More Product, Less Process: Revamping Traditional Archival Processing

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Abstract

Processing backlogs continue to be a problem for archivists, and yet the problem is exacerbated by many of the traditional approaches to processing collections that archivists continue to practice. This research project reviewed the literature on archival processing and conducted surveys of processing practices to identify the scope of the problem and its impacts both on processing costs and on access to collections. The paper issues a call for archivists to rethink the way they process collections, particularly large contemporary collections. It challenges many of the assumptions archivists make about the importance of preservation activities in processing and the arrangement and description activities necessary to allow researchers to access collections effectively.

"Cataloguing is a function which is not working." This is as true in the United States as in Britain, where this frank assessment was made in an official report on local public services including archives.[1] By "cataloguing," the British mean the function we refer to as "processing"—arrangement, description, and cataloging. What provokes such a harsh conclusion? Put very simply, processing is not keeping up with acquisitions and has not been for decades, resulting in massive backlogs of inaccessible collections at repositories

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[1] *Best Value and Local Authority Archives*, section on "Competition," n.d. (c. 2003), http://www.bestvalueforarchives.org.uk/competition.htm (accessed 25 May 2004). The Best Value program is an overall effort to modernize and improve public services at the local level in Great Britain. The report continues: "The Archival Mapping Project shows that the cataloguing function of archive services is clearly not working properly. It revealed that 52% of local archives have large cataloguing backlogs, resulting in a denial of public access to collections of local and national significance, and only 8% have good coverage of their holdings."

across the country (and across all types of archival institutions). It should be dismaying to realize that our profession has been struggling with backlogs for at least sixty years. "Whether dealing with material of public or private origin, archivists almost always fail to keep abreast of descriptive work. 'Manuscripts are received here faster than they can be supplied with checklists and calendars,' reported W. Edwin Hemphill while at the University of Virginia Library [in 1939]."[2] These backlogs are continuing to grow. And they are weakening the archival profession.

Purpose and Methodology

As practicing archivists with many years of combined experience in processing archival materials, and having reviewed many grant requests for processing projects over the years, the authors were troubled by the persistent failure of archivists to agree in any broad way on the important components of records processing and the labor inputs necessary to achieve them. The growth of large twentieth-century archival collections exacerbates this problem. To address this issue, we designed a research project to study the problem and to try to articulate a better, more consistent approach to planning and executing large processing projects. We began with the working hypothesis that processing projects squander scarce resources because archivists spend too much time on tasks that do not need doing, or at least don't need doing all the time.

It is important to note that we are *not* interested in simply replacing one set of processing prescriptions with some other set, one that would prove to be equally arbitrary when trying to apply it to all possible scenarios. Rather, our goal is to reframe the discussion: to ask a better set of questions, to better appreciate the consequences of certain choices that archivists make every day, to understand and apply real administrative economies to the continuum of processing tasks, and to distinguish what we really need to do from what we only believe we need to do.

To achieve this purpose we designed a methodology with five legs. We conducted an exhaustive literature review. We surveyed National Historical Publications and Records Commission (NHPRC) grant files for archival processing grants awarded over the most recent five years, a population of forty files. We conducted a detailed on-line survey of the processing expectations and practices of a hundred archival repositories. We surveyed users (forty-eight responses) in two large repositories and a couple of Internet listservs to ascertain their interests and perspectives on processing outcomes. Finally, we examined the few other studies relating to processing that have been undertaken over the past ten years.

This research led us to reaffirm our hypothesis, to identify several significant and long-standing problems with our practices, and to identify several principles that we think can help the profession improve its processing practice. These

[2] T. R. Schellenberg, *The Management of Archives* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1965), 109.

findings were initially reported at an NHPRC Archival Research Fellows symposium in 2004, and they have been reiterated at several conferences since then. A detailed presentation of the problem, our research, and our findings follow.

The Problems with Processing

A 1998 survey conducted by the Association of Research Libraries (ARL) of special collections units reported[3] that the uncataloged backlog among manuscripts collections was a mean of nearly one-third of repository holdings. "Uncataloged" in this instance means collections for which neither Online Public Access Catalogue (OPAC) records nor in-house catalog cards or other finding aids existed. A smaller survey in 1998 of repositories holding congressional collections found that nearly one-third of respondents had more than a quarter of their general manuscripts collections unprocessed, while 13% of institutions had more than *half* of their congressional collections unprocessed.[4] The survey of repositories conducted for this report in 2003–04 showed that 34% have more than half of their holdings unprocessed; 60% of repositories have at least a third of their collections unprocessed.[5] Reports from several studies outside the United States clearly show that the problem is, in fact, global.[6]

[3] Judith M. Panitch, *Special Collections in ARL Libraries: A Report of the 1998 Survey* (Washington, D.C.: Association of Research Libraries, 2001).

[4] Jeff Suchanek and Mark Greene, unpublished results of survey conducted for the SAA Congressional Papers Roundtable.

[5] The survey, summary results of which are included as Appendix A, was sent via e-mail in January 2004 along with a cover letter to all the members of SAA's Manuscript Repository and Description sections. A total of 1,107 surveys were e-mailed, and 100 were returned. Based on a 10% sample, it appears that approximately 110 individuals are members of both sections, reducing the true number of potential recipients to 897. Because each repository was asked to return only one survey, but may have had several individuals in the sections, the response rate cannot be calculated against the surveys sent—so far there has been insufficient time to determine how many repositories were sent the survey. The respondents included 64 C&U archives, 7 independent research libraries, 7 religious institutions, 6 state archives or historical societies, 5 county or local government archives or historical societies, 3 museum archives, 1 public library, 7 other. The holdings size represented by the respondents ranged from 125 feet to 104,000 feet; the average quantity of new material acquired each year ranged from 0 to 2,222. *We are extremely grateful to those who responded to what was not a simple survey.* In some instances, whole staffs worked together to gather the necessary data. An anonymous version of the entire data set is available for review at: http://ahc.vwyo.edu/nhprcresearch

[6] For example, the National Council on Archives published *British Archives: The Way Forward*, in 2000, www.ncaonline.org.uk/materials/britisharchivesthewayforward.pdf (accessed 17 September 2005), which declared, "A programme of assistance to archive repositories to open up the large backlogs of valuable archives that are languishing inaccessibly in their strongrooms would revolutionise access to our archival heritage (p. 14)." Also from the U.K., see Chris Pickford, *Southeast Regional Archives Strategy* (2001), http://www.semlac.org.uk/docs/archives.pdf (accessed 25 May 2004), 12ff, and the National Council on Archives, *Work Plan for 2002–04* http://www.ncaonline.org.uk/about-work_plan_for_20024.html (accessed 25 May 2004). In Canada see, for example, "Department of Supply and Services—Provincial Archives of New Brunswick," Report of the Auditor General [of New Brunswick] (2001) 175ff, http://www.gnb.ca/oag-bvg/2001/chap8e.pdf (accessed 26 May 2004). See also *Report of the Director of the National Archives [of Ireland] for 2000*, 26, http://www.nationalarchives.ie/about/reports/DirectorReport2000.pdf (accessed 26 May 2004).

A full 59% of repositories acknowledge that their backlogs are a "major problem"; 88% say that an "acceptable" backlog is less than a quarter of total holdings. But, on average, repositories are taking in more material per year than they can process, a fact acknowledged by 78% of repositories.[7] In larger repositories, tens of thousands of cubic feet of material sit unprocessed. Only 44% of repositories surveyed in 2003–04 permit researcher access to unprocessed collections. As *Using the Nation's Documentary Heritage* reported in 1992, "about 30 percent of respondents had been barred from collections because repository staff had not yet described or arranged the records."[8] The smaller survey of end users conducted in 2004 showed a quarter of users had been denied access to unprocessed records.[9]

Why does this problem exist? Certainly, the vast breadth of contemporary manuscript sources and the increasing size of these collections since the 1950s contribute to creating huge backlogs.[10] But these facts encompass another: that the archival profession has been unwilling or unable to change its processing practices in response to the greater quantities of acquisitions. We have been applying traditional approaches to a new problem, and we have not been motivated to change the ways we do things, despite the clearly growing handicaps

[7] The average number of cubic feet acquired in a year by the responding repositories was 357, while the average number of cubic feet processed in a year was 341.

[8] Ann D. Gordon, *Using the Nation's Documentary Heritage: The Report of the Historical Documents Study* (Washington, D.C., 1992), 46. See also Karen Dawley Paul, *The Documentation of Congress: Report of the Congressional Archivists Roundtable Task Force on Congressional Documentation* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1992), 6, 143, where a survey respondent is quoted as saying "there are too many unprocessed collections," and Bruce W. Dearstyne, "What Is the *Use* of Archives? A Challenge for the Profession," *American Archivist* 50 (Winter 1987): 82, who laments unprocessed collections found in the state assessment reports of California, Kentucky, North Carolina, and New York.

[9] See Appendix B. The co-investigators attempted to contact a large number of users for this survey, specifically by posting to several H-NET lists in April 2004. However, with the exception of a message that accidentally made it onto H-DIPLO, they were told it was impermissible to post surveys without the express consent of the H-NET board of directors. Despite repeated attempts, the board has never taken up the request. This made our survey of users much smaller than it was intended to be, but we were still able to survey a broad set of users. We asked researchers at both the Minnesota Historical Society and the American Heritage Center to voluntarily complete the same survey form. MHS researchers are predominantly genealogists and lay researchers, and 27 responded; at the AHC, most users are undergraduates, and 7 responded. We received 10 responses from the impermissible posting to H-DIPLO, primarily faculty and graduate students. And we received 14 responses from a posting of the survey to NYHISTLED, a mixture of faculty, high school teachers, students, and lay researchers. As of 1 September 2004, then, we had received 48 user survey responses, from a fair cross-section of user types. This is not a scientifically valid sample, but it is nonetheless suggestive. Twenty-nine of the respondents had visited 2–5 repositories (another 12 had experience in 6 or more repositories), and 26 respondents had visited both manuscript repositories and institutional archives, so as a group the users are reasonably experienced. Twelve respondents said that they had been denied access to unprocessed collections at one or more repositories—that is an overall rate of 25%.

[10] The archival literature documenting the vastness of late twentieth-century records and manuscripts is itself vast. The four best-known articles are F. Gerald Ham, "Archival Choices: Managing the Historical Records in an Age of Abundance," *American Archivist* 47 (Winter 1984): 11–22; Helen Samuels, "Who Controls the Past?" *American Archivist* 49 (Spring 1986): 109–24; Leonard Rapport, "No Grandfather Clause: Reappraising Accessioned Records," *American Archivist* 44 (Spring 1981): 143–50; David Bearman, *Archival Methods*,"Archives and Museum Informatics Technical Report, vol. 3, no. 1 (Spring 1989): 1–5.

imposed by the status quo. As Megan Desnoyers observed more than two decades ago:

> There are two problems with establishing a standard level of processing. The first is that it dictates what must be done to a collection whether or not the collection warrants it. . . . [W]e process all collections to an ideal standard level. The second problem is that by processing all collections to the ideal standard level, we cannot keep up with the collections we have on hand or with the new collections coming in. The result tends to be a small number of beautifully processed collections available for use and an extensive backlog of collections that are closed while they wait to be processed.[11]

There is good evidence to suggest that we tolerate this situation in part because our profession awards a higher priority to serving the perceived needs of our collections than to serving the demonstrated needs of our constituents. Thus, we have not heard in the United States the clarion demand for "comprehensive accessibility" now common in the United Kingdom: "Improved access for users to the region's archive holdings is an important issue. It is underpinned by the need to address cataloguing backlogs which restrict access to the archives they wish to consult."[12]

So what? Backlogs are no longer (if they ever have been) merely an abstract concern. These large backlogs are hurting the archival profession in the eyes of our researchers and resource allocators. The authors' survey found that at 51% of repositories, researchers, donors, and/or resource allocators had become upset because of backlogs. Thirty-five percent of repositories had at least donors (if not also others) unhappy for the same reason. Sometimes this manifested itself in complaints that a donor's collection had not yet been processed, and sometimes the backlogs caused a potential donor second thoughts about donating a collection. As one respondent from a public university admitted, "virtually all the collections processed in the past three years have been done in response to angry donors and family members." Only 17% of respondents reported that backlogs had hurt them in the eyes of their resource allocators, though it is reasonable to bet that problems with donors will eventually evolve into problems with resource allocators.

How, then, do we break these chains of unhelpful practice that hold us to inadequate productivity? We need to articulate a new set of arrangement, preservation, and description guidelines that 1) expedites getting collection materials into the hands of users; 2) assures arrangement of materials *adequate*

[11] Megan Desnoyers, "When Is It Processed?" *Midwestern Archivist* 7 (1982): 7. To a remarkable extent, Desnoyers identified and proposed practical solutions to the problems of status quo processing; sadly her article has been largely ignored in the subsequent literature.

[12] North East Regional Archives Council, *An Archives Strategy for the North East of England* (2001) 21 http://www.nemlac.co.uk/resources/Archives%20Strategy.pdf (accessed 25 May 2004).

to user needs; 3) takes the *minimal* steps necessary to physically preserve collection materials; and 4) describes materials *sufficient* to promote use. In other words, it is time to focus on what we absolutely need to do, instead of on all the things that we might do in a world of unbounded resources.

Literature Review

Archivists who have sought to address the problem of too much stuff in repositories have focused for the past twenty years on improving the rigor and application of appraisal theory.[13] Arguments about appraisal have been frequent and sometimes fierce. There has, however, been virtually no controversy over processing, with the important exceptions of the communication standards for catalog records (MARC) and finding aids (EAD). Disagreement is certainly evident, but it has remained implicit.

Arrangement

Both our repository survey and our grant proposal survey indicate that many archivists insist on arranging modern collections down to the item level. While there is, unfortunately, warrant for such behavior in the professional articles and manuals dealing with arrangement, it is not uncontested. From the mid-1960s to the present, archival authors have dismissed arrangement at the item level as having little utility and being thoroughly impractical for modern collections. For example, according to Oliver Wendell Holmes, "One does not normally go within folders or cases to arrange original documents if they are going to be retained and used in their original form. . . . Arrangement on this lowest level, then, is done chiefly in connection with flattening and microfilming."[14]

And while David Gracy, Kenneth Duckett, and even Frederic Miller state in their manuals that item-level arrangement was necessary for manuscript curators, Ruth Bordin and Robert Warner, in their manual for manuscript

[13] No good published summary of the appraisal literature since the mid-1980s exists. The success of these efforts is difficult to determine—the acceptance of a smaller percentage of material than otherwise might have been acquired might still result (because of the growth in the absolute total quantity of material available for acquisition) in increasing annual tallies of cubic feet acquired—and unfortunately the ARL survey provides no clues to any of these numbers.

[14] Oliver W. Holmes, "Archival Arrangement—Five Different Options at Five Different Levels," in *A Modern Archives Reader*, ed. Maygene F. Daniels and Timothy Walch (Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Service, 1984), 177 (originally published in *American Archivist* 27 [January 1964]:21–41). See also, T. R. Schellenberg, "Archival Principles of Arrangement," in *A Modern Archives Reader,* 158 (originally published in *American Archivist* 24 [January 1961]: 11–24). Kathleen D. Roe, in her manual *Arranging & Describing Archives & Manuscripts* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2005), 34–35, notes, however, that item-level arrangement and description was the norm in manuscript repositories until the 1950s.

libraries, strongly disagree: "Maintaining the original order of a collection as its permanent arrangement makes for quick processing. Frequently the papers can be boxed in order as they are removed from the original file drawers, kept in their original folders, and an inventory prepared which describes the characteristics of the filing system and describes which units are in each box."[15] This stance was strongly reinforced by arguably the most influential writing on processing in the 1980s, the MIT processing manual and related *American Archivist* article by Helen Slotkin and Karen Lynch. "Arrangement of individual items is time-consuming, and we have learned to avoid it unless there is a compelling benefit to be derived from such detailed work."[16]

Most recently, the Australian manual *Keeping Archives* does not waver from the commitment to arrangement only above the item level. Indeed, in light of the bulk of modern records, the manual argues that "Arrangement and description should concentrate on series level," not even the folder level.[17] Another manual advises that

> When arranging a collection, the ultimate goal is to make the materials available expediently and efficiently. Respect the organization imposed by the person who created the records. Not only is this sound archival practice, but it will save you from having to devise an elaborate and time consuming alternate arrangement scheme. Strive for simplicity. There is no need to create complicated hierarchies of series and subseries if you don't need to. Many collections will be arranged and described as a single collection, without series.[18]

It is important to note that this pragmatic approach has deep roots in U.S. archival literature. As Bordin and Warner stated plainly four decades ago, archivists should not presume that a single formula for arrangement is applicable

[15] Ruth B. Bordin and Robert M. Warner, *The Modern Manuscript Library* (New York and London: The Scarecrow Press, 1966), 44. Contrast this to David Gracy, *Archives and Manuscripts: Arrangement and Description* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1977), 12: "The file unit level is the lowest at which archivists in larger repositories work, simply because the quantity of material they face affords no time for further attention to any one record group. Curators, on the other hand, generally feel obliged to complete file unit arrangement." This distinction, which we regard as inaccurate and unhelpful, is also apparent in Kenneth W. Duckett, *Modern Manuscripts: A Practical Manual for Their Management, Care, and Use* (Nashville: American Association for State and Local History, 1985), 118–30. Regarding arrangement, he advises extensive background research before beginning and then careful unpacking and reading of all the collection materials. His approach is strictly item level, and he even suggests procedures for preparing formal note cards for each item or group of items. Frederic Miller, *Arranging and Describing Archives and Manuscripts* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1990), 69, too, draws significant distinctions between archival and manuscripts approaches to arrangement—for the former he states that it is usually necessary only to verify existing order, whereas for the latter the norm is to create order to the item level.

