

Incubating New Standards Initiatives: A Report From the First NISO Thought Leader Meeting

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Every product has a lifecycle and standards are no exception. Standards begin with a core group of people who either are working together on a joint project, or several groups working on different solutions to a similar problem. If the project is of significant appeal to a broad community, it might be brought to a standards development organization for formal vetting by a working group. After gathering information about the problem and coming to consensus on an approach a working group develops the standard, which is developed, tested and then published. After final release, the most difficult aspect of standards development takes place: the adoption phase. For standards to be truly effective, people and organizations must accept and implement a standard. As adoption picks up speed, the standard enters into a phase of maturity and maintenance. Our community has long been good at bringing people together and building consensus. Unfortunately in the past, NISO had been more reactive to the activities ongoing in the community rather than proactively working to determine areas where consensus is needed.

It is for this reason that NISO instituted a series of **Thought Leader** meetings to assess topics of concern and areas that are in need of standards development. Rather than waiting for projects to grow organically and eventually come to the consensus process, the goal of organizing these **Thought Leader** meetings is to be proactive in identifying common problems or pain points where standardized approaches may alleviate the issue. By bringing together leaders in specific areas, NISO will work to encourage community engagement with an eye toward collaborative development.

With generous support from The **Andrew W. Mellon Foundation**, NISO's initial series of these meetings will focus on four areas of information exchange: **institutional repository** systems, digital library systems and collections, e-learning systems and the interactions with content, and research data. The goal of these meetings is to recommend specific projects, services, or structures that might benefit from standardization to the **NISO Topic Committees** that manage portfolios of standards.

The process we have outlined is for the **Thought Leader** meeting participants to consider which strategic goals NISO should focus on, and then present their recommendations to the **NISO Topic Committee** that convened the meeting. The **Topic Committee** will then review the recommendations and organize a working group to study the situation in detail with regard to existing projects and initiatives. Following that research, the working group will build upon existing



work and develop a standard solution. The working group may determine that the area is too immature for formal standardization, but there are a variety of lower-level consensus approaches that NISO can undertake including a trial use standard, a recommended practice, or a technical report that explores the issues and potential solutions. The openness of the process and the engagement of the members of NISO will be critical to developing a result that meets the needs of the community.

The process of creating a working group to develop a standard requiring broad consensus is a challenging one. A group of 12-15 people is never going to capture the diversity of the entire community due to the breadth and variety of organizations that are affected. International diversity is an added complexity, since none of the issues we face are unaffected by work in Europe or Asia. Finally, the simple logistics of bringing people together for a face-to-face meeting often prevents participation from people who might otherwise be obvious and willing contributors to the process. It is also important to realize that the **Thought Leader** meetings are meant to be an initial brainstorming stage, rather than an end stage. It would be inappropriate for a group of a dozen participants to declare that the answer to everyone's issues is one particular solution and that the matter be closed when that solution is completed. It is in the process of vetting through the **Topic Committee** and the subsequent approval of the creation of a working group by the Voting Members of NISO that the ideas generated in the **Thought Leader** meetings will be validated or reconsidered.

The first of the **Thought Leader** meetings on the theme of **institutional repository (IR)** systems was held in Washington in February. The group brought together representatives from academic libraries, researchers, repository developers, and search engines to consider issues related to use and application of **IR** systems and what role NISO might play in developing solutions. Much like every other publishing activity, the areas of concerns discussed included copyright and intellectual property issues, provenance, usage, transmission of information, metadata and search, and distribution. While each of these facets is complex enough to have been the focus of its own meeting, the group focused its attention on the pain points that are blocking deeper and wider adoption of **institutional repositories**. The group first identified four general themes for deeper discussion: authoring/workflow solutions, distribution solution, legal considerations, and redefining the concept of **IRs** and the function they serve in scholarly communication. These subjects present

a range of areas that could benefit from consensus, but not all are areas where NISO can play a role, or push forward the state of the art in the community.

The group proposed that a NISO working group that is charged with developing a common deposit mechanism "tool" that would allow **institutional repositories** to capture objects as close to their creation point as possible. The capture of these objects should be part of a larger context that will allow for their exposure across a variety of domains, such as journals, subject matter repositories, and course management systems and publisher manuscript tracking systems. In developing this "tool" the working group should explore the critical issues of exchanging information between repository and other content management/creation tools. The **Thought Leader** meeting participants perceived moving content — be it text, multi-media, datasets, metadata, or any other thing or representation — as among the growing issues that will come to the forefront in the near future. Rather than addressing this larger problem first, the group thought that standardizing a tool for common deposit would be simpler to approach and would provide use-cases and experience upon which to build toward the more complex problem. A complete report of the meeting is available at the NISO Website, www.niso.org.

There has already been some development in the area of common deposit. Among the most recent successes in common deposit is **SWORD, Simple Web-service Offering Repository Deposit**,¹ a JISC-funded project in the UK. The success of this project is an area upon which the proposed NISO project could build, along with a number of other initiatives that have explored this area. The group also noted a number of other similar projects in this area which the **Topic Committee** and the future **Working Group** should consider before it begins work.

Assuming the success of the four planned **Thought Leader** meetings that the **Mellon Foundation** has funded, NISO will continue to utilize this tool for incubating new standards activities. By adding this new approach to a larger development pipeline that will help us to gather ideas and suggestions from all participants in our community, we hope that the standards, best practices, and other outcomes that NISO develops will be broadly applicable, adopted, and used to help achieve a stronger information community. 🌸

Endnotes

1. **SWORD** Project. For more information: *SWORD: Simple Web-service Offering Repository Deposit* by **Julie Allinson, Sebastien François** and **Stuart Lewis**, <http://www.ariadne.ac.uk/issue54/allinson-et-al/>