2003 Sustainability Standing Committee Survey
Summary, Observations & Next Steps
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Introduction

During the Spring-Summer, 2003, a taskforce[1] within the NSDL Sustainability Standing Committee (SSC) developed and deployed a survey instrument. Its purposes were:
1) To educate projects on sustainability topics
2) To establish a baseline of data on project-level sustainability activities
3) To identify projects' sustainability information needs

Taskforce work occurred in two phases – a pilot test phase, in which an initial survey instrument was developed and tested by SSC members, and the full implementation phase, which involved further revising the instrument, soliciting comments from a review committee[2] and distributing the survey across NSDL for completion. Though the survey was not validated, the collaborative nature of its development allowed for a broad range of perspectives and experiences to influence design. Due to the distributed nature of the SSC taskforce and NSDL projects, the survey was disseminated online. Visit the SSC website (http://sustain.comm.nsdlib.org) to view the methodology, full survey and results.[3]

Summary

The 2003 SSC survey had a 41% response rate with 42 sets of responses included in the final results after being validated. The majority of respondents had either Collections (64%) or Services (26%) projects. As noted in Tables 1 and 2, the majority of respondents have a sustainability plan (n=36) for their short- to mid-term projects (n=30). 62% of respondents ranked their expertise as high in supporting 2-3 year projects, while 33% reported high expertise in supporting a project for more than 5 years through diverse funding sources.

Program Track	1 to 2 years (short term project)	3 to 5 years	6 to 10 years	Over 10 years (long term project)	Totals
Collections	12	7	2	6	27
Core Integration	-	-	-	1	1
Services	3	5		3	11

[1] The taskforce was led by Sarah Giersch and David McArthur. Members included: Laura Bartolo, Paul Berkman, Rachael Bower, Howard Burrows, Flora McMartin and Kate Wittenberg.
[2] Review committee members: Brandon Muramatsu, Kaye Howe, Susan Jesuroga, Marcia Mardis and Carol Terrzzi
[3] Special thanks goes to Rachael Bower and the Internet Scout Project for the use of their Zoomerang tool for survey delivery and analysis, to the SSC members who participated in survey testing and to Lee Zia, NSDL Program Director, for supporting the survey delivery process with reminder communications.

Targeted research	3	-	-	-	3
Totals	18	12	2	10	42

Table 1: Anticipated life of NSDL projects (by funding track)

Program Track	Yes, and I am implementing the plan.	Yes, but I haven't begun to implement the plan.	No, I don't have a plan.	No, I don't need a plan	*Totals*
Collections	15	8	2	2	27
Core Integration	1	-	-	-	1
Services	6	4		1	11
Targeted research	2	-	-	1	3
Totals	24	12	2	4	42

Table 2: Projects who have a plan to ensure NSDL project will be funded until completed or until it reaches financial stability (by funding track)

While respondents were almost evenly divided (Table 3) about whether the sustainability of their project was tied to the sustainability of NSDL, 68% indicated that they would continue to seek funding from the NSDL program. Other potential funding sources that ranked highly were institutions (universities or companies) – 41% and NSF programs, other than NSDL – 31%. However, respondents did not think the direct sales of products or services or funding from philanthropic organizations were viable funding sources, noting that, "Selling software in the digital library area is not a realistic way to fund an NSDL collection project. …We don't want to become yet another publisher trying to make money off authors."

Program Track	Yes	No	Don't Know	*Totals*
Collections	12	11	4	27
Core Integration	1	-	-	1
Services	3	7	1	11
Targeted research	2	1	-	3
Totals	18	19	5	42

Table 3: Respondents who think their project's sustainability is tied to the sustainability of NSDL (by funding track)

Overall, 93% of respondents were interested in learning more about creating sustainable projects, and 60% were willing to share their sustainability expertise or plans with other NSDL projects.

On an operational level, respondents noted that they or someone on their project had *some* expertise in conducting market research and writing and implementing business plans. Of high interest, though was learning specifically about ensuring project longevity and building a community of users (Table 4), though not necessarily in the context of the traditionally business-oriented approaches of business plans and market research. One respondent commented, "I'm not sure a business plan is what is needed. That does not help when seeking grant support. We need a wider range of assistance - negotiating, developing partnerships with a set of professional societies, etc. … The real point is how to extend the project life! All the

other topics should be cast in terms of how they help in that." Another respondent noted the tension between completing project work and sustaining the project itself. Specifically, "Community building [is] a cornerstone of our sustainability efforts. However, our project funds were cut and we've had to concentrate on collection building."