[16] Helen W. Slotkin and Karen T. Lynch, "An Analysis of Processing Procedures: The Adaptable Approach," *American Archivist* 45 (Spring 1982): 157. They also state, "The most important consideration is a clear arrangement of folders within carefully delineated series."

[17] Paul Brunton and Tim Robinson, "Arrangement and Description," in *Keeping Archives,* 2nd ed., ed. Judith Ellis (Port Melbourne, Vic.: Thorpe, 2000), 230–39.

[18] St. Johnsbury Athenaeum Archives, *Archives Processing Manual*, draft 2 (May 2001), http://www.vermont-archives.org/boards/vhrab/processing.doc (accessed 10 May 2004).

to all collections. Resources must be employed wisely: "For large collections, problems of arrangement multiply. . . . Probably heaviness of use of the collection and its general importance to scholars will be primary factors in deciding how much time should be invested in its arrangement."[19]

However, one aspect of arrangement has pulled archivists back to the item, and that is "weeding." As the very term implies, weeding usually entails identifying and removing items that are of insufficient significance to retain permanently. As Lucile Kane put it in her 1966 manual, "An item considered for rejection must be evaluated both as a part of the collection and as an individual item."[20] This applied to copies, invoices, and fragments, and the concern with piece-by-piece evaluation was carried over into at least some processing manuals of the 1970s and later.[21] But a changed attitude begins to appear in the 1980s, and both the widely distributed MIT processing manual and SAA's "fundamentals" manual stress that appraisal should take place as a distinct phase, not as part of arrangement; the manual even makes clear that item-level appraisal should take place only if "the collection is processed to the level which permits identification of separable material"[22]—that is, if the collection is being processed only to the series level, that is the level at which appraisal should take place. Survey results showing that over 90% of us weed duplicates indicate that the older, item-centered ethos has taken firm root.

Description

While archivists have almost entirely abandoned item-level description, there seems to be in practice a strong tendency to set as a benchmark the creation of a substantial, multilayered, descriptive finding aid. These finding aids may include descriptions of folders rather than just folder lists, descriptions of series, and extended biographical or administrative history notes. Here, too, our inflexibility and our tradition of slow, careful, scholarly research and writing about every collection or record group have come to haunt us. This is true despite the fairly consistent message in the professional literature that descriptive

[19] Bordin and Warner, *Modern Manuscript Library*, 42.

[20] Lucile M. Kane, *A Guide to the Care and Administration of Manuscripts* (Nashville: American Association for State and Local History, 1966), 38. Interestingly, Schellenberg, in *Management of Archives*, and Gracy, in *Archives and Manuscripts: Arrangement and Description,* do not even mention weeding or other forms of appraisal during processing. Bordin and Warner, *Modern Manuscript Library*, 70–71, deal only with large series of doubtful value within congressional collections.

[21] See, for example, Richard Strassberg, *Manual of Manuscript Processing Procedures [for Cornell University Libraries]* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Libraries, 1973), 20–21.

[22] Karen T. Lynch and Helen W. Slotkin, *Processing Manual for the Institute Archives and Special Collections M.I.T. Libraries* (Cambridge, Mass.: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1981), 15–16; Miller, *Arranging and Describing Archives and Manuscripts*, 33.

activities should be flexible, should vary from collection to collection (and even within collections), and should strive first and foremost to provide general descriptive information about all of our holdings, rather than minute descriptions about a few. Schellenberg stated this principle very directly:

> *A descriptive program should be designed to provide information on all records in a repository.* [italics in the original] When he first comes to an archival institution, a searcher wants to know something about its entire holdings. He wants to know what is available, so that he may determine if specific bodies of material pertain to his subject or inquiry. . . . An archivist should thus describe his entire holdings immediately in summary finding aids consisting of (1) guides and catalogs in which concise descriptions are provided of all groups and collections and (2) inventories in which descriptions are provided of record series within large or significant groups and collections. He should definitely forego the detailed description of individual record items until he has provided a comprehensive description of his holdings.[23]

Bordin and Warner support this approach almost verbatim.[24] At root is a user-centered approach to the archival enterprise.

The processing manual at Northeastern University makes explicit the focus on the needs of the user, as well as the reality of limited resources. The intersection of those two variables will determine the level of descriptive detail, as it does the level of arrangement.[25] Likewise, the manual developed at the

[23] Schellenberg, *Management of Archives*, 111–12.

[24] "Most manuscript libraries will find the general catalog their most efficient finding aid. The catalog will need to be supplemented by calendars or inventories to certain collections, but it is the only manageable scheme for retaining complete control over a large number of collections which vary widely in size, importance, and subject matter coverage," Bordin and Warner, *Modern Manuscript Library*, 55. "The great advantage of the general catalog is that it works equally well for a collection of 800 feet or a single item. The larger collection will need a larger number of added entry cards and will take much longer to catalog. . . , but the same methods are equally appropriate for both." Bordin and Warner, *Modern Manuscript Library*, 57. Miller, *Arranging and Describing Archives and Manuscript*, 88, agrees: "A [descriptive] program that is comprehensive as well as integrated will describe all of the repository's holdings at some minimal level for administrative control even if not for full intellectual access. It will therefore include unprocessed records as they are described at the time of accessioning. . . ." As does Sharon Gibbs Thibodeau, "Archival Arrangement and Description," in *Managing Archives and Archival Institutions,* ed. James Gregory Bradsher (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 77: "Priorities for action to be taken to meet these goals within an archival repository should include: 1. Establishment and maintenance of a minimum level of intellectual control over the archival holdings of the repository. (Because it both reflects an appreciation of archival principles and represents the best investment of archival resources, the series level seems an appropriate minimum.)"

[25] "Just as records can be processed at different levels, there are differences in the levels of description in inventories. Since the physical and intellectual work you do on the collection will vary, there can be no rigid definition of what constitutes an inventory. Some collections are never processed beyond the preliminary stages. In such cases, the final inventory can consist of a collection overview and perhaps a brief series list or box list. Collections that are of great importance or are very heavily used will get extensive processing, including detailed folder lists as well as indexes. Most inventories fall in between these extremes, and almost every inventory represents a compromise. You should try, though, to provide the researcher with the most meaningful, concise, and accurate information possible, considering limitations of time and resources." Northeastern University Libraries, Archives and Special Collections, *Processing Manual* (Boston, September 2002), 27.

St. Johnsbury Athenaeum argues that "In some cases, a MARC record may double as the finding aid for the collection. Larger, more complex collections may require detailed finding aids. . . . In general, the simpler the better. Remember that researchers are coming to do research, so you don't have to do it for them in advance. . . . Use your time wisely."[26]

It is unclear whether our clinging, in practice, to one-size-fits-all finding aids is a relic of the past or a misinterpretation of cataloging practice introduced in the 1980s. The content standard *Archives, Personal Papers, and Manuscripts (APPM)* was hugely influential as the primary manual for archivists and manuscript curators supporting MARC cataloging. In an effort to make the parallels between library and archival cataloging clearer, *APPM* raised the finding aid to new importance as a source for bibliographic information: "If there is a practical equivalent to the bibliographic title page, it is the archival finding aid. . . ."[27] Sensibly, the manual directed archivists to use a finding aid, *if one existed*, as the "chief source of information" for a catalog record. "The chief source of information for archival materials is the finding aid prepared for those materials. *In the absence of this source*, treat provenance and accession records, then the materials themselves, supplemented by appropriate reference sources, as the chief source of information" (emphasis added).[28] Anecdotal evidence suggests that some practitioners interpreted what the manual intended as one source among several as the only permissible source for generating bibliographic information for a catalog record. Without a full finding aid, a catalog record was not possible, thus further ossifying the tradition of uniformly detailed description.

Preservation

All too often, even the archival literature that instructed practitioners not to arrange collections to the item level carried the contradictory admonition that basic preservation steps—required for every collection—necessitated item-level inspection and handling. This is perhaps most clear in Frederic Miller's SAA manual on arrangement and description. For the most part, Miller instructs readers to avoid item-level arrangement and description. But in a section on "Physical Handling and Storage" he states:

> Throughout the arrangement process, the work of weeding, separation and conservation begun during accessioning should continue. As archivists or clerical assistants go through series and folders, they should discard duplicates

[26] St. Johnsbury Athenaeum Archives, *Archives Processing Manual*, 15. Lucile Kane made a similar point several decades earlier in *A Guide to the Care and Administration of Manuscripts*, 51.

[27] Steven L. Hensen, *Archives, Personal Papers, and Manuscripts: A Cataloging Manual for Archival Repositories, Historical Societies, and Manuscript Libraries,* 2nd. ed. (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1989), 5.

[28] Hensen, *Archives, Personal Papers, and Manuscripts*, 9.

> and note any groups of records of doubtful value. . . . This is also the time to determine which individual documents will require special conservation treatment or copying. Clippings, scrapbooks, and brittle or mold-damaged paper should be removed for some type of corrective action. . . . Other records might require only unfolding, cleaning, and the removal of tape or metal fasteners such as rusting staples or paper clips. . . . Once arranged, records should be stored in acid-free boxes and folders. Many archives holding modern records find the work of comprehensive refoldering inefficient and unnecessary.[29]

The Australian manual likewise says in one chapter to arrange only to the series level and in another chapter to refolder the entire collection and find and remove all metal fasteners.[30]

Miller's directives were strongly reinforced by SAA's conservation manuals. "While a collection is being organized, damaging fasteners and other items viewed as extraneous or of no archival significance should be removed from the records."[31] "Highly acidic materials, such as newspaper clippings or telegrams, that are retained in their file locations should, at a minimum, be sleeved or interleaved between two sheets of thin . . . polyester film or bond paper that has an alkaline reserve to inhibit acid migration."[32] "Material requiring special protection, such as photographs or weak or damaged records, should be individually sleeved at this time also."[33] The manual's author, Mary Lynn Ritzenthaler, goes on to stress that "All materials used to fabricate storage enclosures for archival

[29] Miller, *Arranging and Describing Archives and Manuscripts*, 77–78.

[30] Ross Harvey, "Preservation," in *Keeping Archives*, 95–96. See also, Gracy, *Archives and Manuscripts: Arrangement and Description*, 16–19: "The proficient archivist will devote attention to the physical condition of the documents as the sorting progresses." He goes on to recommend removing all fasteners, etc. This expectation/directive is further reinforced by the widely distributed leaflet, National Park Service, *Conserve O Gram: Removing Original Fasteners from Archival Documents*, no. 19/5 (July 1993). This assiduous item-centered approach is clearly reflected in some current processing manuals. For example, see the M. E. Grenander Department of Special Collections and Archives, *Accessioning and Processing Manual* (University at Albany, SUNY), developed by Jared Parker and Geoffrey Williams (Fall 1996), revised by Brian Keough (July 2001), Amy C. Schindler (July 2002), http://library.albany.edu/speccoll/processing.htm (accessed 10 May 2004), which defines a normative processing level that involves full organization/reorganization of collection materials, complete reboxing and refoldering, removing all metal, using acid-free barrier sheets, photocopying high-lignin items, item-level arrangement, and item-level weeding. A full folder-level finding aid is also mandated. Similarly, Jane Boley, Marcelle Hull, Shirley Rodnitzky, and Gerald D. Saxon, *Archives and Manuscripts Processing Manual*, University of Texas at Arlington Libraries, Special Collections, 4th ed. (2001), http://libraries.uta.edu/SpecColl/processman/title1.htm (accessed 10 May 2004), presents a very item-focused approach to physical processing, including removal of all metal (even the spirals in spiral notebooks!), liberal encapsulation of fragile and damaged items, placing all photos in envelopes, photocopying all high-lignin items, and use of barrier sheets around all items on colored paper. They also prescribe item-level arrangement and weeding. Here is a telling quote: "By the time the finding aid is completed, the archivist will have worked with the material in each folder in the collection several times."

[31] Mary Lynn Ritzenthaler, *Preserving Archives and Manuscripts* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1993), 110.

[32] Ritzenthaler, *Preserving Archives and Manuscripts*, 111.

[33] Ritzenthaler, *Preserving Archives and Manuscripts*, 112.

records, such as boxes, folders, envelopes, and sleeves, should be physically and chemically stable and non-damaging to the records they are intended to protect."[34]

Further, Ritzenthaler takes direct aim at anyone who might suggest that it was permissible, when faced with the enormous bulk of modern records and the high cost of archival-quality boxes and folders (not to mention the high cost of labor to do the refoldering), to let collections remain in their original containers:

> Office quality draft paper wrappers, manila file folders, and commercial quality cardboard boxes and mats are but a few examples of acidic materials that do not provide safe long-term protection. They are inherently unstable and will break down over time. . . . [A]cid can migrate from such poor quality enclosures to the records stored within. . . . The information that is currently available on the damage caused to records by acid—whatever its source—is conclusive. It renders decisions to keep valuable records in acidic containers unenlightened. . . . A basic preservation principle is that any materials brought into contact with a collection must be non-damaging; suspect or untested materials should be kept away from valuable records.[35]

At first glance there would seem to be little room to maneuver in the face of such a clear directive from an authoritative conservator.

A skeptic might wish to dismiss the willingness of archival authors from Kenneth Duckett forward to question the fundamental need, in the first instance, for relentless refoldering and reboxing of collections as part of standard processing. Duckett said, "The concept of acid-free storage is an intriguing one. The commercial possibilities have not been overlooked. . . . But the curator might do well to look behind the fetish to the practicalities of his own situation."[36] Similar sentiments are found in the MIT processing manual.[37] Duckett and the authors of the MIT processing manual wrote prior to the publication of the preservation manual. It may be more compelling to note that the Northeastern University processing manual, which dates to 2001, accepts the MIT declaration verbatim and goes on to add that "The level of preservation work you do on any collection is closely linked to the level of arrangement that you complete. For example if you are arranging papers only to the box level, it would make no sense to recommend preservation at the folder or item level."[38]

[34] Ritzenthaler, *Preserving Archives and Manuscripts*, 82.

[35] Ritzenthaler, *Preserving Archives and Manuscripts*, 83.

[36] Duckett, *Modern Manuscripts,* 90.

[37] "The sheer bulk of modern records justifies a hard look at the amount of preservation work to be done for each collection. Preservation is *very* time-consuming. Your preservation recommendations—even the recommendation to refolder papers or remove staples—must be defended on the basis of the collection's research value and the degree of physical deterioration of the records." Lynch and Slotkin, *Processing Manual for the Institute Archives*, 47.

[38] Northeastern University Libraries, *Processing Manual*, 24.

Even more telling, however, is the language of the U.S. National Archives and Records Administration's (NARA's) *Technical Information Paper Number 6 (1990), Preservation of Archival Records: Holdings*, also written by Ritzenthaler and still in active use. The Information Paper's description of "holdings maintenance" is consonant with Miller's and Ritzenthaler's conservation benchmarks:

> Holdings maintenance is the term used to describe those preservation actions that are designed to prolong the useful life of records and to reduce or defer the need for laboratory treatment by improving the physical storage environment. These actions include replacing acidic storage materials such as boxes and file folders with materials of known quality that meet National Archives specifications, improving shelving practices, removing damaging fasteners, reproducing unstable materials such as Thermofax copies onto stable replacement materials, and dusting boxes and shelves.[39]

But what the general archival manuals omit is the crucially important second paragraph from the NARA document, which makes clear that holdings maintenance is not something that, in the real world, can or should be assumed to apply to all or even most collections in a repository:

> The groups of records selected for holdings maintenance projects are chosen after weighing a variety of archival considerations, including intrinsic value, condition, and anticipated use of the records. In some instances it may be appropriate to do no more than rebox, or refolder and rebox a records series; in other cases, it will be appropriate to carry out the complete range of holdings maintenance actions.[40]

To clarify the point even further, the section of the document on "folders" states that loose material should be placed in archival-quality folders, but that otherwise, only "Folders that are physically damaged and no longer capable of protecting or supporting archival records should be replaced."[41] Similarly with staples and paper clips: "Such fasteners often cause physical or chemical damage to records *and should be removed when appropriate*. Fasteners should be removed when records have high intrinsic value or are brittle, or when the fasteners have deteriorated and are causing obvious damage to records" (emphasis added).[42]

It seems, then, that not much has changed at the National Archives since Megan Desnoyers wrote in the early 1980s: "Traditionally, archivists have routinely

[39] Mary Lynn Ritzenthaler, *Preservation of Archival Records: Holdings Maintenance at the National Archives*, Technical Information Paper No. 6 (Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, 1990). 2.

