IASSIST Strategic Plan, 2004-2009

by

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I. Introduction: An Overview of the Planning Process

This document is the product of a year-long effort to produce an updated five-year Strategic Plan for IASSIST (the previous plan dates back to 1988). The three main strategic directions that this document proposes for IASSIST are **Education, Outreach, and Advocacy.** Information about each key point in the planning process has been documented by way of appendices at the end of this document. Many people have been involved in this planning process, including the members of the Strategic Plan Action Group (Bill Block, chair; Katherine McNeill-Harman, Melanie Wright, Chuck Humphrey, Joel Herndon, and Ron Dekker) and the current members of the IASSIST Administrative Committee (AC), particularly Ann Green, current IASSIST President.[1]

The project began with the Action Group reviewing the current state and environment of social science data (the "planning environment"), as well as a review of the history and organization of IASSIST. The IASSIST membership then gave direction and focus at the outset of the actual planning process through a survey in July and August of 2003. This survey asked IASSIST members about the organization's strengths and weaknesses, as well as issues the membership felt the organization would likely face in the next five years.

In October 2003 the Administrative Committee met with members of the Strategic Plan Action Group to discuss the results of the member survey and brainstorm and rank potential strategic directions for IASSIST for the next five years. The Strategic Plan Action Group took the results of this meeting and produced a preliminary draft of potential strategic directions for further AC consideration. The AC then discussed these issues via email in January 2004, which produced the three strategic directions that form the heart of this plan: Education, Outreach and Advocacy.

It should be noted that the January 2004 online discussion with the AC did more than just help the planning group focus on the final three strategic directions in the plan. AC members encouraged the Action Group to focus on new directions while providing flexibility and maintaining the aspects of the organization that have made it successful thus far. Moreover, they stressed the importance of focusing on a core of activities in order to create a plan achievable by the organization. One AC member summed up these points by writing:

> "I've been somewhat silent on this subject because I am leery of IASSIST being locked into going in a direction that pans out in a dead end. More than any other organization I've been associated with, IASSIST gets things done, and on an international level to boot. I almost hate to mess with that formula….
> IASSISTers have always had their antennae tuned to the latest developments, and

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[1] The other members of the Administrative Committee during the planning process were: Margaret Adams, Bo Wandschneider, Sophie Hollaway, Suzette Giles, Louise Corti, Fay Booker, Cindy Severt, Daniel Tsang, Ernie Boyko, Cor van der Meer, Robin Rice, Lisa Neidert, Teressa Trost, and Jane Weintrop

response or initiate progress without an advanced directive. On the other hand, I recognize the need for some kind of 5 year plan…so we don't find ourselves upstream without a paddle."

In short, this planning process has been driven by those that count most…the membership, including those members of IASSIST that have been chosen to lead the organization as members of the Administrative Committee.

II. The Planning Environment

A. Organizational Overview

IASSIST has members from across the globe, with the largest proportions in the United States, Europe, and Canada. Members come from a variety of institutional settings, including universities, national social science data archives and services, government agencies, private companies, and non-profit organizations.

The IASSIST Constitution describes an organization with the following objectives:
- To encourage and support the establishment of local and national information centers for social science machine-readable data.
- To foster international exchange and dissemination of information regarding substantive and technical developments related to social science machine-readable data.
- To coordinate international programs, projects, and general efforts that provide a forum for discussion of issues relating to social science machine-readable data.
- To promote the development of standards for social science machine-readable data.
- To encourage educational experiences for personnel engaged in work related to these objectives.

To accomplish these objectives, IASSIST maintains activities such as committees and groups; conferences, workshops, seminars, and training sessions; publications; and cooperation with other organizations. Two of the organization's most robust activities are the annual conference and the email list. The annual conference provides professional networking and training--as well as social--opportunities, while the email list serves as a vehicle for support and collaboration in members' daily work.

IASSIST's external relations take the form of publications, such as the web site and IASSIST Quarterly (IQ), and advocacy, including statements by the President on topics of concern to IASSIST members and work on metadata standards for social science data, namely the Data Documentation Initiative (DDI). One important activity both internal and external in nature is the work of the Outreach Action Group, which has worked to expand the geographic coverage of IASSIST, including sponsoring conference attendance for individuals from less-represented regions.

