

## Processing Decisions for Manuscripts & Archives

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# SPEC Kit 314

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## Processing Decisions for Manuscripts & Archives

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November 2009

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## **SURVEY RESULTS**



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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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### Introduction

Processing is the heart of any special collections or archival program. When libraries speak of processing, they usually refer to “the process of organizing materials with respect to their provenance and original order, to protect their context and to achieve physical and intellectual control over the materials,” as defined by Kathleen D. Roe in *Arranging & Describing Archives & Manuscripts*.<sup>1</sup> Beyond this basic definition, processing must include prioritization among collections, determining the levels of arrangement and description for each collection, and establishing standards and best practices.

In recent years, attention has been called to the need for re-evaluating processing procedures in order to make collections more accessible to patrons. Archivists have shown growing interest in uncovering hidden collections and developing best practices to expedite processing in response to the 2003 ARL Exposing Hidden Collections recommendations and the minimal-level processing discussion sparked by Mark Greene and Dennis Meissner in “More Product, Less Process.”<sup>2</sup>

Ultimately, processing planning and management decisions become the essential building blocks for making these collections accessible to patrons. A review of the literature on processing reveals the big picture of arrangement and description, but not the specific details on practices or policies for processing special collections, manuscripts, or archival materials. Yet, managers and processing staff face an array of difficult decisions when processing materials. These decisions can include whether to adopt minimal processing standards to facilitate access or item-level

processing to facilitate digitization; whether to use traditional finding aids or technology-enhanced access methods; how to provide training in processing; and how to manage processing itself.

A review of the fundamentals of processing is necessary in order to understand how to answer these challenging decisions. What does it mean to process special collections, manuscripts, and archives? How are processing priorities determined? What are the steps to make these collections accessible and physically preserved? Finally, what should be the policy and best practices for processing these materials?

This survey was distributed to the 123 ARL member libraries in April 2009 and solicited information about current policies and practices for processing manuscript and archival collections in Special Collections. It was organized around four general areas: personnel, job responsibilities and training; processing policies, procedures, and priorities; impacts on processing decisions; and management tools. Seventy-six libraries (62%) responded to the survey by the May 8 deadline.

### Processing Workflow

Half of the 76 responding institutions have a combined special collections/archives department and all but a few of these process all types of rare books, rare serials, manuscripts, and archival materials. At most of the institutions with separate special collections and archives units, special collections processes books, serials, and manuscripts, and archives handles the archival materials. Whether combined or separate, some book and serials processing activities are often shared with (or handled by) yet another unit. Twenty-seven

respondents (36%) indicated that rare books and rare serials were cataloged in another department or unit within the library, usually cataloging or technical services. Only five respondents indicated that manuscripts and archival materials were processed outside of special collections/archives.

### Definition of Processing Terms

According to Slotkin and Lynch's article, "An Analysis of Processing Procedures," a collection is "processed" whenever it can be used productively for research.<sup>3</sup> In practice, manuscript and archives processors have developed different definitions for "fully processed," "minimally processed," or "unprocessed" collections.

The majority of respondents agreed that "unprocessed" implied accession records only and sometimes an inventory list. However, definitions of "fully processed" and "minimally processed" range wildly among archivists. "Fully processed" was commonly defined as materials arranged and described to the folder/item level, all hardware (staples, paperclips, etc.) removed, and materials rehoused in acid-free folders and boxes. Fully processed collections may also include such descriptive items as a full MARC and/or MARC21 compliant record, an electronic finding aid (commonly EAD encoded), and a full descriptive finding aid (sometimes DACS compliant). A majority of respondents defined "minimally processed" as a collection having a brief inventory or box list, perhaps a brief MARC record and/or brief finding aid, and some rough organization. Some characterized this as a collection described to the folder level (folder titles) and reboxed in appropriate housing. It appeared that some institutions' "minimally processed" met the standards of other institutions' "fully processed." Supplementary terms used for minimal processing included: accession processed, preliminary processing, proactively processing, and pre-processing.

Some respondents indicated that their institutions had several different levels of processing beyond the terms in the survey. Others indicated that they treated "minimally processed" collections as "preliminary processed" collections, with the expectation of processing the collection more fully in the future. And finally, a minority of institutions rejects formal

processing categories in order to retain some flexibility in processing. One respondent declared, "We do not use formal definitions; we know categories when we see them."