[40] Ritzenthaler, *Technical Information Paper*, 2.

[41] Ritzenthaler, *Technical Information Paper*, 4.

[42] Ritzenthaler, *Technical Information Paper*, 20.

refoldered most personal papers or manuscript collections regardless of the found state of the folders. Custodians of massive holdings, such as the national archives, have not done this and have instead retained the incoming folders wherever they existed. We need to begin questioning the need for refoldering instead of making it a standard requirement for finished processing."[43]

This is especially true since the labor costs associated with the simple act of refoldering collection materials can be huge in the aggregate. A substantive congressional papers processing project at the University of Washington concluded that, when all arrangement, preservation, and description labor was taken into consideration, "up to 80 percent of the processing time was spent on tasks related to refoldering."[44] Surprisingly, the author seems to conclude that even decisions to describe some series at a greater level of detail had less impact on overall costs than did decisions to refolder entire series.[45]

An unconscionable fraction of our limited and—all too often—declining processing resources are being badly spent on this and other extremely labor-intensive conservation actions. At first blush, it seems improbable that a routine procedure like universal folder replacement could account for such a disproportionate part of processing labor expended, but consider the separate steps that comprise the replacement of each and every file folder: remove old folder from box; grab and refold new folder; transfer contents; straighten up contents (who can resist?); transfer old label information to new folder; place new folder in box; discard old folder. Multiply that procedure a thousand times and it starts to add up—in dollars and in diminished staff productivity.

So, too, with the obsession to remove every metal fastener (and the concomitant fascination with debating the relative merits of Plastiklips and stainless steel paper clips as the best "archival" alternative).[46] The recent revision of the SAA arrangement and description manual strikes the correct note, that item-level conservation work is an option, not an expectation or requirement: "As

[43] Desnoyers, "When Is It Processed?" 14. Much more recently, the Council for Museums, Archives, and Libraries, *Benchmarks in Collection Care for Museums, Archives and Libraries: A Self-assessment Checklist* (London: Resource Publications, 2002), 27–28, makes no mandate that collection material be rehoused, only that rehousing material be available if needed. Of boxes and folders it requires simply that "Containers used for physical protection are strong enough to withstand handling and the weight of the items they contain," and that "Boxes and folders fit the items they contain."

[44] Uli Haller, "Variations in the Processing Rates on the Magnuson and Jackson Senatorial Papers," *American Archivist* 50 (Winter 1987): 107.

[45] Haller, "Variations in the Processing Rates," 108–9.

[46] The extent to which the U.S. Archives and Archivists Listserv is dominated by such discussions should concern anyone interested in the societal image of archivists or in the profession's culture. A quick search of the list's archives reveals extended threads on the paper clip vs. Plastiklip question in June 1993, April 1995, August 1995, December 1996, September 1999, March 2000, September 2000, July 2001, December 2003–January 2004. This doesn't include comparable threads on removing papers from binders and whether it is professionally acceptable to temporarily staple loose folder labels. What makes these threads particularly significant is the extent to which the posters focused on whether a particular kind of clip bent the paper to which it was attached—as if every sheet of every collection was a precious artifact.

records are rehoused, a variety of phased preservation actions may be taken, such as removing paper clips, staples, rubber bands, or other fasteners if they will damage records over time. In some cases, flattening records or interleaving with alkaline paper may be necessary."[47] Much more often that not, we will (or should) find that we have larger, more urgent tasks in front of us—first and foremost converting our massive backlogs into usable resources for our patrons.

Metrics

If the great variances among guidelines for arrangement, description, and conservation seem disconcerting, they become doubly so when we enter the arena of metrics—that is, when we try to establish real quantitative benchmarks for processing productivity. It is certainly daunting to examine the complicated factors that comprise processing and come up with any sort of reliable numbers for the amount of collection materials that can be processed by an archivist in a given unit of time. Instead, we are largely content to conduct studies to describe examples of—and measure production within—existing processing regimens, and we tend to convert this description of current practice into a normative benchmark (particularly for grant proposals) even though the original articles cautioned that the data might not be broadly applicable. And even the few attempts to date at establishing such norms did not begin to appear until the late 1970s. Nevertheless, many practitioners have since made the attempt and have, at least tentatively, advanced some quantitative suggestions.[48]

A fairly early attempt to quantify processing expectations was advanced by Texas A&M archivist Charles Schultz in an unpublished 1976 survey report prepared for SAA's Committee on Personal Papers and Manuscripts. Averaging responses of six repositories reporting on a total of seven arrangement and description projects, Schultz concluded that in approaching the universe of all modern, somewhat disorganized manuscript collections, an average figure of forty hours per cubic foot could be postulated.[49] This extrapolates to about a foot per week or, perhaps, a maximum of forty feet per year, given the fact that no archivist is able to devote all of his or her working time to focused processing activity.[50]

[47] Roe, *Arranging & Describing Archives & Manuscripts*, 68.

[48] All of the processing rates expressed in this section, unless otherwise stated, include all of the processing-related tasks being considered in this paper: arrangement, description, and minor conservation activities.

[49] Charles Schultz, "Report on Case Studies in Manuscript Administration—Costs of Acquiring, Processing, and Housing Collections," unpublished report to the SAA's Committee on Personal Papers and Manuscripts, 28 September 1976.

[50] It seems reasonable to the authors to posit a figure of about 230 days per year as the average amount of time available to a given processing archivist to perform focused processing work, given such anticipated subtractions as holidays, vacation, personal leave, meetings, and so forth.

William Maher brought a larger dimension and more rigorous scrutiny in a pair of articles that were primarily focused on the dollar costs of archival administration, including processing. In the first, a 1978 study of costs at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, he concluded that it cost his institution $18.79 per cubic foot to process 583 feet of records during the 1976–77 reporting year.[51] Unfortunately, no attempt was made to calculate the person-hours needed to process each foot, but we can perhaps tease out a rate of about six hours per foot, though this is very speculative. A few years later, Maher reported findings from a more comprehensive study conducted at the University of Illinois. He concluded, after reviewing current and retrospective processing statistics from 76 series and collections, that general office files can be processed at a rate of 3.0 hours per cubic foot, and that personal papers require 6.9 hours to process the same volume.[52]

Maher's rigorous case study was certainly more optimistic than the one conducted by Schultz, and by a large factor, suggesting as it does that an archivist might reasonably arrange and describe between 250 and 600 cubic feet annually. Unlike Schultz's, Maher's study does not control for either the era of the collection or its size; all are averaged together. If we accept the premise that smaller and pre–twentieth-century materials are more time consuming to process, the figures become even more impressive. Between Maher's articles came a very brief report by W. N. Davis, Jr., chief of the California State Archives, who also attempted to calculate the financial costs of processing work. Calculating work performed at that repository during the 1977–78 fiscal year, Davis concluded that, averaging together all of the processing work performed by clerks and junior and senior archivists, the state archives required eight hours to process each cubic foot.[53]

The next significant metrics study was reported in 1982 by Karen Temple Lynch and Thomas E. Lynch, who examined in detail thirty active and closed files for processing grants funded by the National Historical Publications and Records Commission and twenty-five active grant proposals funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities. Their general conclusion was that for all twentieth-century archival materials, averaged together, the grant recipients invested 12.7 hours per cubic foot in processing work, and for the subdomain of organi-

[51] William J. Maher, "The Importance of Financial Analysis of Archival Programs," *Midwestern Archivist* 3 (1978): 10.

[52] William J. Maher, "Measurement and Analysis of Processing Costs in Academic Archives," *College & Research Libraries* 43 (January 1982): 62. The figures noted in the text divide total cubic footage *as received* by the total processing hours invested. If one calculates on the basis of the final size of the processed collection (subtracting weeded materials), the figures become 3.5 hours/foot and 9.8 hours/foot, respectively.

[53] W. N. Davis, "Budgeting for Archival Processing," *American Archivist* 43 (Spring 1980): 210–11.

zational records, they spent 10.6 hours on a cubic foot.[54] A very telling comment from the authors notes that "Of the twelve completed NHPRC grants, five were completed as proposed and on schedule." The other seven projects took longer than estimated. In no instance was there any indication that a grant had been completed early or that initial estimates of processing time had been too large.[55] Clearly, our incompetence in the area of processing metrics greatly harms both our capacity to plan projects and granting agencies' ability to fund them.

Next into the normative fray were Terry Abraham, Stephen Balzarine, and Anne Frantilla, who reported in 1985 results of a study done at Washington State University-Pullman in 1983 for the purpose of developing baseline figures for processing planning and comparison, especially as a means of dealing with the repository's significant backlog. The study retrospectively examined a large number of processing projects performed since 1975, when they began keeping reliable and comparable processing statistics. The study concluded that, using half-time graduate student workers, manuscript collections measuring less than a cubic foot required 5.5 days per foot to process; manuscript collections greater than a foot were processed at a rate of 3 days per foot; and archival series of any size used 2 days per cubic foot of processing time.[56] The authors suggest that, after their institutional administrative practices and measuring differences are taken into consideration, their figures jibe with those reported by Maher in 1982,[57] but it is difficult to see how such a quantitative disparity can nevertheless result.

Uli Haller summarized his findings from a 1985 processing study at the University of Washington in a 1987 *American Archivist* article. The approach was a bit different from most of the previous studies in that, in addition to producing measures of physical volume processed per unit of time, it also attempted to measure the amount of access afforded by the work performed, as reckoned in inventory text lines and index terms produced per unit of time invested in the total processing project.[58] Analyzing the routinely gathered statistics resulting from special projects to process two large congressional collections, the study concluded that such large-scale, twentieth-century collections could be processed at a rate of 3.8 hours per cubic foot.[59]

[54] Karen Temple Lynch and Thomas E. Lynch, "Rates of Processing Manuscripts and Archives," *Midwestern Archivist* 7 (1982): 31. The cubic footage figures given here are extrapolated from the *linear* footage figures reported by Lynch and Lynch—15.9 hours/linear foot and 13.25 hours/linear foot, respectively. This extrapolation was made on the presumption that 1 cubic foot equals 1.25 linear feet.

[55] Lynch and Lynch, "Rates of Processing Manuscripts and Archives," 28. Of course, it bears admitting that a project completed ahead of schedule would be required to return any unspent funds to the granting agency, so the system offers no incentive to finish early.

[56] Terry Abraham, Stephen Balzarine, and Anne Frantilla, "What Is Backlog Is Prologue: A Measurement of Archival Processing," *American Archivist* 48 (Winter 1985): 39.

[57] Abraham, et al., "What Is Backlog Is Prologue," 42, 44.

[58] Haller, "Variations in the Processing Rates," 102.

[59] Haller, "Variations in the Processing Rates," 102.

Haller suggests two likely reasons for the high productivity evidenced in this project relative to that found in the previous metrics studies. The first is that both senatorial collections "more closely resembled corporate office records than classic personal papers. . . . [T]he records arrived at the university in clearly-labeled folders, many of which were still organized in their original series order."[60] His second explanation is that "reporting of archival work rates is not yet standardized, leading to some confusion over how to interpret those rates."[61] Both points seem to be on the mark, but the second deserves reemphasis. The normative studies clearly show a lack of standardization, but it is not just a matter of how we define "series-level" or "folder-level" work. It is a matter of coming to some general agreement about what levels of arrangement, preservation, and access are useful and necessary in the first place. Haller's study has poked at a sore spot in our professional practice and its intellectual underpinnings.

Following on from these metrics-focused studies was a very thorough repository analysis that carefully considered all of the preceding attempts in trying to develop its own workable processing norms. The study by the Billy Graham Center Archives used the earlier works noted above as the basis for developing a reliable set of repository processing expectations that would allow its archivists to estimate not only how long it would take to process a given collection, but also the real financial cost of doing so.[62] The center's processing cost analysis began in 1990 and has since proved itself to be a beneficial tool for planning overall administrative costs.

It especially led the center's archivists to conclude that "we're processing more intensively than we realized or intended (and consequently arranging and describing less for the amount of time available for processing)."[63] Looking at the paucity of processing norms in the archival literature, especially detailed cost analyses, they came to two interesting conclusions: the first, that archivists ignore them in part because they resent them in theory and, the second, in some cases, they fear what may come to light as a result of parading such statistics, especially to one's resource allocators.[64] This reluctance, if real, suggests that we are not as comfortable with our traditional practices as we may think ourselves to be.

In the Billy Graham Center's case, they were indeed shocked by what they found. When all 1993 processing projects were averaged together they found

[60] Haller, "Variations in the Processing Rates," 102. This is particularly relevant, since the countervailing tendency among some congressional papers archivists is to treat these collections as if they deserve virtual item-level care.

[61] Haller, "Variations in the Processing Rates," 102.

[62] Paul Ericksen and Robert Shuster, "Beneficial Shocks: The Place of Processing-Cost Analysis in Archival Administration," *American Archivist* 58 (Winter 1995): 32–52.

[63] Ericksen and Shuster, "Beneficial Shocks," 47.

[64] Ericksen and Shuster, "Beneficial Shocks," 40.

that they were investing 15.1 processing hours for each cubic foot of collection materials at a total cost of $374.48 per foot, figures they found distressing. They stated that "the resources we devoted to processing exceeded the value we placed on what we had accomplished."[65] Despite the shock, the authors felt that they had reaped important management benefits: better project prioritizing, better comparison among reporting periods and types of collections, and especially an improved sense of the real and total costs involved in any processing project.[66] They conclude with a sage expansion of these thoughts:

> We also believe cost analysis has value for the profession at large. It seems incredible that so little comparative work has been done between institutions. It is almost accepted as a given in the literature that processing methodologies and local conditions vary so widely from archives to archives that figures developed at one institution are meaningless at another. . . . This is unfortunate, because comparative studies of the processing costs of similar institutions applying similar methods to similar materials could help establish the parameters for valid comparisons and, through the process of beneficial shocks like those we experienced, could lead to greater uniformity in determining acceptable costs.[67]

So, what do these wide disparities in processing metrics tell us? Right off the top, they tell us that a couple of generations of us have failed to establish reasonable administrative controls over a crucial and extremely expensive[68] component of our work as archivists, despite all the experience accumulated in work on large twentieth-century archival collections. This inability hampers us, indeed embarrasses us, in many situations. Not only can't we reliably project the end date for an arrangement and description project, nor suggest its final cost with any confidence, but we can't make any guarantees to our funders—whether granting agencies or our own resource allocators—that we'll even be able to finish the work within the funding envelope. In the end, we have each become so comfortable with arguing our uniqueness as a program and a repository that

[65] Ericksen and Shuster, "Beneficial Shocks," 47.

[66] Ericksen and Shuster, "Beneficial Shocks," 49–50.

[67] Ericksen and Shuster, "Beneficial Shocks," 51. Their reference to a professional culture that insists that no interinstitutional comparisons of processing rates is possible echoes the arguments that archivists used in the 1980s to resist adopting the uniformity of the MARC format.

[68] Karen Lynch, untitled and undated conference paper, c. 1981, 3. In a typescript paper based upon the same processing grants study that produced the later 1982 Lynch and Lynch article "Rates of Processing Manuscripts and Archives," Lynch reports in her second footnote that "In a survey of grants funded by NHPRC, Robert W. Coran found that processing costs ranged from $61 to $321 per linear foot [our own survey of NHPRC processing grants reveals that the spread has widened enormously, from $10 to $1,900 per linear foot], and that labor costs accounted for about 90% of the total cost." This 90% figure seems quite consistent with the findings in our literature review and with our own survey data. The labor costs associated with processing archival materials are undeniably large, and it is dangerous for us, as professionals in this area, to have so little control over them and to be so untroubled by that fact.

we have utterly failed to come to grips with a critical administrative reality, a reality that eats 90 percent of our direct program expenditures.[69]

Conclusion

The archival literature has been inconsistent and even schizophrenic about defining the parameters of "processing." Some authors and manuals suggest that it is appropriate and sensible to focus on the series level of arrangement and description, and then go on to insist that preservation measures be applied rigorously at the item level. Still, there is a solid literary warrant in our profession for taking a hard-nosed, pragmatic, forest-not-trees approach to processing.[70] This is far more than an abstract or theoretical distinction—it has very definite consequences for our profession.