Respondents were most interested in learning about sustainability topics at tutorials during the NSDL Annual Meeting or at 1-2 day workshops, though they commented that sessions at previous meetings have primarily addressed problems, not solutions and that the large number of parallel sessions at meetings makes it difficult to attend additional sessions.

Topic	Interest Level
Ensuring my project's longevity beyond its current NSDL funding	71%
Building a community of users	64%
Identifying alternative sources of funding	57%
Preservation of your digital collections or services	52%
Fund raising strategies	48%
Writing a successful business plan	36%
Conducting market research	36%
Protecting the intellectual property of your project	31%
Digital Rights Management	24%

**Table 4: Ranked list of respondents' level of interest in
learning about specific sustainability topics**

When asked what aspects of their NSDL project they'd like to sustain beyond the current period of NSF funding, respondents (n=38) listed specific collections, services and tools and cited such reasons for the continued longevity of projects as: wanting to meet the needs to end-users; wanting to adapt and update materials based on new information or educational standards; and, feeling that NSF's previous investment in the project would be wasted if the work were not continued.

There were 37 responses to the question of "What are the plans for your project if it receives no further NSDL funding?" For the most part, these mirror the responses, noted above, about seeking funding from other NSF programs, such as CCLI, or from an institution. Specific institutions range from other government agencies, state-supported institutions, professional societies or other digital libraries, such as the California Digital Library or DLESE. Most respondents seemed to be in an "exploratory" phase and were not prepared to immediately transition away from NSDL funding.

For the most part, respondents (n=19) were positive about merging project work into NSDL, though offered the following comments:
- We'd love to merge with NSDL as much as possible. But we've had very little encouragement for this in spite of many offers.
- How [do we] reconcile commercial interest of participating societies and open access at university level?
- We… need to work to keep our special features from being sheared off in the merging process since merging with NSDL so far has meant extracting catalog records.

▪ Because the users of the materials in these collections identify fairly strongly with the sponsoring organizations, this connection between resources and organization probably needs to be carefully maintained.

Observations

➢ Projects are still uncertain about their role in relation to NSDL in terms of 1) whether future project funding is tied to continued NSDL funding, 2) how or when to merge projects into NSDL, 3) what role NSDL should have in supporting or sustaining projects and 4) the extent and type of education activities NSDL should provide about sustaining projects. Since this survey wasn't focused on NSDL sustainability, it's difficult to infer what the NSDL-wide response to project uncertainties should be. Project-level barriers to continuing exploration of these issues includes short funding cycles and budget cuts that fund few activities other than project work.

➢ Absent NSDL-level direction, projects are making their own sustainability plans. It will be interesting to note as individual projects and NSDL as a whole move forward, if projects will continue to align themselves with NSDL, regardless of funding or whether projects will have to change their scope, in order to meet other funding requirements, to the point that it doesn't make sense to be a part of NSDL.

➢ Many respondents noted ongoing relationships with professional societies as a potential distribution mechanism, especially for content, and as a potential source of funding. This would make sense in part because most professional societies have a pre-existing infrastructure, from metadata and technical standards to quality control and preservation mechanisms, that removes many barriers to merging and provides much potential for sustaining parts of project work in which respondents are invested. By comparison, the NSDL infrastructure, both technical and organizational, is still evolving and often requires projects to modify services or content to the point that some respondents perceived that the value of their project was being compromised by conforming to be part of NSDL.

➢ The business-plan approach to sustainability, with accompanying words like "market analysis" or "due diligence", was not on the radar of most respondents. In fact, there was an undertone of antipathy towards "productizing" project research. This could be due, in part, to an awareness of what the market will, or will not bear. This could also be due to unfamiliarity with, or a general lack of interest in, the process of systematically exploring the business potential of projects. There is nothing inherently wrong with this perspective, given that research requires a completely different skill set from sales and delivery; however, this could limit the extent to which various sustainability options are explored or incorporated into project activities.

Next Steps

The data from this survey will be useful to several groups across NSDL:

➢ The SSC will use the data to plan committee activities for the upcoming year, potentially including a workshop on project-level sustainability issues. Additionally, they will review the process of deploying a Sustainability Standing Committee survey annually to build on this initial baseline data.

➢ The Core Integration team will receive a copy of the survey results and this summary to inform them of project concerns and activities.

➢ And, the Collaboration Finder project will be able to add sustainability information to specific project profiles, thereby providing all NSDL projects with an opportunity to leverage others' knowledge and experience in sustaining projects.