### Access to unprocessed collections

Sixty-nine respondents (92%) allow researchers to have access to minimally or unprocessed collections. One respondent clarified, "We don't 'advertise' unprocessed or minimally processed collections, but if a research question leads to the location of such materials, we do not, generally, restrict access unless there is some legal reason to do so." Another stated, "Decisions are made on a case-by-case basis."

### Decision Makers

The majority of responding libraries (70 or 93%) indicated that the archivist and/or department or unit head in special collections/archives has primary responsibility for developing processing policies, setting priorities, and managing activities. Just under half include librarians and other professionals in decision making and 18 take a team approach. At a small number of institutions, support staff have some responsibility for developing policies and setting priorities, but more often they are responsible for overseeing the work of other staff.

Respondents were asked to estimate the percentage of time spent on these activities by up to three key staff members. Developing policies and setting priorities each account for only about 5% of staff time; managing activities account for about 25%; the most time (50% to 75%) is spent on "other duties."

### Setting Priorities

When asked what factors were considered in setting priorities for processing manuscript and archival collections, all but two respondents selected anticipated high-use of the collections and 80% ranked it as one of the three most important factors. The other two highest ranked factors were response to patron demand and institutional priorities. While the size of the collection is considered by a majority of respondents, only 21% ranked it as one of the most important factors. Interestingly, the least important factors considered

were consortial/collaborative activities (29 responses or 39%) and the digital format shelf life (20 or 26%). Some respondents noted that the experience, special skills, and number of staff can impact their priority decisions.

Other factors that significantly influence processing priorities include donor relations and outside funding. One respondent reflected, “Donor agreements that include processing deadlines and donor funding for processing are important considerations when setting processing priorities.” Another indicated, “Donor expectations are sometimes considered, if a collection is particularly important. We do try not to make promises about when a collection will be processed, but it sometimes comes up in certain donor-related situations.”

More than half of the responding institutions (44 or 60%) discuss requirements for access to collections and what materials need to be processed with their researchers. Others discuss priorities more casually. According to one respondent, “We do this informally and look to support the research efforts of our patrons whenever we can while still attaining other departmental goals.”

### **Determining Levels of Description**

“The goal should be to maximize the accessibility of collection materials to user,” according to Greene and Meissner. When asked which levels of description have been used for manuscript and archival collections, all but two (71 or 97%) responded folder-level and most (82% to 86%) also use collection-, item-, and series-level descriptions, depending on the collection. One respondent explained, “The approach differs based on the presumed research value of the materials, on the degree of access restrictions which may be placed on the materials, and the time available to attain production goals.”

When considering factors to establish the level of description for a collection or part of a collection, the three most important are patron access needs, anticipated high-use, and size of collection. One respondent who considers other factors noted that “the nature of the collection is a major factor in determining what is to be done.” Other comments listed the complexity of

the organization of materials within a collection and digitization potential as other factors to be considered.

In “Accessioning as Processing,” Christine Weidman argued that “time, budget, and personnel constraints at academic institutions render folder-level processing difficult if not impossible to complete for every collection.”<sup>4</sup> Yet when asked what factors are used to decide to process at the folder level, the majority of respondents indicated that this would be the ideal level for all collections. In addition, the folder level was considered an important aspect in providing patron access.

The size of collections factors into deciding to use series- and collection-level description, but not item level. Nine respondents indicated that the criteria for processing at the collection level included the size of the collection itself. Others discussed this level as “a temporary description, used to alert researchers to the existence of the collection.” Criteria for determining series levels included the complexity as well as size of the collection. One respondent stated, “Series-level description must suffice to provide patrons with a detailed account of the series content and its relation to the collection as a whole.” Yet factors for determining processing to the item level were anticipated high-use, monetary value, security, and format type. As one respondent explained, “Unless it’s George Washington’s signature on the invoice of an axe-maker, it’s folder level.” Two respondents reported that they never process anything at the item level.

When asked to describe how an institution determines the minimal level a researcher needs in order to use a manuscript and archival collection, the answers were widely varied. Many of the comments reflected that “the primary factor is size and uniformity—what is the lowest level at which we can convey the contents and the size allows a reasonable expectation that the researcher will be able to locate a specific item or group of materials without further guidance or description.”