IASSIST is an all-volunteer organization governed by an Administrative Committee (AC) with elected officials, Regional Secretaries, and Ex-Officio officers. Many aspects of IASSIST's

activities are undertaken by standing committees and specially-constituted Action and Interest Groups.

B. IASSIST over the Past Decade

While the size of the membership has remained fairly stable over the past decade, changes in the institutional location of data services--from computing centers to academic libraries--have been reflected in the increasing number of library professionals involved in the organization; moreover, some libraries have established relationships between data services and larger digital library initiatives.

As interest in social science data increased around the globe, IASSIST established two programs to broaden its reach and recruit new members. First, the Outreach Action Group was established to support professionals in countries beginning to develop data archives and services. The second initiative was the consideration of new regions within IASSIST (e.g., Africa).

Many of the communication vehicles discussed earlier began in the recent past. The email list was initiated in 1991 while the web site was introduced in 1995. While the IQ is a long-standing print publication, in recent years, the Publications Committee has made an electronic copy in PDF format available on the IASSIST web site. In addition, structural changes in the organization, such as the creation of a Treasury Group with assistant treasurers in the regions, have improved internal communications within IASSIST.

IASSIST members over the past decade also have been managing changes in their work environments. These changes have included developments in metadata, standards, and technology, such as data access via the World Wide Web, the Data Documentation Initiative, and integrated data catalogs. Members also have been struggling with issues of confidentiality, privacy, intellectual property, and the commodification of data. Moreover, they have learned how new frontiers in research data--such as qualitative, historical, and data to be used with geographic information systems (GIS)--share metadata, preservation and access issues long a concern for social science data.[2]

C. Summary of IASSIST Member Survey

In order to plan strategically for IASSIST's activities over the next five years, a survey was sent via email to the membership in July of 2003 asking the following questions:

1) What do you think are the strengths of IASSIST (in areas such as membership, committees, communication, and organizational structure)?
2) What are its weaknesses?
3) What issues or trends in the field do you think IASSIST will be facing in the next five years?
4) What if any specific suggestions do you have for IASSIST's strategic direction over the next five years?

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[2] For a more detailed description of IASSIST over the past decade, see Chuck Humphrey's recent article in IASSIST Quarterly.

Twenty members responded and discussed the following themes:

- **International Scope:** Members found IASSIST's international coverage to be a strength, yet saw the need for more support for regions such as Africa, Latin America, and Asia.
- **Organizational Involvement:** IASSIST was described as a small organization with a lack of bureaucracy and enthusiastic and hard-working volunteers. However, there is concern that a relatively small group of members does most of the volunteer work and new members are not being involved in activities. Some members cited barriers to participation and many felt that new members needed to be better-supported and more actively involved.
- **Relation to Other Areas:** Many respondents described a need to better integrate GIS and other kinds of data, as well as digital library and preservation projects. IASSIST was encouraged to build partnerships with related organizations and to improve its profile and expertise in the eyes of outside groups.
- **Core Activities:** Numerous members found strength in the fact that IASSIST is a focused community of peers across various types of institutions. Valued support comes in the form of networking and information-sharing via the conference, email list, and other activities.
- **Issues and Trends:** Members discussed a variety of emerging trends in areas such as data access, preservation, metadata, professional development, and budgets.

A detailed description of the points made by respondents to the survey is available as a separate report.

D. The External Environment

A number of trends in IASSIST's external environment implicate its strategic directions over the next five years:
- Changes in computer hardware and software and the methods of data access
- Increasing complexity of questions from researchers, policy makers and groups in society
- Increasing complexity and variety of data, such as audio, video, and geographic and qualitative data
- Concerns about the confidentiality of research data and changes in the system of access to restricted data
- Trends in government security to restrict access to public data
- Initiatives toward data literacy in universities
- An integration of numeric data into larger digital library strategies
- The need to recognize the significance of open standards
- Integration of data into libraries' traditional collections
- Growth of services for GIS
- The promise of metadata initiatives for social science data, namely the DDI

E. Discussion with IASSIST Administrative Committee

The IASSIST Administrative Committee was instrumental in helping to focus the planning effort on the key strategic goals of the organization. An initial discussion took place in October 2003 at a joint meeting of the Strategic Plan Action Group and the Administrative Committee. There the results of the Member Survey were reported and the Administrative Committee was asked to

brainstorm and rank potential strategic directions for IASSIST. Further Administrative Committee involvement occurred during an online discussion in January 2004, when the Administrative Committee was asked to select the set of strategic directions from among the universe of ideas brainstormed to date. The result of this electronic conversation produced two competing alternative sets of strategic directions for the Strategic Plan: Strategic Alliances, Education, and Membership; and what ultimately became the three strategic directions at the core of this plan: **Education, Outreach, and Advocacy**. This latter group ultimately was selected in part based on the argument that Membership should not stand alone as a strategic direction, but rather is a means to achieving other directions (such as Education and Outreach).

