed email have been made available in archives. By placing a particular emphasis on the processing and access of specific email collections, end users will be provided access to more such collections.

The final, and perhaps most significant outcome, will be the wide dissemination of results. This will take several forms. First, the University of Illinois will publish both the interim and final reports from the grantees on the project website, and in our institutional repository, IDEALS. Second, we will encourage grantees to report results to their own communities, both in the form of research presentations, and in journal articles or proceedings. Again, these will be promoted through the project website. In addition, we will host the symposium, and report results from it. And finally, the Project PI will direct the graduate fellow in researching and writing an email archives community assessment, which will describe any analyze the current state of email archiving, using both a survey and interview methodology. The asssessmet will be reported to the community via a peer review journal, in the University of Illinois institutional repository, and via conferences, setting the stage for the next phases of email archiving work in the library, archives, and museum community.

# Sustainability

All immediate outcomes, project documentation, and reports will be preserved by the University of Illinois Library, both on a project website, and in IDEALS, our institutional repository. We will develop a project website, to be hosted as part of the University of Illinois Library. The website will include and incorporate the following elements at a minimum. It will also be preserved over the long term as part of our overall digital infrastructure, as well as submitted to Archive-IT and cataloged by the project assistant, as part of our general web archiving program. The project website will comprise, at minimum the following materials

* Calls for Proposals, evaluation rubrics, and promotional materials
* Blog for project staff and grantees to promote projects
* Interim and final reports from subgrantees; links to project sites and to archival copies of those sites submitted to Internet Archive
* Any other project materials (i.e. workflow diagrams, contributed code) that will be useful to email archiving community.
* Interim and Final Reports to the Mellon Foundation
* Open Access copies of the research paper

In addition, we propose that all of the content form the Email Archives Task Force project site (<https://emailarchivestaskforce.org>) be moved from its current location to the University of Illinois, as well as submitted to Archive-IT via the University of Illinois subscription account. This will provide preservation and sustainability of that resource as well.

As noted in the draft evaluation process/rubric (Appendix B), each of the individual projects that are proposed will also be assessed for its long term sustainability. In addition, each project will be required to report on its sustainability, in both the interim and final reports that the grantees submit.

1. Task Force on Technical Approaches for Email Archives, “The Future of Email Archives” (New York: Council on Library and Information Resources, August 2018), https://www.clir.org/pubs/reports/pub175. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. David Bearman, Review of “Office of the Secretary: Evaluation of Email Records Management and Cybersecurity Requirements, ESP-16-03,” *The American Archivist* 80, no. 2 (September 1, 2017): 459–62, https://doi.org/10.17723/0360-9081-80.2.459. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. These attempts can struggle in the absence of policy frameworks and tools to meet user expectations. Angela White, “Politics, Transparency, and Email: Lessons Learned from Trying to Preserve the Historical Record,” *BloggERS!* (blog), June 21, 2016, <https://saaers.wordpress.com/2016/06/21/politics-transparency-and-email-lessons-learned-from-trying-to-preserve-the-historical-record/>; Alston Coburn, “Adventures in Email Wrangling: TAMU-CC’s EPADD Story,” *BloggERS!* (blog), September 5, 2017, <https://saaers.wordpress.com/2017/09/05/adventures-in-email-wrangling-tamu-ccs-epadd-story/>. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. “DLF Museums Cohort - February  Wednesday, Feb 27, 2019, Agenda and Minutes,” accessed May 31, 2019, <https://docs.google.com/document/d/19tEwdBzucSsrLvXAki5PknNyBplEq8veXUvVY9Q6uvE/edit>. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Alice Prael, “Archiving Email: Electronic Records and Records Management Sections Joint Meeting Recap,” *BloggERS!* (blog), September 12, 2017, <https://saaers.wordpress.com/2017/09/12/archiving-email-electronic-records-and-records-management-sections-joint-meeting-recap/>. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. “Email Management,” United States National Archives, August 15, 2016, <https://www.archives.gov/records-mgmt/email-mgmt>. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. “Review, Appraisal, and Triage of Mail,” accessed May 17, 2019, http://ratom.web.unc.edu/. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)