Processing Decisions for Manuscripts & Archives

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Processing Decisions for Manuscripts & Archives

November 2009

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SURVEY RESULTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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*.¹ 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.”²

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.³ 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."⁴ 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."⁵ 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.