[69] In addition to the published literature, some processing norms have shown up in institutional processing manuals, as in the following found in that from Northeastern University:

> *Processing Rate 1 (24–30 hours per cubic ft.):* Used for collections that have little or no arrangement and order. Different kinds of materials are mixed together, correspondence is unsorted or stored in original envelopes, some papers and correspondents are unidentified, and extensive preservation work may be required.
>
> *Processing Rate 2 (14–20 hours per cubic ft.):* Used for collections that have an average number of problems. Papers may have some order and sections of the collection may be properly sorted, although significant portions will have to be arranged and a good deal of interfiling work will have to be done. Most collections can be processed at this rate.
>
> *Processing Rate 3 (4–10 hours per cubic ft.):* Used for collections that have no significant organizational problems. A minimum amount of interfiling and reorganization is needed. The major portion of staff time will be expended on the basic work required for all collections: reboxing, refoldering, listing, and describing the contents of the papers.

In the more detailed processing instructions that follow, the manual advises: "Very few collections merit detailed item-level arrangement or description. For example, unless a collection (or a portion of a collection) has an extremely high research value, it is not necessary to arrange items chronologically or alphabetically within a folder. Avoid item-level arrangement simply by breaking folders into smaller chunks and providing more specific description; accurate date ranges are extremely important." They do, however, prescribe complete refoldering.

[70] "*In the past, an emphasis on uniformly detailed processing to the item level resulted in repositories having immense backlogs of undescribed, inaccessible records and a small number of perfectly processed collections. The key goal of a processing program should be instead to maximize the proportion of a repository's holdings available for effective use.* It is better to have a high proportion of records with general series-level descriptions than a small proportion with comprehensive item- or folder-level indexes" (emphasis added). Miller, *Arranging and Describing Archives and Manuscripts*, 46. Sadly, Miller was being far too optimistic when he placed immense backlogs in the past tense. Sadly, too, his own manual's prescription for item conservation treatment probably undermined, if not completely superseded in many archivists' minds, his sensible advice about arrangement and description.

Kathleen Roe's arrangement and description manual hews to Miller's good advice about flexible levels of processing, 17 (also see 71–72) without repeating his contradictory advice to perform conservation treatment at the item level: "All records should be arranged and described beginning with that first level of description. With complex groups of records, or those with extremely rich content for users, more detailed levels of description may be appropriate." See also Desnoyers, "When Is It Processed?" 7: "by processing all collections to the ideal standard level, we cannot keep up with the collections we have on hand or with the new collections coming in. The result tends to be a small number of beautifully processed collections available for use and an extensive backlog of collections that are closed while they wait to be processed."

Research Findings

Our own research, conducted during 2003–04, provides something of a capstone to the metrics studies in the published literature, both highlighting and testing the wide range of opinions and conclusions found in thirty years of archival writings on processing productivity.

The projects enabled by the NHPRC grants that we analyzed covered a wide range of manuscript collections, institutional archives, and local government records, though the majority focused on the large twentieth-century collections that are the focus of this study. Averaged together, the 40 grants generated a productivity figure of 9 hours per foot,[71] with individual values ranging from 67 hours per foot on the low side to 1.5 on the high. The modal average—the most frequent value in the range—was 33 hours per foot and, indeed, there was a large clustering of projects (7) in the 25–40 hours per foot range. The wide range in productivity values is not explained by type or size of repository; among the grants received by college and university archives with moderate to large programs (19), productivity rates ranged from 67 hours to 11 hours per foot. These figures are on a rough parity with those noted by Lynch and Lynch in their 1980 study of processing grants—12.7 hours per foot for all twentieth-century materials averaged. The depressing clustering of productivity expectations at the low end of the scale is also all too consistent with the evidence in the archival literature. A very disproportionate fraction of applicants (68%) expected to arrange, preserve, or describe at or close to the item level of intensity.

The beefier leg of our research comprised an in-depth e-mail survey of processing archivists across the U.S. Among the 106 data elements extractable from the survey document were two questions in which the 100 respondents were asked for their opinions about processing productivity. The mean average response to the question—"Averaging large 20th century archival collections together, what quantity (in cubic or linear footage) should a professional-level archivist, with processing as his/her sole/primary responsibility, be able to process in a one-year period?"—was 152 cubic feet. The individual responses ranged from 50 (4 respondents) to 600 (2 respondents) feet. The other question—"Averaging large 20th century archival collections together, how many hours should it take a professional-level archivist, with processing as his/her sole/primary responsibility, to process 1 cubic foot of collection materials?"—the figure was 14.8 hours. Individual responses ranged from a whopping 250 hours on the high side to 2 hours on the low. The most frequently cited

[71] It is important to mention here that none of the averages and aggregates noted in connection with the NHPRC grants research pertains exclusively to the quantities of material that were *actually* processed in the course of these grants. Of the 40 grants studied, fully 12 of them (30%) were still open at the time of our research. Therefore, the overall figures can really be said to reflect the productivity *expectations* in the original application documents, rather than realized productivity.

figure was 8 hours (18 respondents). Here again, our survey figures tend to reinforce those found in the literature. The 14.8 hours per foot average reported to us is fairly in line with the Lynch and Lynch figure of 12.7 hours and the Billy Graham Center Archives figure of 15.1 hours. The more interesting thing to note is that, while the figures from the literature reflect actual productivity viewed in retrospect, our survey figures reflect the current *expectations* of American archivists about what is both possible and reasonable. These are the productivity norms that they are either content with, or else resigned to.

The published literature, institutional processing manuals, and formal grant applications, while often minutely prescriptive, taken together end up offering no usable guidelines for processing collections. Too often they cleave to widely differing standards, even when treating the same general topic of large-scale twentieth-century archival and manuscript collections, thereby leaving us with no common sense of acceptable policies, procedures, and expectations. And our own attitudes as practitioners, as revealed in the survey data, reinforce this same lack of commonality regarding specific aspects of processing. However, a more general consistency exhibits itself in assumptions about our role as keepers and preservers and in a strong inclination to accept as not just "normal," but as "proper," certain processing metrics.

The Status Quo

Part of what the survey tells us is that there is wide variation in what archivists believe are "generally accepted norms" of processing. It may not be surprising that some of us see creating EAD finding aids as above the norm, while others consider it part of the norm (only 38% of us actually do it sometimes, usually, or always for twentieth-century collections). Probably more surprising is the variation of opinion concerning whether such things as routinely photocopying newspaper clippings, deacidifying paper, providing folder-level descriptions in finding aids, and making use copies of sound and visual material on demand are (as the survey put it) "above and beyond" standard processing practices.

While some specific processing steps vary, there is a dismaying commonality at the broad level. Many of the quality benchmarks that archivists promulgate in various writings and in survey responses cannot possibly succeed on their own as general administrative practices. Based on the most recent survey, we can summarize the processing status quo as follows: While archivists have almost entirely given up on item-level description, we continue to arrange and do multiple types of minor preservation work at the item level. While we almost uniformly create finding aids that include collection and series descriptions, administrative or biographical notes, and folder lists, barely half of us make our descriptive work accessible through OPACs or Web-mounted

documents. In both our proclivity for item-processing and our avoidance of on-line cataloging, we evince a dismaying lack of concern for user access to our holdings.

The repository survey reflects the following facts about our profession's practice of arranging twentieth-century collections. Arrangement is still often at the item level (68% sometimes, usually, or always arrange items within folders). Sixty percent of repositories separate photos from the rest of the collection. A remarkable 92% sometimes, usually, or always weed duplicates from twentieth-century collections, a practice that clearly requires item-level review. Of the 36 repositories with the biggest percentage of holdings defined as unprocessed backlogs (50% or more), 63% arrange items within folders and 86% weed items. Of the most active repositories in terms of current collecting (those bringing in 250 feet or more of material a year), 58% arrange at the item level and 82% weed duplicates.

The survey results regarding description reveal that 72% of repositories sometimes, usually, or always enter bibliographic records into an OPAC (43% do it always). Eighty-two percent of repositories sometimes, usually, or always create finding aids with collection- and series-level descriptions; 76% create finding aids with a biography or administrative history; and 74% create container lists with folder-level content description. Only 9% of repositories produce item-level lists or descriptions sometimes or more often. Significantly, 29% sometimes, usually, or always mark up finding aids in EAD, while 22% resort to HTML instead of EAD. This means that only 51% of repositories are regularly putting finding aids on-line, and more than a quarter of repositories don't use an on-line catalog. Such results indicate more agreement about how to create internal finding aids than about making information easily accessible on-line, either through a catalog or a Web-findable document.

In terms of preservation steps, the true conservatism of archival processing most clearly emerges. Sixty-three percent of repositories sometimes, usually, or always remove metal fasteners from twentieth-century collections; 85% refolder in buffered folders; 52% photocopy clippings onto archival bond paper; a third place torn items in polyester L-sleeves; 20% interleave scrapbooks and/or photo albums with acid-neutral paper. It is a telling point that only three do all of these things, suggesting that there is no consistent preservation ethos at work, but rather a disjointed and haphazard dedication to certain rituals.

Of the repositories that report that more than 50% of their holdings are unprocessed—that is, those that might be assumed to have the strongest motivation to speed processing—88% refolder twentieth-century collections sometimes, usually, or always, and 58% remove metal fasteners. Of the most active repositories in terms of current collecting (those bringing in 250 feet or more of material a year), 84% refolder twentieth-century collections sometimes,

usually, or always, and 55% remove metal fasteners with the same frequency. Thus, neither the scale of current acquisitions nor the extent of a backlog significantly alters a repository's allegiance to the most time-consuming actions that can be undertaken during processing.

Moreover, of the repositories that usually or always remove metal fasteners from twentieth-century collections, 33 report having 100% of their stack areas properly controlled for temperature and humidity. With good climate control, metal fasteners should not rust; why such determination to remove them? Similarly, of the repositories that usually or always refolder twentieth-century collections into "archival" buffered folders, 37 have completely climate-controlled stacks. It may startle some archivists to learn that *no* studies have been done on the effect that standard manila folders have on collection material when stored in proper environmental conditions. In fact, no studies exist on the effect of buffered folders on collection material stored in proper conditions.[72] We are spending lots of time and money in the hope that buffered folders can make a significant difference.

User Needs Are Deprecated

Why have admonitions to do item-level conservation taken stronger hold on so many more archivists (as reflected in their recent survey answers, as well as in the concrete evidence of their growing backlogs) than the equally clear directives to "maximize the repository's holdings available for use"? Forty years ago, Lucile Kane posited that "custodians of historical manuscripts are conservators by inclination and training. Rooted in traditions of scholarship and trained largely in intensive work with small- or moderate-sized collections, many of them find it difficult to deal with the problems inherent in the great volume of recent manuscripts and the limited physical resources of their institutions."[73]

[72] Dianne van der Reyden, Chief, Conservation Division, Library of Congress, e-mail to Mark Greene, 13 April 2004. "In answer to the questions 'Are there studies to which you could point us that quantify the improvement (presumably in terms of extended life during artificial aging experiments) resulting from refoldering? And/or studies that examine whether poor storage climate makes refoldering more or less effective?' I must answer that, to my knowledge, there are no studies addressing this query specifically. However, the Oddy Test has shown that volatile materials (which lignin containing folders are) in both ambient or poor environments (which high temperature and RH are) contaminate susceptible materials (which many documents are)."

[73] Kane, *A Guide to the Care and Administration of Manuscripts*, 35. More recently, see Frank Boles, draft of paper delivered at 2004 SAA meeting, for session "Twenty Years Later and the Box Is Blacker than Ever." "Archivists like to present themselves as preservers. This is, for example, one of our profession's favorite postures in press releases and annual evaluations to our boss. We are forever talking about how we saved this thing from destruction or preserved that thing from the ravages of time. That's our pr image and our usual strategic niche in the tussle for organizational resources, but I think it is far more than that. I believe it reflects our deepest professional beliefs and psyche. What archivists really see themselves as are guardians of the past: the devoted followers of Hilary Jenkinson's 'keeper' mentality." We are grateful to Boles for permitting us to read and use this draft.

This is simply a sharper statement of a fundamental tension in our profession. Is our ultimate goal the physical and contextual preservation of records, or is it serving users?[74]

For example, in the introductory chapter to *Managing Archives and Archival Institutions*, Greg Bradsher writes that "archivists have two objectives. Their most fundamental objective is to establish and maintain control, both physical and intellectual, over the records transferred to them. . . . The archivist's secondary objective is to make their archives, or the information in them, available to researchers. . . ."[75] More frequent have been statements, such as this one from Frederic Miller, that place preservation and access on a par: "Archival and manuscript repositories exist to preserve historical records and make them available for use."[76]

But we should give heed to SAA's *Planning for the Archival Profession* when it calls "the use of archival records. . .the ultimate purpose of identification and administration."[77] James O'Toole has expanded on this point, noting that archivists "develop a characteristic set of values about what they do, why they do it, and why it is important to do." The first value he identifies is that "archival records exist in order to be used, not merely saved for their own sake."[78] Those

[74] The most vocal and consistent advocate for a user-centered revision of archives administration has been Elsie Freeman Finch. See especially, Elsie Freeman, "Buying Quarter Inch Holes: Public Support through Results," *Midwestern Archivist* 10 (1985): 89–97; Elsie Freeman, "In the Eye of the Beholder: Archives Administration from the User's Point of View," *American Archivist* 47 (Spring 1984): 111–23; "Soap and Education: Archival Training, Public Service, and the Profession—An Essay," *Midwestern Archivist* 16 (1991): 87–94. Terry Cook has criticized this view, most sharply in "Viewing the World Upside Down: Reflections on the Theoretical Underpinnings of Archival Public Programming," *Archivaria* 31 (Winter 1990–91): 123–34. Cook argues that the records, and not the user, should be the center of the archivist's universe. To be sure, a user-centered approach can cut the other way. When they gather in bars to complain about unrealistic demands from researchers, many archivists suggest that just as our users seem to want us to acquire and save everything, they likewise expect item-level access to everything (on the Web ideally, but certainly on-site). Certainly there is some truth to this, but Gordon, *Using the Nation's Documentary Heritage* and our own more limited survey of users suggest that if they understand the trade-off—some information about lots of collections versus lots of information about some collections—they would choose less detail. This only makes sense. Whether a researcher is a scholar or a genealogist, he or she doesn't have any chance at all of finding important material in a collection that is not open for research because it is unprocessed; they can at least find it in a less intensively processed collection, even if finding that information would take some digging.

[75] James Gregory Bradsher, "An Introduction to Archives," in *Managing Archives and Archival Institutions*, 10. It is telling, in this regard, to note that only 9% of survey respondents asked users about processing priorities/trade-offs, though 34% said they might change procedures/priorities if users supported that. This reflects, it seems, a basic disinclination to accept that use is the ultimate purpose of the archival endeavor.

[76] Miller, *Arranging and Describing Archives and Manuscripts*, 3. See also, T. R. Schellenberg, *Modern Archives: Principles and Techniques* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956), 224: "The end of all archival effort is to preserve valuable records and make them available for use. Everything an archivist does is concentrated on this dual objective."

[77] Society of American Archivists, *Planning for the Archival Profession* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1986), 22.

[78] James M. O'Toole, *Understanding Archives and Manuscripts* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1990), 58.

who champion a user-centered archival profession believe that "Records that are merely accumulated and never arranged or described are as unavailable to future users as records that have been destroyed."[79]

It follows that, if we are going to effectively serve our users, we must adopt a much more flexible conception of what it means to "process" a collection. One approach holds, "A collection is 'processed' whenever it can be used productively for research. Our system recognizes that it may be desirable to process at the collection level, the item level, or at any intermediate level in the processing continuum. The level of processing may even vary from series to series."[80] But this approach is much more complicated than the record-focused approach. The latter approach "dictates what must be done to a collection whether or not the collection warrants it. . . . [W]e process all collections to an ideal standard level."[81] This makes sense if the goal is to do the best by the records themselves. The former approach, however, requires us to make choices and set priorities: "The key questions to be answered in setting priorities are: Which collections to do first?; What level of detail is required?; How much time to spend on each collection?"[82] Choices can be uncomfortable. What Frank Boles says in this regard about appraisal may apply equally to the notion of employing a variety of different levels of processing, that archivists don't do it "because they think they will be criticized for making mistakes. This can become an almost paralyzing fear in some archivists who will wring their hands endlessly about potential uses and users."[83]

If this seems harsh, perhaps it needs to be. After all, it was forty years ago that Bordin and Warner acknowledged that "Nine times out of ten, time, money, staff will require that the large collection of recent papers be left in the order in which they are received. A cursory inventory is made, a card or two of general description is placed in the manuscript catalog and from there on the researcher is on his own."[84] True, their acknowledgment was grudging; they viewed such shortcuts as an "expediency" that would one day be remedied when there were more resources. But they knew better than to try to do "permanent processing" until and unless the ratio of collections to staff swung heavily in favor of staff. That day, of course, has never come and never will. But we still permit item-focused assumptions and practices to frustrate our administration of large collections. We find ourselves unable to break out of a cycle that produces ever-larger backlogs.