III. Strategic Directions for the Next Five Years

The three main strategic directions outlined in this plan are Education, Outreach, and Advocacy. Strategies to achieve these directions often overlap due to their integrated nature. For example, some of the strategies under the Education refer to the education of people currently outside of IASSIST, which relates closely to the other strategic directions of Outreach and Advocacy. This level of interconnectedness will foster success because it leads many strategies to serve the goals of multiple directions.

Strategic Direction I: Improve and Expand the Educational Component of IASSIST both Internally and Externally

Discussion:
As an organization, IASSIST has a history of working to educate its members about matters of common professional interest to the social science data community. Traditionally, this education has taken the form of professional development opportunities available in member-initiated and member-taught workshops at the annual IASSIST conference. Yet as the world of social science data grows increasingly complex, staying abreast of new developments in the profession is likely to present an ever-increasing challenge for IASSIST members. As a result, the educational component of IASSIST should expand to encompass far more than the traditionally inward-looking workshop training on new standards, techniques, or technologies. Indeed, a far-reaching and outward-looking educational component to IASSIST can go far in achieving many of the goals outlined in the other areas of this strategic plan. In formulating an expanded educational component to IASSIST, we must be careful to concentrate our efforts on activities that will provide the greatest benefit.

Strategies to achieve this direction include:

1. Continue and Improve Professional Development and Educational Opportunities for IASSIST members
Professional development and education opportunities could take many forms. Following are some examples of specific activities the organization might want to pursue:

A. Conference Enhancement

The professional development opportunities available through workshops at the annual IASSIST conference will likely remain a strong learning component of IASSIST. These workshops are one of the primary avenues by which IASSIST members receive formal training and support in their field. Continuing and improving these workshops should be a primary goal of IASSIST over the next five years. Possible ways to improve or expand IASSIST's internal educational function at conferences include:

- Engage the Education Committee in the planning and delivery of conference workshops;
- Establish through the Education Committee a network of trainers based on a model of peer-to-peer instruction;
- Conduct train-the-trainer workshops in conjunction with the annual conference; and
- Include half-day discussion sessions at the annual conference.

B. New Initatives
IASSIST should work to develop additional opportunities for learning, such as:

- Pursue initiatives targeted at the education and professional development of members in geographic regions not heavily represented in IASSIST (e.g. Africa, Asia, Latin America);
- Develop through the Education and Communications Committees a program of tutorials deliverable over the IASSIST website;
- Create through the Education and Membership Committees a network of mentors and a method of pairing trainees with mentors; and
- Initiate through the Education Committee and Regional Secretaries special training activities outside the annual conference, such as regional workshops on matters of importance to IASSIST members.

2. Reach out to new members through IASSIST education initiatives
Traditionally, IASSIST has mostly been concerned with the education and professional development of its members. One externally oriented component to IASSIST's educational efforts should focus on outreach to potential members. Educational programs that IASSIST might establish to meet its outreach mission could include:

- Develop through the Education and Outreach Committees a coaching/mentoring program for staff members of data archives and related organizations; and
- Establish through the Education and Outreach Committees a leadership program for the management of data archives and related organizations;
- Facilitate through the Membership Committee the exchange of members between established institutions and those new to, or seeking guidance from, the social science data community.

3. Expand IASSIST's Educational Mission to include Advocacy

Another externally oriented component to IASSIST's education mission should focus on the use of education as an advocacy tool. IASSIST has a responsibility to use its expertise to educate and advocate on issues of importance to its membership. Educational programs that IASSIST might establish to meet its advocacy mission could include.

- Organize and deliver through the Education and Outreach Committees training for social science data administrators or policy makers;
- Support and encourage the use and understanding of social science data.