### **Impact of Online Access on Processing Decisions**

Almost all respondents (59 or 89%) are marking up finding aids in Encoded Archival Description (EAD). When describing how encoding finding aids in EAD

has impacted processing decisions, one respondent claimed, "Use of EAD has forced greater consistency in processing practices" while another noted that, "We adjusted some processing policies to conform to EAD structure and online searching." Other comments ranged from "Does not impact processing decisions" to "There has been a steep 'learning curve' in training varied staff and building the technical infrastructure to deliver EAD records." Not all respondents (7 or 10%) are encoding in EAD and a couple commented that they have adopted DACS as a result of EAD implementation.

Among those hosting finding aids on the Web, whether in EAD or other format, many commented on the increase in research queries. One respondent commented that putting finding aids online "helped us determine which collections are used and impacts what we process." Another interesting comment from the survey discussed the advantage of making collections available in this environment, "With minimal processing, we've gone with the idea that some info is better than none and having any information on the Web will enhance access. Finding aids for full, minimally, or preliminary processed collections are posted. Ability to keyword search has probably made it easier to accept minimal processing as adequate for a collection ever to receive." There is a downside to online guides, as one respondent said, "Some researchers, seeing the online finding aid, expect the materials to be digitized as well."

### **Impact of Using Web 2.0 Applications**

Using Web 2.0 applications and social software such as Facebook, Flickr, etc., does not seem to have much impact on processing goals at this point. One respondent commented, "2.0 tech has contributed very little of value to our collection descriptions, even though we employ these technologies as vehicles." Most of the respondents (32 or 64%) who employ 2.0 applications indicated that this does not impact processing decisions and many have "only begun to experiment with this." Other respondents (18 or 36%) are not currently involved in 2.0 applications.

### **Impact of Providing Access through Databases**

Once again, the majority of respondents felt that the impact of providing access through databases was not a factor. Regarding bibliographic databases, many commented on being part of state or national initiatives, such as Online Archive of California, Archives Grid, and Archives USA. One respondent declared that databases are "becoming less significant as the volume of finding aids available increases and searching mechanisms are refined." As for databases created for access to collections, other respondents (8 or 15%) reported that they created databases that were "utilized internally" and not for "public access." Some noted plans to make these available online or to consolidate internal databases and that use of access databases meant item-level description, better searching capability, and better access for users to specific collections, such as photograph collections.

### **Impact of Archival Management Software**

As for the impact of Archival Management Software, respondents agreed that this did not affect processing workflow. Some of the respondents (22 or 44%) are currently investigating or in the trial stages of using these types of software.

### **Impact of Digitization Projects**

In 2000, Peter Hirtle stated, "The biggest single benefit that has arisen from our pioneering digitization efforts has been a tremendous increase in the use of digitized material. If you make special collections materials available via the Web with appropriate metadata and software, preferably for free, they will be used."<sup>5</sup> When asked about the effect of digitization projects, one respondent agreed with Hirtle, "Put it up and they will come." Several others also agreed that digitization increase the use of collections. Additionally, some respondents (12 or 18%) were concerned that such projects would require item-level digitizing and description, thus requiring more resources and time. Some respondents also commented that digitization has had significant impact on processing, such as a greater need to include item-level description and metadata creation, and a change in how they determine processing priorities and level of processing.

## Management Tools

Just over half of the respondents (39 or 54%) have a written processing policy for manuscripts and archival collections. Of the 33 (46%) who don't, 14 communicate standard practices verbally, seven by written procedure manuals, and five through hands-on training. More of the responding institutions (52 or 74%) have in-house processing procedures manuals and 51 have documents that list workflow steps.

## Process Evaluation and Statistics

Thirty-eight respondents (53%) indicated that their institutions have procedures or tools to monitor and evaluate manuscript and archives processing activities. The types of tools and procedures included Excel spreadsheets, annual reports, and review of finding aids once they are completed by designated staff members. The vast majority of the responding libraries (68 or 94%) do collect statistics about processing. Most commonly they gather information about the number of accessions and the physical size of collections processed, followed by the number of finding aids digitized/encoded and the number of catalog records created/updated. Statistics are reported largely through annual reports and the annual ARL statistics.

## Estimating Processing Work and Processing Metrics

When asked how libraries calculate the amount of time it takes to process manuscript collections, not one institution indicated that they followed Greene and Meissner's calculation "that a competent processing archivist ought to be able to arrange and describe large twentieth century archival materials at an average rate of 4 hours per cubic foot."<sup>6</sup> A portion of the respondents use internal tools, past experience, past observations, and experiments to estimate processing time, while many of the Canadian libraries refer to the Canadian Council of Archives *Time Guidelines for Arrangement and Description Project*, published in 2007. Two respondents are using the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript processing manual to estimate processing rates (available online at <http://www.library.yale.edu/beinecke/manuscript/process/>). Still others have no standard way for calculating time or do not calculate time at all.