Why does this enervating reality endure? It endures for at least three reasons. First, it persists in large part because we allow our pride in craft to get

[79] Thibodeau, "Archival Arrangement and Description," 67.

[80] Slotkin and Lynch, "An Analysis of Processing Procedures," 157.

[81] Desnoyers, "When Is It Processed?" 7.

[82] Brunton and Robinson, "Arrangement and Description," 224.

[83] Boles, draft of paper delivered at the 2004 SAA annual meeting.

[84] Bordin and Warner, *Modern Manuscript Library*, 72.

in the way of our real objective: making materials accessible to users. Sometimes the love of craftsmanship degenerates into mere fastidiousness, an obsession with cleanliness and order that serves none of the real business interests of user, repository, or archivist. One archivist put to words what we think is a widespread horror at "sloppy" processing: "If all those letters were to be unfolded and carefully placed in acid-free folders chronologically, but you're rushed to meet some quantification figures because you had the flu, it becomes easier to throw them all in one folder."[85] Why do we care?

Our users, tellingly, seem much less concerned about these housekeeping issues than we do. Only 10% of users in our small survey indicated that they were at all concerned with the level of dirt and tidiness of collections. One respondent, checking the statement "I would accept generally greater levels of dirt and untidiness in processed collections," added parenthetically "Dirt Sc[h]mirt. Research is a dirty business."[86]

Second, we have placed preservation far ahead of access in our priorities by establishing as "proper" the removal of metal fasteners and complete refoldering. No clear mandate for this exists—archival manuals and other publications are quite divided on this principle—rather, it seems to be a self-imposed burden. That burden may derive from the heavy legacy of a profession rooted more in service to "the stuff" than in service to patrons, a profession that exalts the value of the physical item.

Third, it persists because we have allowed techniques appropriate to a different age to survive unchallenged in an era dominated by collection materials that are profoundly different in both volume and character. Techniques and expectations that made great sense when acquisitions consisted of a *relatively* small

[85] Dean DeBolt, posting to Archives and Archivists Listserv (hereafter Archives List), Friday, 12 December 2003, 08:49:41, Re: Project management questions. See also Mary Lynn Ritzenthaler, *Preserving Archives and Manuscripts*, 83:"There is a further, perhaps psychological, advantage to replacing acidic folders and boxes with new, high quality containers that have an alkaline reserve: records that show evidence of care and attention will elicit careful handling by users, while records that look timeworn and sit in dirty, ragged folders and boxes give the impression that they have little value to the repository or anyone else." Even Schellenberg, generally not interested in superficial concerns, notes in *The Management of Archives*, 199, that "to achieve the order and neatness found in library stacks, an archivist should pay attention to certain physical activities, namely, packing, shelving, and labeling."

[86] Half of the researchers stated that "I would accept generally lesser levels of organization in processed collections" in exchange for access to more collections; 44% said they would accept lesser levels of description if it would speed access to collections. When we parsed the options more finely and asked respondents to rank their preferences (1 being highest priority, 7 being lowest), it was clear that this set of users valued basic intellectual access to more collections more highly than detailed access to fewer collections—and the only action given a lower priority than conservation was appraisal (suggesting our users would still, all other things being equal, prefer we never throw anything away):

Provide basic descriptions (such as catalog records) for all collections: 2.2
Provide basic content information (like box lists) for all collections: 2.9
Provide detailed content information (like full finding aids) for all collections: 3.2
Acquire new collections: 3.8
Digitize collections and put them on the Web: 4.2
Provide full conservation to collections: 4.5
Appraise and weed collections: 5.6

volume of carefully created document types, often unique and visually impressive, make no sense in an era where acquisitions comprise a huge amount of frequently redundant material, in myriad forms, with no inherent appeal apart from their informational content.

Why else would we so fiercely assert the "necessity" of removing every piece of metal from a collection, when that collection will be stored in a climate-controlled environment engineered to prevent rust? Why else would we spend so much money and time replacing every folder when in many instances the office folders the records arrive in are no more acidic than the paper inside them, when our users are crying out for faster access? Why else would we so methodically organize and describe every collection to the same ideal level despite authoritative (though admittedly not unchallenged) articles spanning fifty years that sensibly advise us to vary our level depending on the specific size, original order, and plausible use of each collection?

It is a puzzle. And we insist on following these unhelpful precepts despite admitting that our donors, our users, and our resource allocators are all growing impatient with the time it takes to process collections and with the size of our backlogs. We think nothing of the fact that it took us (at one repository) two years and $150,000 of staff resources and supplies to process one 680-cubic-foot collection.[87] Though to be sure, while $200 a foot for processing costs is not extravagant by our current unwritten standards, it probably indicates for this project a lack of grant money—when we hit up NHPRC we often spend over $500 a foot on processing projects.[88] Indeed, we go out of our way to insist that we must never sacrifice processing "quality" simply to achieve quantity.[89]

[87] This information was relayed as part of an informal e-mail exchange with Mark Greene by a member of the SAA Congressional Papers Roundtable; in context the figures were put forward as typical of a congressional processing project. The standard envisioned by this repository is not an anomaly, unfortunately, particularly in terms of congressional collections. One respondent to our repository survey noted spending $300,000 over five years to process 700 feet of a House member's papers. Conversely, the Minnesota Historical Society processed 1,000 feet of a senator's papers in one year for only the cost of supplies and the salary of one professional archivist; if preprocessing appraisal work is included, it would still be less than half the cost (i.e., approximately $100,000, including benefits, for 1,000 feet).

[88] NHPRC was gracious enough to permit us to review processing grant proposals and final reports for the period of the 1990s. All reference to costs or rates for NHPRC grants are from this review. We requested similar access to NEH processing grants, but were refused.

[89] For example, consider these responses to a listserv poster who was asked by her boss about defining workable metrics for her archive unit (subject heading for the thread is "Re Project management question"): "Your question frightens me. My first reaction is: As an archivist, first and foremost, a processing archivist (besides all of my other duties as primary archivist and member of the faculty), I am hesitant to put strict and general time constraints on processing. Each and every collection is unique and distinct from every other collection" —Karen Peterson, posting to Archives List, 12 December 2003, 07:51:46. "Certain supervisors with no exposure to archives could look at that report and give [the processor] a hard time if they failed to meet the standards the supervisor set based upon that report. Although I expect that you will really come up [with] some sort of average time for processing, many supervisors who know nothing about archives may well take that number as a requirement for any and all collections" —Charles R. Schultz, posting to the Archives List, 12 December 2003, 6:41. "I would urge caution on quantification, because in a pinch, you begin to sacrifice quality for quantity"—Dean DeBolt, posting to Archives List, 12 December 2003, 08:49:41. These posts echo Gracy, *Archives and Manuscripts: Arrangement and Description*, 2: "Each collection and record group is unique, each exhibits its own personality. . . ."

No wonder, then, that while 10% of survey respondents believe it reasonable for a professional archivist to process more than a foot a day, or over 300 feet a year, about half set their sights on 75 to 150 feet a year—except with grant money, at which point that figure can drop to 50 feet a year and less.

If 250 feet a year is possible even with widespread adherence to the spectral goals of removing all metal, refoldering all material, and parity of effort for all collections, just think how much we could do by breaking free of those "requirements." Would something be lost by beginning to privilege the speed of processing over the careful examination of every document? Certainly. Our question is whether we might not gain much more than we would lose.

A Call for Change

A wide range of survey statistics and a wealth of published and unpublished literature point to our profession's processing approach failing by any reasonable measure to address the reality of late twentieth century collections. But the time finally seems ripe to challenge U.S. archivists to change. In 2003, the Association of Research Libraries held a "summit" to discuss the problem of collection backlogs,[90] which brought attention to the issue even if it changed little. Some institutions are implementing truly creative and cost-effective processing approaches, even though to date little of this work has appeared in the literature, and rarely at conferences.[91] A parallel reengineering is even occurring in library practice. Cornell, for one, has succeeded in reducing cataloging backlogs for library materials despite staff reductions through

[90] Little has come from that effort to date, and it was disappointing to read in the "white paper" that served as the background for the meeting, and in the few presentations during the meeting that have been posted on the Web, that what was largely being suggested was to dedicate more resources to the same approaches—adding yet another layer of work, to boot, by stressing flexible Web linking to finding aids and collection materials. See, particularly, Barbara M. Jones, comp., "Hidden Collections, Scholarly Barriers: Creating Access to Unprocessed Special Collections Materials in North America's Research Libraries—A White Paper for the Association of Research Libraries Task Force on Special Collections" (June 2003), http://www.arl.org/collect/spcoll/ehc/HiddenCollsWhitePaperJun6.pdf (accessed 19 May 2004).

[91] One of the few recent sessions was "Undaunted by the Deluge: Case Studies in Managing an Archives Backlog," at the 2000 SAA conference in Denver. In addition to the work being done in the institutions represented by the two investigators for this project, we know of useful work occurring at Arizona State University, Georgia State University, Yale University (Archives and Manuscripts Division), the Pennsylvania Historical Society, and the Wisconsin Historical Society, only one of which has published anything about its efforts. (See Pam Hackbart-Dean and Christine de Catanzaro, "The Strongest Link: The Management and Processing of Archival Collections," *Archival Issues* 27, no. 2 [2002]: 125–36). However, speakers from Yale and the Pennsylvania Historical Society presented findings at the 2004 Society of American Archivists meeting. Archivists and manuscript curators at Yale, University of Montana, and Texas Christian University also agreed to pilot implementation of the recommendations in this article and will report on that work at the 2005 SAA meeting.

various procedural and technical innovations and by redefining "quality."[92] We archivists have an identical need to redefine quality as applied to the function of processing.

"*It is the duty of an archivist to open up the research treasures that are entrusted to his care. . . . He should not only accumulate and preserve documentary material; he should also make it accessible to others* (emphasis added)."[93] It must be our aim to provide sufficient physical and intellectual access to collections for research to be possible, without the necessity of processing each collection to an ideal or arbitrary standard. Tension between housekeeping compulsions and user needs must be resolved in favor of user needs: we cannot continue to let item-level preservation work undermine more rational decisions to arrange a collection only to series or folder level. "The level of preservation work that is done on a collection is linked to the level of other processing work done. If the collection is not to be rearranged at the item level, it is doubtful that staples or paper clips will be removed."[94]

We should be paying more attention to achieving basic physical and intellectual control over, and thus affording research access to, *all* our holdings, rather than being content to process a few of them to perfection. "Progressive refinement does not mean that all records are described to the same level of detail, but only that work on all records should proceed in the same direction, even if the stopping place varies with different materials. Items should not be described before the folders of which they are a part, nor series before the larger collection."[95] What this means is that all collections should have collection-level intellectual control before any collection receives folder-level control. Note, in this context, Schellenberg's admonition to give researchers first and foremost an overview of a repository's "entire holdings" and to "forego the detailed description of individual record items" until those summaries are complete.[96]

More importantly, researchers cannot come to do research if at least minimal information about the collections is not available to them. If we must comfort ourselves with the belief that one day we will be able to do "proper" processing, so be it, as long as that fiction does not interfere with the first and most important level of processing:

[92] "At Cornell, for instance, the central technical services unit has decreased its workforce by 20 percent in the past seven years, while reducing the backlog and the time from point of receipt to point of use. They have done so by replacing manual processing methods with technology-based methods, *eliminating redundancies, streamlining workflows, minimizing handling*, and making selective use of outsourcing. *They have redefined 'quality' as the appropriate balance between processing speed, cost, and fullness of bibliographic treatment* (emphasis added)." Anne R. Kenney, "Collections, Preservation, and the Changing Resource Base," *Access in the Future Tense* (Washington, D.C.: Council on Libraries and Information Resources, April 2004), 26. http://www.clir.org/pubs/reports/pub126/kenney.html (accessed 4 June 2004).

[93] Schellenberg, *The Management of Archives*, 108.

[94] Slotkin and Lynch, "An Analysis of Processing Procedures," 159.

[95] Miller, *Arranging and Describing Archives and Manuscripts*, 90.

[96] For full quote and citation, see note 23.

> Of course, few manuscript libraries will be able to realize the ideal of having their resources adequately cataloged or otherwise provided with suitable finding aids. Some collections will of necessity have to be inadequately cataloged or not cataloged at all except for a single card containing a brief description of the papers waiting for a happier day when staff time is available to do a thorough job.[97]

While some of us are waiting for that happier day, all of us should be working toward a new set of basic assumptions about how we process most of our collections.

This is not abstract theorizing, calling on the profession to do things that are untested, unrealistic, or impractical.[98] Some repositories are already implementing these changes. Several have established a category between "processed" and "unprocessed," variously called "partially processed," "use processed," "minimum processed," and other monikers, which can be defined as a collection that has been accessioned and for which a container list has been created, but which has not been physically arranged, refoldered, or de–paper-clipped.[99] Such partial

[97] Bordin and Warner, *Modern Manuscript Library*, 67. See also Schellenberg, *The Management of Archives*, 242, which identified for archivists the "end of establishing bibliographical control over the holdings of a particular repository. . .in the form of catalogs and guides." See also Susan Beth Wray, Vesta Lee Gordon, and Edmund Berkeley, Jr., *Manuscripts Collections Processing Manual* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Library, 1976), 2, which also notes grudgingly but more realistically:

> Ideally, all collections should be processed as completely as our competence will allow. Because collections differ from one another both in their relative importance and their state of preservation, and because of work loads, the budget, and other factors which must be considered, it is the policy of the Manuscripts Department to view the processing requirements of each collection individually rather than to attempt to apply every step in our procedures to each collection. The processor may, therefore, be required to apply a variety of relatively complicated processes to one collection, and only to rebox and label another.

[98] It is evident, from the repository survey, that change as such is acceptable to most archives: 76% reported having made changes to their processing regime in the last 10 years. Disappointingly, only 22% made changes aimed at speeding processing or providing intellectual access to unprocessed collections. Indeed, at many repositories, changes—including adding EAD mark-up to the existing workflow—may further slow the rate of processing.

[99] The respondent for a private university with more than 50,000 cubic feet of holdings gave this detailed explanation of minimum processing and why his repository decided to employ it:

> When considering the size of our backlog, so defined, we realized that we had more than fifteen years worth of work ahead of us provided we kept the same level of staffing and stopped adding to our holdings. This proved untenable, since we still add much more to our holdings than we fully process each year, so we decided to re-conceptualize the backlog.
>
> Our first attempt at this resulted in the development of what we call "minimum standards processing." The idea behind minimum standards is to streamline processing by simplifying it and essentially removing the professional-level work from it. So minimum standards processing consists of the following steps:
> – making sure the materials are in a somewhat comprehensible order (we only do arrangement when absolutely necessary).
> – Preservation crises are addressed (materials are re-boxed and sometimes, but not always, re-foldered).
> – Restricted materials are located and segregated.
> – Creation of a finding aid with a box/folder level inventory and an Overview (described above), which also gets entered into the catalog along with a few obvious subject headings.
>
> Minimum standards processing is supervised by professionals but carried out by para-professionals and students. The vast majority of our collections in our "backlog" have been slated for minimum standards processing and we initially planned to begin with the collection that had been with us for the longest time and move forward.

processing can and should include creation of collection-level catalog records, as one respondent noted:

> For many years, we have conducted "preliminary processing" for all accessions in our manuscript collections and university archives record units. This preliminary processing consists of creating or adding to a finding aid that, at minimum, consists of a title page, a section called the "Overview of the Papers/Records/Collection," and a container level inventory. The Overview contains fields that map to required fields in a MARC record, so our OPAC is updated as part of this process as well.

Archivists at some of these repositories, like Bordin and Warner before them, are hoping for better times when these collections can be fully processed, but in the meantime the collections have been made accessible to researchers in at least a rudimentary way. A few of these repositories create container lists in databases and intellectually organize the folders for clearer presentation to researchers, without having to do the physical reorganization.[100] As one respondentrepresenting a state historical society with 15,000-plus feet of holdings stated: "For large collections that have 'preliminary' inventories we use that inventory as the final inventory—we 'arrange' the collection by sorting the inventory in a database—like material appears together."