Strategic Direction II: Conduct Outreach to Current and Potential Members of IASSIST and to Related Data Organizations

Discussion:

IASSIST has worked over the years to both serve its core members and expand its involvement in various areas of the world and related fields of data. Yet as the landscape of the data environment becomes more complex, the challenge of how to stay involved with this variety of communities increases. Strategies for managing this complexity can be found in the combined experience and knowledge of IASSIST's members. Therefore, IASSIST must ensure that current and new members are actively engaged in the organization's mission, as well as reaching out to potential members and related data organizations.

IASSIST is international; yet most of its activities are centered in Europe, the United States, and Canada. It must work to expand its presence in other regions, such as Africa, Asia, and Latin America. This goal can be accomplished by working with both membership and related organizations.

Strategies to achieve this direction include:

1. Foster Active Participation in the Organization

While outreach is most often associated with interactions outside of one's organization, a vital resource for IASSIST's future is its membership. However, despite the small size of the organization, it must improve its ability to engage new or less-involved members in its activities. As IASSIST continues to take on new members, it is vital to involve them in order to foster member retention and to assure the continued vitality and growth of the organization. This strategy will encourage communication among the membership and provide more open methods for becoming involved in organizational activities. These efforts could have particular impact in regions in which IASSIST has less of a presence. Specific activities could include:

- Establish through the Education and Outreach Committees a mentor- or peer-support program for new or less experienced IASSIST members, including projects focused on particular areas of the world;

- Develop through the Membership Committee a system by which members throughout the organization can be invited to participate in its activities, such as involvement in committees, action groups, and conference events;
- Institute through the Membership Committee formal activities to welcome newcomers to IASSIST, such as a special event at the conference;
- Sponsor through the Administrative Committee and the Regional Secretaries regional activities, such as workshops on topics of interest or informal networking events.

2. Promotion Campaign to Increase Awareness of and Membership in IASSIST

While the work of IASSIST has wide-reaching implications for researchers in the social sciences and numerous other fields, it has not received wide recognition of its activities. It has been effective in engaging numerous researchers and information and computing specialists, yet has not conveyed its message to many other professionals. Therefore, IASSIST needs to develop a promotion campaign to: increase its membership; improve awareness of its activities; and demonstrate its relevance to a broader base of collaborators across the globe. An assessment of the promotion plans of peer organizations should be done to gather examples of effective campaigns on the part of other small-sized professional associations. Sample activities of a promotion campaign could include:

- Conduct through a special Action Group research into the best practices of networking with peer organizations and implement ideas generated;
- Develop through the Membership Committee promotional materials tailored to IASSIST regions;
- Distribute "IASSIST at a Glance" brochures through the guidance of the Membership Committee at conferences and events;
- Publicize IASSIST in relevant professional publications through the direction of the Membership Committee and according to the priority of the Administrative Committee.
- Through the Outreach Action Group provide financial assistance to support participation in IASSIST activities

3. Collaborations and Strategic Alliances with Related Organizations

In its efforts to expand its influence, IASSIST would best leverage its resources by working in partnership with other organizations committed to the collection, dissemination, and preservation of data. It is vital that we collaborate and benefit from each other's work as we tackle some of the difficult issues that we will be facing in the next five years, such as providing access to an increasingly complex world of data, privacy and confidentiality, metadata standards, and preservation. Collaboration activities could include:

- Seek opportunities through which IASSIST members could participate in other organizations, and vice versa, to exchange information on work practices and important issues (this might include and exchange of conference speakers);
- The Education Committee could lead efforts to partner with related organizations in a variety of regions to run small workshops and/or tack on a day to their conferences and meetings;
- Undertake joint advocacy efforts on topics of mutual interest under the guidance and according to the priority of the Administrative Committee.

Following are selected areas related to the work of IASSIST in which we could seek collaboration: scientific data, geographic information systems, social science research, social science computing and informatics, digital libraries, qualitative data, government statistics, and professional associations of librarians, archivists, and other information professionals.

Strategic Direction III: Engage in Advocacy on Issues of Importance to IASSIST

Discussion:

As an organization seeking to advance research and teaching infrastructure in the social sciences, IASSIST has a long history of advocacy for enhancing and expanding access to data collections. Over the last thirty years, IASSIST members have played a central role in creating the standards used to describe social science metadata, strengthening the networks (both electronic and personal) that support this data, and lobbying for policies designed to ensure that public and private researchers have access to the data necessary for furthering human understanding.