Only seven of the respondents (10%) indicated they use processing metrics—a formula used to measure or predict the success of outcomes—when making processing decisions. Of those who use metrics, one respondent compared the estimated time required with the actual time elapsed for processing. Another indicated that "this has worked best for use with relatively orderly collections."

## Staff Training

Not surprisingly, 100% of the respondents checked "on-the-job" when asked how staff who are responsible for processing received their training. Other popular methods include professional association-sponsored workshops and library school, followed closely by peers, conferences, and professional reading. When asked the most important skills needed for processing, the majority indicated organization, attention to detail, and analytical skills. One respondent said it this way: "Resilience, flexibility, and intelligence: processing is as much art as craft and somebody has got to see the big picture before launching themselves on the myriad parts. In my experience, staff either has the instincts to be a useful processor or they don't. If they don't, it doesn't matter how much 'training' you throw at them: they still don't get the point."

## Challenges of Making Processing Decisions

When asked to provide three challenges faced in making processing decisions, most respondents gave what were expected and unsurprising answers. One person's replies sum up these answers: "Adequate funding" and "Adequate staffing levels." This is a continual challenge and was put eloquently by one respondent, "An ongoing challenge is trying to process collections with insufficient staff. Acquisitions continue, but staffing remains at unchanging levels." Other common challenges include handling backlogs and related space issues.

In addition to the lack of resources libraries continue to face, respondents also report that technology is an obstacle to making decisions in processing collections. Issues of concern are born-digital materials, digitization demands, and media obsolescence. One respondent was concerned how to provide "access to and preservation of born digital archival materials

created by private donors and university offices.” Another discussed “stabilizing, migrating, describing, and maintaining born-digital collection materials, the new frontier portending major changes in the method and prioritizing of manuscript collections.” As for media obsolescence, one respondent observed, “We lack the equipment to transfer or read older forms of magnetic and electronic media.” Other respondents noted that digitization placed demands on already strained resources for archival activities.

Another challenge is the lack of paperwork related to older collections, which makes it difficult to ascertain the legal status of some of their collections. This lack of legal paperwork also extends to limited or no preliminary information about older unprocessed collections. One respondent noted that the “lack of information about collections in the backlog makes it difficult to make processing priority decisions.”

## Conclusion

The survey responses speak to the classic issues of management: how to process collections efficiently but yet adequately so that collections are usable with minimal processing; how to balance demands for more description and item-level cataloging (digitization) with initiatives to make more collections available (“more product, less processing”); and how to manage staff effectively and to assess processing progress. From the survey results it is clear that the respondents agree on core principles for processing (such as what is a fully processed collection, what makes a good processor, and the challenges facing processors), but in practice the application of these principles is tempered by institutional practices, traditions, and resources. Where archivists tend to deviate from each other is in the application of some standards (such as metrics, statistics,

and standardization of processing and description), in the adoption of trends and new concepts in processing (databases for access, MPLP) and in handling outside demands (digitization, user needs). The application of archival methods and theories may indeed be more art than science. Archival managers and processing archivists must have the judgment and critical thinking skills (and the freedom to apply them) as an essential part of their tool sets in order to balance the various competing critical factors in managing the processing process.

## Endnotes

- 1 Roe, Kathleen D. *Arranging and Describing Archives & Manuscripts*. Chicago, IL: Society of American Archivist, 2005: 11.
- 2 Greene, Mark A., and Dennis Meissner. “More Product, Less Process: Revamping Traditional Archival Processing.” *The American Archivist* 68, no. 2 (Fall/Winter 2005): 240.
- 3 Slotkin, Helen W., and Karen T. Lynch. “An Analysis of Processing Procedures: The Adaptable Approach.” *American Archivist* 45, no. 2 (1982): 157.
- 4 Christine Weidman. “Accessioning as Processing.” *American Archivist* 69 (Fall/Winter 2006): 275.
- 5 Hirtle, Peter B. “The Impact of Digitization on Special Collection Libraries.” Fleur Cowles Flair Symposium 2000, University of Texas, 3 November 2000, Austin, Texas.
- 6 Greene and Meissner, 253.