Another respondent, from a public university explained:

> Increasingly we're relying on preliminary inventories (done in Microsoft Access), which doesn't jive well with our recent EAD implementation, but it does make things available in house more quickly. Another way we've mitigated is by basically stopping removal of paper clips and staples unless the collection is very small, embrittled to the point that the fasteners could result in loss of *information*, or specific documents have *very* high artifactual/intrinsic value. . . .

Yet another respondent, from a state historical society, noted pointedly: "We often have a good preliminary box list that will stand for quite a long time, but allow people to use the collection in the meantime. *I think detailed processing is often done for archivists, not for researchers*" (emphasis added). At least two respondents who represent institutions employing a minimal type of processing feel, as one put it: "that many share my views, but are reluctant to voice them."

This reluctance stems from the perception that minimal or partial processing is substandard and that admitting to doing it opens an archivist and his or her program to professional scorn. It is time, however, to redefine what passes for "standard" processing and to *make backlogs more embarrassing to the profession than failure to remove paper clips.*

[100] The technique of reordering folders for the finding aid without concomitant physical reorganization is described in Hackbart-Dean and de Catanzaro, "The Strongest Link," 133; Georgia State uses the approach to deal expeditiously with additions to existing collections, but other places use it from the start for partially processed collections.

Principles for Change

So, in large measure, the recommendations that follow simply give voice to the small but growing number of archivists who have quietly abandoned traditional approaches to processing. Such a shift, as radical as it may seem to some, will still only allow minimal progress on our backlogs, once the quantity of new accessions is taken into account. Given the size of those backlogs, no processing archivists will be working themselves out of jobs anytime soon. A few basic principles support the processing guidelines that we are suggesting and serve the preeminent goal of maximizing user access to archives.

The Golden Minimum

The goal should be to maximize the accessibility of collection materials to users. Other efforts and objectives must be harnessed to serve that overarching goal, instead of to compete with it. What is the least we can do to get the job done in a way that is adequate to user needs, now and in the future? Deviation from that minimum should only occur for clearly demonstrable business reasons. Second, arrangement, preservation, and description work should all occur in harmony, at a common level of detail—that is, if arrangement occurs only to the series level, so should description and preservation. However, there is no need for all series, for example, in an archival unit to be processed with the same level of intensity, or to the same level of detail. Some series may warrant more than the minimum effort. Here, again, clearly demonstrable business reasons should apply. A final general principle can be derived from a remark attributed to computer pioneer Roger Needham of the University of Cambridge: "Good research is done with a shovel, not with tweezers: you should find an area where you can get a lot out of it fast." Similarly, *good processing is done with a shovel, not with tweezers.* These principles play out in all the task areas that make up archival processing.

Arrangement

Notions about arranging archival materials have always been predicated on the linked precepts of *respect des fonds* and original order. The first precept tells us to take care in maintaining together the whole of the materials created by an entity, along with evidence of the context of their creation. The second instructs us that, in dealing with this organic whole, we need to preserve the existing order and interrelationships (to whatever extent they still exist) among the physical units comprising the materials, whether series, files, or items.[101] This organic

[101] One noted attempt to challenge the theory and utility of original order is Frank Boles, "Disrespecting Original Order," *American Archivist* 45 (Winter 1982): 26–32.

order is the true intellectual basis for arrangement of collection materials, and it is the objective we ought to be pursuing.

How does all of this play out in the act of processing? First, understand the whole of the materials. Then, identify the major organic groups (subgroups, series) that compose the whole and present them in a way that expresses their natural relationships. In looking at arrangement from the top down, one sees that the work at the top of the chain is much more important than the work at the bottom.

Research is much more effectively enabled by performing arrangement work at the series level than it is by shuffling around items within folders, or even folders within a file. As one reference archivist with over twenty years of experience noted:

> I don't think most researchers care how a collection is arranged or described. They are often unaware or uninterested in the hierarchical structure imposed by series/subseries. All they care about is finding the folder headings that have meaning to them.[102]

If a user is given an understanding of the whole and the structure and identity of its meaningful parts, then the vagaries that occur within a folder will not prove daunting, and probably not even confusing. As Schellenberg said so long ago, and so rightly, "Usually the order in which individual record items within a series are arranged does not significantly reveal how things were done. The order seldom has a presumptive value and usually must be judged strictly on its merits."[103]

Truly, much of what passes for arrangement in processing work is really just overzealous housekeeping, writ large. Our professional fastidiousness, our reluctance to be perceived as sloppy or uncaring by users and others has encouraged a widespread fixation on tasks that do not need to be performed. This misguided focus adds a tremendous amount of time to processing projects of any magnitude. When factored out to encompass all the work on a collection of 100 cubic feet, the origins and intractability of our backlogs become clear.

Certainly it is true that the order of folders in a series can, especially in large collections, affect a researcher's ability to find relevant material. Partly for this reason, archivists automatically pursue arrangement at the folder level after defining and ordering series. And it is usually during this folder reorganization that all the file folders themselves are replaced and new label text laboriously handwritten on each tab. But here we have allowed ourselves to conflate intel-

[102] Private e-mail to the authors.

[103] Schellenberg, "Archival Principles of Arrangement," 158.There is really no brief in archival theory for a conscious and willful reordering of collection materials on *any* hierarchical level. We are not enjoined by our tradition or literature to shift around the files within a series, let alone to be shuffling and redealing items within folders.

lectual arrangement and physical arrangement. With a fraction of the effort and time required to physically reorganize a large collection, now we can reorder it intellectually with our computers to assist researchers (see Fig. 1).

Container list for unorganized collection	**Inventory for same collection**	
Box 1	Series: Committees	
Exec Committee. Minutes, 1961–67	Exec Committee Minutes, 1924–30	Box 1
Exec. Committee. Minutes, 1924–30	Exec Committee Minutes, 1961–67	Box 1
Strategic Planning, 1985	Exec Committee Minutes, 1965–70	Box 2
Report to Board, 1988	Exec Committee Minutes, 1970–85	Box 3
Report to Board, 1986	Marketing Committee, 1970–85	Box 2
Newsletters, 1932–50	Personnel Committee, 1950–67	Box 3
Box 2	Series: Board Reports	
Report to Board, 1987	1986	Box 1
Annual Budgets, 1940–80	1987	Box 2
Exec Committee. Minutes, 1965–70	1988	Box 1
Newsletters, 1960–72	1989	Box 3
Marketing Committee, 1970–85	Series: Newsletters	
Box 3	1932–50	Box 1
Report to Board, 1989	1940–60	Box 3
Exec Committee Minutes, 1970–85	1960–72	Box 2
Newsletters, 1940–60	Series: Budgets	
Personnel Committee, 1950–67	1940–80	Box 2
	Series: Planning	
	1985	Box 1

Figure 1. Computers allow us to organize collections intellectually without reorganizing them physically

The instant objection to such an approach is that more boxes will need to be retrieved for a researcher who wants to see all the material within a single series. This is true, but it is not an effective argument. For some researchers, this approach may result in fewer boxes being retrieved (it all depends on what the researcher is after), but in any event, as one of our survey respondents confirms, "For large collections we're doing less and less physical arrangement, using our databases to locate files in different areas of the collection. This is retrieval

intensive but that's a lot less expensive than arranging large collections!"[104] It is also much more effective in placating our donors, users, and resource allocators.

For these reasons, we believe that, in normal or typical situations, the physical arrangement of materials in archival groups and manuscript collections should not take place below the series level. With regard to the "typical" collection, we should not manipulate individual items for the sake of improving their literal arrangement. Nor should we any longer insist that the small amounts of space saved by weeding at the item level are remotely worth the amount of time such action takes. The perceived importance and research value of the collection materials should dictate ultimate decisions about the intensity and level at which such tasks will be performed. But, failing these sorts of exceptions, a given collection—and especially large, modern collections—should not receive arrangement work below the file level.

The second principle for change also comes into play here: *not all series and all files in a collection need to be arranged at the same level of intensity.* One series may be good to go; another series may need some reshuffling of its constituent files or folders; a certain group of files within a series may need arrangement work at close to the item level because of its great historical importance or the intensity of expected use. By selectively arranging individual collection components, rather than rearranging everything, we can often achieve the greatest labor and access efficiencies, focusing attention on the few real problems or needs so as to achieve a uniform accessibility throughout the materials.

But is this truly a practical prescription for family papers and the records of small businesses and nonprofit organizations, which we have told ourselves for decades are less well-organized than university records or similar institutional archives? More graphically, how can a series-level approach be applied to those collections that David Gracy once eloquently described this way: "Despite the archivist's best efforts, many collections seem to arrive straight from a giant combine that takes the papers, jumbles them, and then bales them in old suitcases, steamer trunks, and cardboard boxes."[105]

[104] No doubt this cost-benefit analysis would be altered for a repository with many of its holdings stored off-site, particularly the few that are only able to do next-day retrieval by truck. In such cases more weight might need to be given to detailed description, to facilitate long-distance retrieval. Even then, however, it must be asked whether it is better to have minimal description of all the off-site material rather than detailed description of just some. And it would be well to note that some university libraries hold hundreds of thousands of volumes in off-site storage, retrieved at best once a day, and relying solely on standard bibliographic records to assist patrons in selection (for example, Johns Hopkins University, which by 1996 stored half a million volumes off site with an average 52-hour retrieval time, Council on Library and Information Resources, *Comprehensive Access to Off-Site Print Materials at Johns Hopkins University: Research Brief 3* (November 1997), http://www.clir.org/pubs/research/rb3.html).

[105] David B. Gracy, *An Introduction to Archives and Manuscripts* (New York: Special Libraries Association, 1981), 22.

The obstacle here is much more apparent than real. Collections that are truly unorganized should be sorted/ordered only into series—subseries if the series are very large—unless, again, their perceived research importance demands more detailed work. While it is imperative that a researcher be able to encounter a series of correspondence rather than a complete jumble of correspondence, background information, financial material, and so on, it is less necessary that the correspondence be meticulously organized (ordering it into decades, for example, for a large collection, would be sufficient).[106] Is this perfect? Not by any means, but it affords a much better balance of costs and benefits than does our current dedication to detailed arrangement.

It is particularly necessary, in some respects, to abide by these guidelines when arranging smaller collections. It is tempting to spend ghastly amounts of time (especially when measured per cubic foot) on small collections just because they are small. It is one thing when the small collection is also extremely important, but many small collections are marginal at best. Many years ago, Ken Duckett, generally an advocate of detailed arrangement and description, noted that "Small collections have tended to be over-cataloged, and often curators could not justify time spent on them."[107] Though we are not going that far, it would not be wholly unreasonable to assume that researchers can muddle through a cubic foot of completely unfoldered, unorganized material; the point is that it is not worth organizing that foot of material to the item level. "The goal is to make the most, and the most valuable, material available the quickest with the greatest control," Gracy admonished going on to quote a staff member at the Newberry Library: " 'How much time should and can the library spend on manuscript work in the beginning to save how much time of the scholar or the administrator in the end?' "[108]

An early reader of this paper described our recommendations as "technocratic" and argued that "processing is what hooks many a young enthusiastic professional. They get into the field because they love the stuff. . . . I'm concerned that teaching the minimum methods will turn off people who might otherwise be drawn to the field."[109] We would argue, based on our personal experience, that fast processing does not need to completely separate the archivist from the

[106] While we believe that refoldering is often unnecessary, it remains important that each folder (whether original or supplied by the archives) should be easy to replace in its proper box when it is (inevitably) alienated from its context (e.g., found days later in the photocopy room). This does not mean that each folder must bear all the hierarchical information from the finding aid, or even that the label have any text on it at all—the collection number, box number, and folder-number-within-box is the minimum necessary. Since the archival community has not been willing to embrace adhesive labels and insists that any label information added to a folder be done by hand, minimizing what needs to be penciled on the labels will make a significant difference in the time it takes to process a sizable collection.

[107] Duckett, *Modern Manuscripts*, 142.

[108] Gracy, *Archives and Manuscripts: Arrangement and Description*, 45.

[109] Private e-mail to the authors.

contents of "the stuff." One of us spent a decade doing appraisal of large collections at the very level suggested in this paper for processing and still was able to read the occasional document (and share it with colleagues). After all, to know enough about a series to be able to appraise, arrange, or describe it, an archivist has to examine a folder or two at more detail. The other of us, with over twenty years as a processing archivist, knows that a processor can operate at a fairly high level (e.g., series) and still absorb a great deal of content from the records. He processed thousands of feet of railroad and other corporate records over the years—rarely poking around within folders. Despite that, he always came away with a sense of the creator and the content of the records. An archivist can get to know the forest pretty well without examining each tree, coming away with a better sense of the big picture.

Description

If arrangement can be said to be based upon the principles of *respect des fonds* and original order, then the *description* of archival materials finds its basis in their arrangement. Kathleen Roe states it simply and clearly in her SAA manual on arrangement and description when she says that "Following arrangement and drawing from it, the archivist describes the records. This involves developing a summary 'representation' or access tool that includes information on the context in which the materials were created, their physical characteristics, and their informational content."[110] Our descriptive tools are, in fact, often referred to as surrogates for the collection materials themselves. They represent them and they afford access to them. The point of good description is to both reflect and explain the intellectual arrangement of the materials—and to a lesser extent, their physical arrangement—so that users can efficiently determine whether any materials may interest them and, if so, how to locate them within the collection.

In their primer on archival organization and description, Michael Fox and Peter Wilkerson note three fundamental purposes of description: to facilitate users' discovery of materials, to establish authenticity of the holdings, and to satisfy administrative needs.[111] It is no accident that user needs appears at the top of the list. The principal reason for archival description is to enable and to ease access by users. As Roe notes in her manual, "Arrangement and description are perhaps most intimately connected with reference services because the purpose of description is to make the records accessible for users."[112] The

[110] Roe, *Arranging & Describing Archives & Manuscripts*, 7.

[111] Michael J. Fox and Peter L. Wilkerson, *Introduction to Archival Organization and Description: Access to Cultural Heritage* (Los Angeles: Getty Information Institute, 2002), 2.

[112] Roe, *Arranging & Describing Archives & Manuscripts*, 9.

descriptive surrogates—principally catalog entries and collection inventories—help the user (and the other principal beneficiary, the reference archivist) to discover the collection among all the other repository materials, to identify it as a relevant body of materials, and then to locate desired materials from among those that compose it.

Although description is obviously a critical archival function that serves multiple roles, it needn't be long-winded, laborious, or minutely detailed to be effective. A crisp, simple presentation with minimal verbiage often provides the most effective representation of collection materials. Indeed, the literary warrant for brevity goes back at least to the 1898 Dutch manual that is often viewed as the foundational modern expression of arrangement and description theory. One of the sections comprising the Muller, Feith and Fruin work states:

> 37. In the description of an archival collection the important point is that the inventory should serve merely as a guide; it should therefore give an outline of the contents of the collection and not of the contents of the documents.[113]

Archivists who have written authoritatively about description since then have argued for brevity and conciseness, and never for verbosity.

But how brief can we be and still serve the user's needs adequately? The literature on description, and our own experience, suggest that we can scale back our assumptions and still represent rich collection materials in a manner adequate to researcher needs. A couple of simple rules can guide us. First, following from arrangement itself, description should proceed in a top-down manner from the most general level to the most specific. Second, we should record at each hierarchical level the information pertinent to that level and not repeat information from level to level.[114] Following these principles, we can create a finding aid structure that will maximize user access with the least amount of effort.

The first objective is to describe the whole of the materials *at a level of detail appropriate to that level of arrangement*. In our current toolkit, this is the catalog record. Here in a compact and fairly easy to create form is sufficient information to find the collection and assess its overall relevance to the user. Then what? Since we have identified the series level as the standard baseline level for arranging collection materials, we place our greatest descriptive efforts there. We can accomplish this with a few simple inventory components. We should include a brief note about the collection's overall context—a biographical or historical

[113] S. Muller Fz., J. A. Feith, and R. Fruin Th.Az., *Manual for the Arrangement and Description of Archives*, trans. Arthur H. Leavitt, 2nd. ed. (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2003), 100.

[114] These two principles are discussed in much greater detail in the International Council on Archives Committee on Descriptive Standards, *ISAD(G): General International Standard Archival Description*, 2d ed. (Ottawa: ICA, 2000),12, and in *Describing Archives: A Content Standard* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2004), xii–xiv.

sketch, preferably taken wholesale from background documents in the collection. This should be followed by a brief scope and content note for each series within the collection. This, then, represents the most detailed level at which we need to prepare descriptive narratives.