As IASSIST enters its fourth decade, the organization and the data community confront a range of political, social, and economic challenges that are shaping the nature of data-driven research. IASSIST must continue to advocate for enhancing and expanding access to data collections through work on issues of confidentiality, metadata standards, and data access.

Strategies to achieve this direction include:

1. Advocate on Issues of Access to Data

Issues of the commodification of data, personal privacy, and data confidentiality have grown increasingly urgent. In a period in which legal provisions designed to ensure both confidentiality and privacy have not kept pace with rapid technological advances in both data gathering and dissemination, and where data producing organizations are suffering from increasing pressure to recover costs, issues of access to data are particularly salient. Throughout its history, IASSIST has played a crucial role in advocating for open access to data sources in a manner that ensures individual privacy. The current debate about the balance between maintaining confidentiality, protecting data owners' interests, and providing fair access requires that IASSIST take an active role in advocating policy solutions that provide broad and affordable access to research data while safeguarding individual privacy. This role is particularly important in a period in which governments and international organizations are debating laws controlling access to government and international data, and commercial organizations consider data a valuable commodity.

The debate over access to personal information also informs related discussions of data retention and preservation. IASSIST must maintain a voice in each of these dialogues to ensure long term access to data collections that respects individual privacy. Activities in this strategy could include:

- Consider creating an Action Group to collate and produce statements of principals regarding best practices in distributing data containing sensitive information
- Collaborate with organizations to ensure that access to microdata from a variety of sources remains available to the social science community. Many opportunities exist for

IASSIST to play an active role in shaping government policy on data preservation and distribution.

2. Advocate on Issues of Documentation of Data

Metadata standards have long been a central issue for the data community. IASSIST members played an instrumental role in the establishment of the Data Documentation Initiative (DDI) standard and continue to educate its members in the documentation and distribution of data in this format. In the next five years, IASSIST efforts at advocating metadata standards for numeric and qualitative data will expand from developing standards to promoting their implementation in a variety of different communities. In the data community, IASSIST shares responsibility with the DDI Alliance (of which it is a member) of building a dialog with both public and private data providers that stresses the benefits of the DDI as a distribution standard. In the Digital Library community, IASSIST members face the challenge of both educating users and patrons about the DDI standard as well as ensuring that the DDI is well integrated into other library metadata initiatives. Activities in this strategy could include:

- Collaborate with the DDI Alliance to encourage data providers to adopt the DDI standard for data distribution.
- Provide training for data producers eager to support the standard. IASSIST should devote time to increasing the adaptation of the DDI standard by encouraging DDI projects within the organization as well as DDI services that link data producers and distributors.
- Participate in other metadata standards groups to ensure that DDI integration and crosswalks are available

3. Advocate on Issues of Digital Preservation

In many ways, IASSIST has been working on issues of digital preservation since its inception thirty years ago. As the organization's members developed standards for storing, refreshing, and migrating social science data, the computing environment associated with social science research expanded to include a growing body of digital formats and media. Today, as organizations confront the challenge of digital preservation, IASSIST members must once again offer their expertise in preserving social science data while continuing to provide access to these holdings. With over thirty years of experience in preserving digital collections, the IASSIST community has an obligation to share its experiences, exchange knowledge and develop partnerships with others in the larger digital preservation community. These exchanges will not only provide opportunities for IASSIST members to learn about developments in technology and good practice in other digital preservation areas, but also will increase the likelihood that issues regarding social science data are included in today's broad-based digital preservation strategies. Activities in this strategy could include:

- Participate in the planning and implementation of a variety of digital preservation projects.
- Consider creating an Interest Group to monitor and evaluate a variety of digital preservation strategies for social science data. Given the wide range of digital

preservation strategies and the lack of long-term studies on these strategies, this group could identify best practices and strategies for the organization.

- Support the Data Documentation Initiative (DDI) metadata standard as a vendor-independent preservation strategy for social science data.

IV. To Achieve this Plan

The Administrative Committee has created a Strategic Plan Implementation Action Group charged with creating an implementation plan outlining: activities to achieve the strategic directions, methods for assessing progress toward achieving the Strategic Plan, and resources needed for success (which could include funding, volunteer involvement, and possibly hiring staff). The group will be composed of the chairs of IASSIST standing committees and interest groups, the members of the Strategic Plan Action group who drafted the plan, and the IASSIST President and Vice President.