An unfortunate tendency on the part of processing archivists is to use the preparation of these text notes as an excuse to demonstrate their own knowledge (of both collection and historical context) and writing ability. Perhaps this is an attempt to demonstrate professionalism but, if so, it is a misguided one that further reduces processing productivity. The goal should always be to convey such narrative content and contextual information as briefly as possible and with as little recourse to outside sources as possible. Let researchers create significant essays out of or about the collection at hand. *The archivist's job is simply to represent the materials sufficient to affording acceptable access. Let's waste neither our own valuable time researching and writing lengthy narratives, nor our researchers' time by forcing them to read more verbiage than necessary.* The final step is to prepare container lists enumerating the files that each series comprises. And, at this point, the minimum acceptable description is complete.

In performing this quite rudimentary set of tasks, have we really covered the bases sufficient to affording decent access? Kathleen Roe's requirements for good description remind us that we need to represent the context of the materials (provenance and interrelationships), their physical characteristics, and their informational content. The catalog record certainly provides all three elements for the collection as a whole, and the fairly minimal inventory does the same at the series level. The container list, along with its basic content information (names, dates, topics), provides adequate contextual information about the series, their relationship to the collection-level entity, and their relationship to each other. The file entries in the container list provide sufficient information on physical characteristics (what type of materials and their physical extent), and the file titles and dates provide the requisite content information.

The level of description may also vary *within* a collection, as well as among collections. A particularly rich series might merit content notes at the file level, or some other more labor-intensive variation from the baseline standard. But that should be treated as a necessary exception, and there is absolutely no reason to apply the same descriptive intensity to other units in the collection. Slotkin and Lynch point out that every collection has its own minimum descriptive requirements for good access, and they should not be exceeded simply to create uniformity across a repository's finding aids.[115] The same is true within any single collection. No sensible rationale calls for exceeding the descriptive baseline throughout a collection just because one unit deserves or requires more attention. *The most important guideline is always to prefer the acceptable*

[115] Slotkin and Lynch, "An Analysis of Processing Procedures," 156.

minimum—within and across collections—and make each new situation argue for any additional investment of time and effort.

In a manual prepared for the New York Documentary Heritage Program in 1991, Kathleen Roe makes a recommendation that ought to be required reading for every archivist with a substantial backlog. She notes that "repositories with limited staff, or a large backlog of materials to describe," should give highest priority to providing "accession-level description" for *every* collection. This first and most basic, but highly useful, level of description can be created on the basis of a fairly cursory survey of a repository's holdings. "The specific elements that might be included in an accession-level description include: main entry, title, dates, volume, scope and contents note (brief), access restrictions (if applicable), [and] indexing terms (a few)."[116] While too many archivists view accession-level description as fit only for internal administrative purposes, Roe shows that these descriptive elements nicely fill out a MARC record and thus can and should serve as sources for researchers to learn about a collection.[117] Indeed, she emphasizes that collection-level description is not only the minimum, but an acceptable accomplishment, writing that in addition to the information in a catalog record, "many repositories also prepare a container or folder list for collections or series. *Whenever this is feasible,* it is a useful tool for researchers" (emphasis added).[118]

Has digitization changed the rules? After all, more detailed description—the closer to item level the better—greatly facilitates the selection of material to be digitized. If the goal is to find discrete, interesting items amid tens of thousands of feet of collections, it is necessary to first ask whether our immense application of detailed description can be justified simply to ease the hunt for Web-site eye candy. If the goal instead is to identify whole collections, or whole series, that might warrant digitization as Web-accessible research material, then the question becomes more intriguing. A report for the Council on Library and Information Resources states that one of the first questions to ask in any digitization project is "Does the intellectual quality of the source material warrant the level of access made possible by digitizing?"

One can posit this as a chicken/egg problem—how do we know if the collection is good enough to digitize if we haven't already described it to the item level? But more practically, if arrangement and description of the analog material depend on an initial assessment of the value (or intellectual quality) of the collection in the first place, then finely processed collections will by definition be good candidates for digitization and require less additional descriptive work.

[116] Kathleen Roe, *Guidelines for Arrangement and Description of Archives and Manuscripts: A Manual for Historical Records Programs in New York State* (Albany: New York State Archives and Records Administration, 1991), 4–5.

[117] Roe, *Guidelines for Arrangement and Description of Archives and Manuscripts*, 25–26.

[118] Roe, *Guidelines for Arrangement and Description of Archives and Manuscripts*, 23.

Retrospectively, the decision to digitize all or part of a collection by definition makes the collection a candidate for improved analog processing. "Digital resources depend on the nature and importance of the original source materials, but also on the nature and quality of the digitizing process itself—on how well relevant information is captured from the original, and then on how the digital data are organized, indexed, delivered to users, and maintained over time."[119]

A word needs saying about the whole topic of *descriptive standards* as it relates to processing economies. A host of new and revised standards for archival description have appeared on the scene, and been widely debated in the literature, over the past decade. These include structural standards, such as *General International Standard Archival Description (ISAD(G))*, that categorize archival information; content standards, such as *APPM* and *Describing Archives: A Content Standard (DACS)*, that explain what information to put in those categories and how to express it; and communication standards, such as MARC21 and EAD, that establish a technical syntax for exchanging descriptive information among repositories. Without these standards, our descriptive surrogates would appear less user friendly; we would not be able to reach users effectively in on-line environments, especially unmediated ones; and we would not be able to participate in union catalogs and other consortia. They are a necessary part of the information-sharing world in which archivists are players.

Unfortunately, all the confusing buzz about these variant standards, especially in their more technical aspects, has created the impression that they, in and of themselves, impose a large additional burden upon the processing workflow. This is not really true. The fact is, none of these standards, whether U.S. or international, require or even encourage description to take place at any particular arrangement level. If they point at any level, they note the necessity of describing the whole of the materials. Then they advise that the subcollection levels *may* be described according to the policies of the repository. And this is as true in union environments (e.g., the Research Library Group's [RLG's] *Archival Resources*) as it is in the more controllable world of the individual repository.

Consider EAD, for example. The EAD Working Group never required content information beneath the uppermost level in either version 1.0 or in the current *EAD 2002*. The more prescriptive RLG EAD Advisory Group, in preparing guidelines for EAD encoding for *Archival Resources* participants (and larger international audiences, by extension), made basic content information, including the typical textual notes, mandatory at the collection level. At the series level, and on down, those things were only *recommended* as best practice, never demanded. In truth, all of these standards are consistent with description

[119] Dan Hazen, Jeffrey Horrell, and Jan Merrill-Oldham, *Selecting Research Collections for Digitization* (Washington, D.C.: Council on Library and Information Resources, August 1998).

occurring at the highest level only, and they confine themselves to instructing practitioners *how* to structure, record, or exchange elements of information, not where—or in what detail—they must appear. If they are properly understood and applied, they incur no significant drag on the economies that we are trying to put into practice.

Now, it is certainly true that technical communication standards such as EAD and MARC21 do impose an administrative burden on the *repository* because it requires money, time, and expertise to acquire and deploy software and network hardware, and to train staff to use these systems. These, however, tend to be front-end costs, rather than ongoing brakes that affect processing productivity. Once the financial costs are met and the initial technical learning curves flatten out, little enduring effect remains on measures such as processing productivity.

Preservation

As already noted, archivists are often undone in the area of preservation, despite all the best efforts to process collections efficiently. In the normal course of things, we have an irresistible impulse to deal with our collection materials, no matter how voluminous, on what amounts to an item level. Why this compulsion? Certainly, the preservation sources we examined in our literature review nearly all contain at least the implicit notion that the inside of a file folder is a grisly and dangerous environment, one in which poor quality paper is self-destructing at a rapid pace and taking down all its neighbors for good measure.

However, there is good reason to believe that the file folder neighborhood is not quite that hostile, or at least not that volatile, and it can be managed by controlling the storage environment on a macro level, without such intensive work at a micro level. The *Preservation Leaflets* series produced by the Library of Congress certainly convey the common message that controlling the larger storage environment can keep strong paper in admirable stasis and that *even newsprint can survive for very long periods if it is stored 1) at low temperatures (the life of paper is effectively doubled with each 10° F drop in ambient temperature); 2) in the dark; and 3) in a nonpolluted atmosphere.*[120] The leaflets contend that both the high-lignin content and alum-rosin sizing content can be quite effectively controlled in proper storage vaults.[121] We have known this for at least *forty years*: "A great

[120] Library of Congress, *Environmental Protection of Books and Related Materials*, Preservation Leaflets Number 2 (Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress, February 1975), 1; Library of Congress, *Preserving Newspapers and Newspaper-Type Materials*, Preservation Leaflets Number 5 (Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress, October 1977), 1.

[121] And, to point up this fact, one of the authors of this article was recently leafing through a fifty-year-old correspondence file and was impressed at how the several high-lignin items were not only in quite good condition themselves, but had also failed to even lightly discolor adjacent paper items.

deal can be done to preserve manuscripts that never pass through the hands of a restorer by making every effort to provide storage conditions favorable to preservation."[122] Similarly, there is no reason to believe that metal fasteners will seriously degrade in a controlled storage environment.[123]

And the same holds true for folders. Although it has been ingrained in perhaps most of us that we ought to routinely replace file folders with acid neutral folders as we work our way through a collection, no really compelling preservation reason exists for doing so. The same environmental considerations that apply in the case of collection materials on bad paper apply here, as well. It is possible, though not yet demonstrated, that refoldering has some measurable benefit on the long-term viability of collections. But against this we *must* weigh the clear and massive costs associated with routine folder replacement. The literature reveals both the large direct dollar cost incurred by routine replacement of folders and, more significantly, the immense labor costs associated with their replacement. Clearly, we can increase our processing efficiency by a huge factor if we adopt the more sensible policy of selectively replacing only damaged and seriously embrittled or overstuffed folders, avoiding altogether the practice of wholesale refoldering.

Most archivists do enjoy the advantages of good environmental controls in their storage areas. Our survey data indicates that 51% of respondents have stack areas that are completely controlled for temperature (slightly less for humidity) and that 63% have more than three-quarters of their storage space temperature controlled (51% humidity controlled). It therefore appears that a good majority of practitioners—and most of us who routinely process and administer large, modern collections—have no real business reason to approach conservation work on anything like an item level. Our practices are based more on erroneous, or at least excessively cautious, thinking than they are on demonstrated needs.

In practice, this really means that we will rely on our storage area environmental controls to carry the preservation burden. Do not refolder unless the original folders are in poor condition or the collection is supremely valuable; ditto for removing metal fasteners, unfolding every item, segregating newspaper clippings and/or photos, and putting torn documents in L-sleeves. These procedures should become exceptions rather than rules. Collection materials should be screened during acquisition or accessioning to make sure that there are no extraordinary preservation issues in play. But, failing that, processors should avoid manipulating individual items. We have to get over practices that treat

[122] Kane, *A Guide to the Care and Administration of Manuscripts*, 47.

[123] One archivist who reviewed an early draft of this paper asked, "What about Thermofax?" It is true that the early liquid-toner–based photocopy and telefax technologies produced documents that fade to illegibility regardless of storage conditions. Should archivists hunt for them and ensure that every such item is photocopied onto archival bond paper? The simple answer is: no, we should not do that, unless the collection is of particularly high significance or so much of the value of the collection is held on thermal copy paper as to make the collection meaningless without such items.

massive twentieth-century collections as if each piece of paper is a priceless artifact and that providing clean and tidy collections for our researchers is more important than providing more collections. By taking this larger view we will save ourselves a tremendous amount of time in our processing projects, and we can anticipate real progress in reducing our backlogs.

Policies

This is simple. *Unprocessed collections should be presumed open to researchers. Period.* The exceptions should be obvious: collections with legal or contractual restrictions; collections that are too fragile or too moldy to safely give over to researchers; the very rare collections that can reasonably be expected to contain items of extremely high value (and thus high risk of theft). We must get beyond our absurd over-cautiousness that unprocessed collections might harbor embarrassing material not accounted for in deeds of gift,[124] and we must stop fretting over what users might think about us if given a dirty, disorganized collection—their thoughts will be paeans of praise compared to what they now think about us, after being denied access to so much of our holdings.

Metrics

Throughout the paragraphs above, we advocate a new set of processing benchmarks pertaining both to quality and efficiency. We stress, first, that for any given unit of archival collection materials, arrangement, description, and conservation work should *all* occur at the same hierarchical level. Those activities should reinforce each other; they should never frustrate or nullify each other, as we see happen all too often in the status quo. We also stress that, with regard to processing large twentieth-century collections, the lowest appropriate

[124] As one example, a survey respondent answered that his repository permitted access to unprocessed collections "if the collection has been reviewed to check for sensitive items and is minimally organized." Another respondent stated that "as a general rule, No. But if we know the person and review the material we may allow some limited access." Leaving aside the questionable ethic of making material accessible "if we know the person," the idea of having to review collections (or even parts of collections) item by item to identify "sensitive" material is impractical, both because of the time it takes and because there is no agreement about whose sensitivity we measure against. One processing manual identifies "sensitive subjects as adultery, alcoholism, drug abuse, homosexuality, lesbianism, mental illness, or suicide" (Bruce P. Stark, *A Guide for Processing Manuscript Collections* [n.p., 2001], 24), but several of those items are not sensitive to every donor or donor's family. Both archivists who believe we should not be in the business of protecting sensitivity and those who believe we should be much more active are beginning to agree that in either event decisions should not be made at an item level. See, respectively, Mark A. Greene, "Moderation in Everything, Access in Nothing?: Opinions about Access Restrictions on Private Papers," *Archival Issues* 18, no. 1 (1993): 31–41 and Marybeth Gaudet, "Playing Fair with the Right to Privacy," *Archival Issues* 28, no. 1 (2003), 21–34. Further, though suggesting such screening should take place during processing, Mary Jo Pugh's new manual, *Providing Reference Services for Archives & Manuscripts* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2005), 161–66, allows that identifying "sensitive" material can and often does happen at the point of reference.

hierarchical level for all of this work is the *series* level. For the great majority of materials, significant arrangement, description, and conservation efforts ought not to take place below that level. In particular, archivists should avoid the temptation to perform physical and descriptive work on an item level.

The most important upshot of these benchmarks will be their effect on productivity. If we avoid time-consuming manual tasks below the series level, we should be able to realize very considerable gains in productivity. We can try to establish some new normative benchmarks based on some of the more applicable normative findings in the literature that treats processing metrics. The Northeastern University processing manual suggests that a processing rate of 4 to 10 hours per cubic foot can be maintained "for collections that have no significant organizational problems. A minimum amount of interfiling and reorganization is needed. The major portion of staff time will be expended on the basic work required for all collections: reboxing, refoldering, listing, and describing the contents of the papers."[125] Bear in mind that the Northeastern archivists consider this productivity range practicable even though it involves significant refoldering, an activity that we deprecate in our own guidelines.

The 1982 Maher study identified a rate of 3.4 hours per cubic foot for official university records, noting that "official records generally arrive in the archives in reasonably good order with clearly marked folder labels. . . ."[126] Given our admonishment to restrict work to the series level, this seems a useful figure in that it suggests a general level of physical and intellectual work in keeping with our own recommendations. Uri Haller's 1987 work notes a processing rate for congressional collections of 3.8 hours per cubic foot, reflecting work largely performed at the series level, except for large-scale refoldering, on fairly well-organized and maintained bodies of office files.

The above metrics tell us 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.* This rate can be achieved by avoiding the time-consuming arrangement of materials within folders and by avoiding even more time-consuming wholesale folder replacement, fastener removal, preservation photocopying, encapsulation, and similar item-level preservation tasks. Description time is reduced by avoiding content description, beyond simple file lists, below the series level. Given the significant percentage of labor costs attributed to these very activities in the processing literature (the Uri Haller study found that tasks relating to folder replacement alone squandered up to 80% of processing time; see footnote 44), it is no great stretch to understand that we could bring our overall average down from something like 20 to 25 hours per foot to a figure of 4 hours. By increasing general processing productivity by a factor of

[125] Northeastern University Libraries, *Processing Manual*, 19.

[126] Maher, "Measurement and Analysis of Processing Costs," 63.

4 or 5, we can also envision a realistic road to reducing backlogs, providing much better access to users, and producing a sounder administrative model for our resource allocators.

Conclusion

"Cataloguing is a function which is not working." There are but two options for making it work. One is to increase the resources devoted to it. Given all we know about current processing practices, current acquisition levels, and current backlogs, it would require roughly a tripling of the number of processing archivists to fix the problem in this way. Is there anyone willing to suggest with a straight face that this is possible? The other option is to change the way we process so that we can, with our existing resources, roughly triple the speed with which we process. This is exactly what we propose, although many archivists will probably find it hard to believe that we are serious. The existing archival culture seems deeply rooted in an implicit belief that every item in twentieth-century collections is so precious that each must be scrutinized for paper clips that might damage a word. Similarly, the culture seems to guard against appraisal decisions that might cast out one interesting document in a twenty-box series of junk.

This item-level focus has unfortunately been strengthened inadvertently by some of our most important granting agencies. With no clear guidelines to support assessment of processing rates, institutions have used grant funds to be even more meticulous than they could afford to be with their own resources. Our survey of NHPRC grants and our personal experience with NEH grants (through individual reviews and on panels) make it clear that processing rates for grant projects are on average even lower than normal processing rates. The mode from our repository survey was 8 hours per foot; from the NHPRC survey, 33 hours a foot, or *four times slower*. Instead of using grant funds to make a significant dent in our backlogs, we have instead tended to use them to over-process collections and bring down the overall average processing rate measured by previous studies. Those studies, in turn, have been used to justify the slowest possible processing: the literature reports processing rates as low as 24 to 40 hours per foot, exactly where the largest cluster of NHPRC projects fell. It is a vicious circle.

We are not arguing that some exceptional collections do not deserve more meticulous—even item-level—processing. Nor are we suggesting that it is inappropriate for external granting agencies to fund such intensive and costly work. But we do expect that any project that seeks funding for that sort of work must *justify* that need against the recommendations made in this study and, perhaps more importantly, that the grantor and the applicant must have a basis on which to calculate the real cost differentials imposed by that more intensive level of work.

"Insanity is when you do things the way you've always done them, but expect a different result."[127] We have to start doing things differently if we hope to begin reducing our backlogs and serving our patrons, resource allocators, and donors better than we have done. If we need to comfort ourselves with the fiction that gearing our processing programs to a norm of 500 feet per processor per year rather than 50 to 150 feet is only a temporary expediency, and that "one day" we will go back and reprocess all those collections to the item level, it is a harmless fantasy. We would suggest, however, that a sign of professional maturity would be for us to own up to the limitations we work under and accept that the golden minimum recommended here (or doing "good enough" rather than insisting on perfection) is all we can realistically accomplish. Instead of comforting ourselves with a fantasy, we could instead take comfort from the fact that we will be revolutionizing access to our holdings.

We might take heart, as well, from the fact that we are not alone. The library profession has been confronting precisely the same problems and slowly adopting nearly identical solutions. As Anne Kenney writes in a recent CLIR report:

> Reengineering has been built on establishing priorities and accepting trade-offs in some areas. At the heart of this process are tough choices. Libraries have operated under the assumption that standards and best practices are the mainstay of operations. Quality cataloging in 1990 meant that each institution tweaked its records or would accept copy only from the Library of Congress. By 2000, the notion of acceptable copy had changed, and the need to address growing backlogs forced a shift in practice that includes not only conformance to bibliographic standards that are "good enough" but also to timely and cost-effective processing. Ross Atkinson calls the "demise of the completeness syndrome" one of the key management transformations occurring today. . . . "'Good-enough' practice is beginning to make head roads into preservation programs as well."[128]

Many years ago, Jerry Ham wrote about archivists' reluctance to make hard appraisal decisions and to instead request ever more storage space: "Society must regard such broadness of spirit as profligacy, if not outright idiocy."[129] So, too, our reluctance to make hard processing decisions and confront necessary trade-offs.

Change is hard. But we have a distinct advantage in approaching this change that we did not have when trying to change our appraisal methods. We have good working models to follow and pioneers to learn from. We strongly recommend reading the MIT and Northeastern processing manuals, as well as Kathleen Roe's 1991 manual for New York historical programs. We urge

[127] This adage has been ascribed to both Albert Einstein and Ralph Waldo Emerson.

[128] Kenney, "Collections, Preservation, and the Changing Resource Base," 26.

[129] Ham, "Archival Choices," 12.

consultation with the archivists at Arizona State University, Yale, Marquette, University of Central Florida, University of Montana, and/or the Wisconsin Historical Society—all places that have already set, and have begun to achieve, ambitious processing goals. Processing 400 feet per processor per year (or more) is not a theoretical goal; it is achievable. Let's get on with it.

Appendix A

Survey on the Practice and Definition of Processing: Summary Data

Institutional Context:

Total archives and/or manuscripts holdings (in linear or cubic feet):
mean: 11,366 c.f. ; mode: 0 c.f. ; maximum value: 104,000 c.f.

Average quantity (in linear or cubic feet) of archives and/or manuscripts acquired each year:
mean: 286 c.f. ; mode: 0 c.f. ; maximum value: 2,222 c.f.

Total paid *professional* FTE involved in archives and/or manuscripts administration:
<1: 20 ; 1–5: 65 ; 6–10: 6 ; 10+: 9

Total paid *non-professional* FTE in archives and/or manuscripts administration:
<1: 50 ; 1–5: 42 ; 6–10: 7 ; 10+: 1

Total *volunteer* FTE in archives and/or manuscripts administration:
<1: 75 ; 1–5: 22 ; 6–10: 2 ; 10+: 1

Approximately how many of the following types of FTE are dedicated to processing work?
Professionals: **1.6** Para-Professionals: **0.73** Students: **1.34** Volunteers: **0.75**
(Figures above are all mean averages; modal average for all categories is "0".)

Total annual budget (including salaries) for archives and/or manuscripts administration:
mean: $25,840 ; mode: $0 ; maximum value: $4 Million

Percentage of stack space that is:
Temperature controlled to archival standards: **mean: 65% ; mode: 100% (49 responses)**
Humidity controlled to archival standards: **mean: 55% ; mode: 100% (41 responses)**
Susceptible to leaks and/or flooding: **mean: 22% ; mode: 0% (51 responses)**

Administration of Processing Backlog:

Does your repository permit researchers to access collections that are unprocessed?
Yes: **44** No: **56**

Approximate percentage (of cubic/linear feet) of archives and/or manuscript holdings your repository considers "unprocessed":
0–10%: **12** 10–20%: **11** 20–30%: **13** 30–40%: **18** 40–50%: **8** 50%+: **36**

Over the past ten years, has the backlog grown (you may check more than one)?
Yes, as a percentage of total holdings: **6** Yes, in absolute size: **34** No: **17**

Generally speaking, do you consider your institution's backlog to be a:
major problem: **56** or a minor problem: **39**

What would you consider an "acceptable" backlog (as a percentage of total cubic/linear feet):
mean: 16% ; mode: 10% ; maximum value: 75%

Does your repository usually appraise collections before they are accessioned? That is, does appraisal occur *before* processing: **60** or only/usually *during* processing: **34**

Approximately how long does it take a collection to be processed, from the time it is accessioned?
< 6 months: **9** 6–12 months: **15** 12–24 months: **18** 24–36 months: **6** >36 months: **52**

What do you consider a realistic & acceptable interval from accessioning to completion of processing?
< 6 months: **6** 6–12 months: **53** 12–24 months: **24** 24–36 months: **12** >36 months: **5**

On average, how many cubic/linear feet of archives and/or manuscript material is processed each year?
mean: 277 c.f. ; mode: 0 c.f. ; maximum value: 5,104 c.f.

Has your repository received funding from outside sources for processing of 20th century collections?
Yes: **61** No: **39**

Does your institution use additional categories for describing the status of a collection besides "processed" and "unprocessed" (e.g., "partially processed")? Yes: **38** No: **62**

Please indicate whether any of the following problems related to unprocessed collections have occurred at your repository in the last five years:

32 Collection donor upset because donated materials had not yet been processed
4 Prospective donor reluctant to donate collection because of your actual or rumored backlog
34 Researcher upset at being denied access to, or lacking knowledge of, unprocessed collections
15 One of your institution's resource allocators concerned/upset at size or duration of backlog

Processing Tasks (NOTE: *Summary data presented for 20th century collections only)*	
	Appraisal/Housing/Arrangement:
1	Re-box in buffered boxes
	never: 2 ; seldom: 1 ; sometimes: 3 ; usually: 13 ; always: 78
2	Re-folder in buffered folders
	never: 0 ; seldom: 3 ; sometimes: 9 ; usually: 28 ; always: 57
3	Physically organize/arrange the material at the series level
	never: 0 ; seldom: 5 ; sometimes: 5 ; usually: 26 ; always: 61
4	Physically organize/arrange the material within folders
	never: 1 ; seldom: 18 ; sometimes: 19 ; usually: 33 ; always: 26
5	Weed duplicates
	never: 2 ; seldom: 2 ; sometimes: 10 ; usually: 39 ; always: 43
6	Weed other material of little or no historical value, at the item level
	never: 1 ; seldom: 8 ; sometimes: 30 ; usually: 34 ; always: 21
	Preservation:
7	Remove staples and metal paper clips
	never: 0 ; seldom: 8 ; sometimes: 26 ; usually: 33 ; always: 30
8	Place newspaper clippings in folders separate from rest of collection
	never: 12 ; seldom: 23 ; sometimes: 27 ; usually: 17 ; always: 18
9	Photocopy newspaper clippings onto buffered paper
	never: 3 ; seldom: 13 ; sometimes: 29 ; usually: 35 ; always: 17
10	Photocopy newsprint and onionskin carbons, and thermal faxes and thermal photocopies onto buffered paper
	never: 6 ; seldom: 20 ; sometimes: 28 ; usually: 33 ; always: 10
11	Place torn documents in l-sleeves
	never: 6 ; seldom: 30 ; sometimes: 30 ; usually: 15 ; always: 15
12	Encapsulate brittle, torn, or valuable documents
	never: 20 ; seldom: 19 ; sometimes: 37 ; usually: 12 ; always: 9
13	Mend torn documents
	never: 29 ; seldom: 34 ; sometimes: 28 ; usually: 5 ; always: 0
14	Deacidify brittle paper
	never: 70 ; seldom: 17 ; sometimes: 6 ; usually: 3 ; always: 0

15	Replace intrinsically valuable documents with photocopies
	never: 22 ; seldom: 22 ; sometimes: 36 ; usually: 13 ; always: 3
16	Store photos separately from rest of collection
	never: 11 ; seldom: 5 ; sometimes: 24 ; usually: 32 ; always: 25
17	Place photos in pH neutral envelopes or sleeves
	never: 0 ; seldom: 2 ; sometimes: 19 ; usually: 43 ; always: 32
18	Interleave scrapbooks, photo albums with pH neutral paper
	never: 10 ; seldom: 28 ; sometimes: 35 ; usually: 10 ; always: 10
19	Make use copies of all A-V material
	never: 16 ; seldom: 35 ; sometimes: 30 ; usually: 9 ; always: 2
20	Make use copies of A-V material on demand
	never: 7 ; seldom: 10 ; sometimes: 18 ; usually: 20 ; always: 34
21	Migrate computer files to current hardware/software
	never: 27 ; seldom: 28 ; sometimes: 24 ; usually: 8 ; always: 4
22	Migrate obsolete video formats to current formats
	never: 16 ; seldom: 36 ; sometimes: 30 ; usually: 7 ; always: 2
	Description:
23	Enter catalog record into OPAC and/or online bibliographic utility
	never: 17 ; seldom: 6 ; sometimes: 11 ; usually: 18 ; always: 43
24	Create finding aid:
25	With collection/series level scope/content note
	never: 1 ; seldom: 4 ; sometimes: 8 ; usually: 21 ; always: 61
26	With biographical or administrative history note
	never: 1 ; seldom: 6 ; sometimes: 12 ; usually: 23 ; always: 53
27	With series descriptions
	never: 2 ; seldom: 8 ; sometimes: 16 ; usually: 28 ; always: 41
28	With folder level content list
	never: 1 ; seldom: 3 ; sometimes: 17 ; usually: 25 ; always: 49
29	With item level lists or descriptions
	never: 14 ; seldom: 32 ; sometimes: 39 ; usually: 6 ; always: 3
30	Mark-up finding aid in EAD
	never: 42 ; seldom: 9 ; sometimes: 9 ; usually: 9 ; always: 20
31	Mark-up finding aid in HTML (*in lieu of EAD mark-up*)
	never: 45 ; seldom: 10 ; sometimes: 9 ; usually: 12 ; always: 10

Processing Productivity and Quality Benchmarks:
Within the last 10 years, has your institution implemented changes in processing procedures (i.e., eliminating, changing, or adding steps)? Yes: **64** No: **36**

Has your institution ever conducted surveys, focus groups, or informal discussions with your researchers about whether they would be willing to have collections less intensively processed in exchange for having access to more collections? Yes: **9** No: **91**

If you knew for a fact that your researchers would be willing to trade processing thoroughness for gaining access to more collections, would that change the way your institution processed collections?
Yes: **34** No: **66**

Averaging large 20th century archival collections together, what quantity (in cubic or linear footage) should a professional-level archivist, with processing as his/her sole/primary responsibility, be able to process in a one-year period?
mean: 141 c.f. mode: 0 c.f. maximum value: 750 c.f.
most populated range: 100–200 c.f.

Averaging large 20th century archival collections together, how many hours should it take a professional-level archivist, with processing as his/her sole/primary responsibility, to process 1 cubic foot of collection materials?
mean: 14 hours mode: 0 hours maximum value: 250 hours

number of responses:
4 hrs. (4) ; 8 hrs. (20) ; 10 hrs. (7) ; 20 hrs. (4) ; >12 hrs. (23) ; >20 hrs. (15) ; >30 hrs. (10) ; >40 hrs. (5)

Which collection characteristics have the greatest effect on processing productivity? Please check all the items on this list that you believe to have a *significant* effect on the volume of collection materials that can be processed in a given unit of time (You may rank the factors if you feel comfortable doing so):

- **74** Overall collection size
- **33** Era of creation
- **38** Type of creator(s) (individual, family, business firm, etc.)
- **55** Perceived richness or anticipated research usefulness of the collection
- **68** Heterogeneity of collection materials (whether few or many material types and formats)
- **81** Physical condition of collection materials (fasteners, dirt, mold, brittleness, etc.)
- **84** Existing level of organization of collection materials
- **69** Structural complexity of collection
- **34** Condition of existing folders (and other housing materials)
- **38** Legibility of individual items

Appendix B

A Survey of Researchers Using Archival Materials

The National Historic Publications and Records Commission is funding a study of archives work, particularly whether the priorities of archives professionals align with the priorities of the people who use archives.

Therefore, we ask your assistance in completing this survey. No name-linked information will be used in public presentations or publication, except with the explicit permission of the respondent. *Thank you* for considering this request.

I am a:

0 Secondary student	**3** Undergraduate	**9** Graduate student	**7** Faculty member
0 Lawyer	**1** Journalist	**1** Professional Author	**4** Local Historian
4 Genealogy researcher		**19** Other	

In the past 3 years I have done primary source research in:

7 1 repository **29** 2–5 repositories **7** 6–10 repositories **5** >10 repositories

These repositories were:

6 government archives	**14** manuscript repositories	**26** both	**0** don't know

In the past 3 years, I have (check any that apply):

12 Been denied access to primary sources because the material was "unprocessed"
16 Been frustrated because collections I used were poorly organized
20 Been frustrated because collections I wanted to use were poorly described
5 Been concerned because collections I used were dirty or appeared unkempt

If it meant that unprocessed collections would be made more quickly available for research (check any that apply):

23 I would accept generally lesser levels of organization in processed collections
21 I would accept generally lesser levels of description for processed collections
24 I would accept generally greater levels of dirt and untidiness in processed collections

As far as I am concerned, the priorities of most repositories should be (please rank these items, with 1 being most important):

4.2 Putting more resources into digitizing collection material and putting it on the web, even if that means fewer collections will be accessible

2.2 Putting more resources into creating basic descriptions (the equivalent of an on-line catalog entry) for all of their collections, whether processed or not

3.8 Putting more resources into acquiring new collections, even if that means slowing the pace at which collections are processed and made available to research

4.5 Putting more resources into performing a full range of conservation actions on each collection (such as removing metal fasteners and replacing folders), even if that means slowing the pace at which collections are processed and made available to research

3.2 Putting more resources into providing detailed finding aids (description of collection contents) on the web, even if this means slowing the pace at which collections are processed and made available to research

3.0 Putting more resources into providing basic information about each collection (such as lists of folder titles in each box), without physical reorganization or synthetic description, if this means making the collections more quickly accessible

5.6 Putting more resources into ensuring that collections are not larded with "junk," so that the "good stuff" is easier to locate, even if this means slowing the pace at which collections are processed and made available to research

The archival function most valuable to me and my work is (please choose one):

8 identifying good material, negotiating with donors, acquiring the material

10 organizing the material and physically protecting it

11 describing the material, on-line and otherwise

14 assisting me in finding the collections and material most useful to my research (reference)

6 creating on-line collections, that I can research from my desktop