

# More Product, Less Process: Why it Matters to Archivists, Librarians, and Researchers

The Problem: Archival processing does not keep pace with the growth of collections

- Unprocessed backlogs continue to grow
- Researchers denied access to collections
- Our image with donors and resource allocators suffers

Hypothesis: Failure to revise processing methodologies to deal with problem is central problem

Methodology

- Literature review: All English-language literature over past 50 years
- Repository survey: 100 repositories
- Grant project survey: 40 completed NHPRC grants
- User survey: 48 researchers

Findings

- Processing benchmarks and practices are inappropriate to deal with problems posed by large contemporary collections
- We preference the ideal over the necessary
- Fixation on item level tasks
- Preservation anxieties trump user needs and management principles

Recommendations

- General Principles for Change
  - Establish acceptable minimum level of work, and make it the benchmark
  - Don't assume all collections, or all collection components, will be processed to same level
- Arrangement
  - In normal or typical situations, the physical arrangement of materials in archival groups and manuscript collections should not take place below the series level
  - Not all series and all files in a collection need to be arranged to the same level
- Description
  - Since description represents arrangement: describe materials at a level of detail appropriate to that level of arrangement
  - Keep description brief and simple
  - Level of description *should* vary across collections, and across components within a collection
- Conservation actions
  - Rely on storage area environmental controls to carry the conservation burden
  - Don't perform conservation tasks at a lower hierarchical level than you perform arrangement and description
- Productivity: an *average, baseline* processing expectation of  $\geq 4$  hours per cubic foot

Lessons learned

- What do our users really need and expect?: **Access**
  - Online discovery tools
  - Effective finding aids
- What are the essentials of *effective* arrangement work?
  - Respect des fonds
  - Original order
  - Series-level arrangement
- What preservation activities are truly necessary?
  - Protection from light
  - Protection from atmospheric pollutants

- Protection from excessive heat
- Protection from moisture

#### A better model

- Make user access paramount: the most material available in an *adequate*, usable form
- Expend the greatest effort on the most deserving or needful materials
- Establish acceptable minimum level of work, and make it the processing benchmark
- Embrace *flexibility*: Don't assume all collections, or all collection components, will be processed to same level
- Embrace *ambiguity*: Stop pretending that you know what will be important in the future
  - User needs and interests
  - Access and description needs
  - *See every collection as a potential work in progress*
    - Let future events drive further work
- Don't allow preservation anxieties to trump user access and higher managerial values
- Establish good risk management models
  - Risk is unavoidable
  - Risk is amenable to being managed
  - Assess, mitigate, budget for, respond to

#### What MPLP is not (but has been caricatured to be)

- Your go-to manual for arrangement, description, and conservation specifics
- A set of absolute upper limits
- Inflexible
- Absolutist
- Simplistic

#### What MPLP really, *really* is all about: *Access the goal, and resource management the strategy*

- Stern advice about resource management
  - Prioritizing goals
  - Achieving high-level program objectives
  - Maximizing ROI
  - Practical approaches, not millennial ones
  - A profound change in approach and perspective
- Making *use* the preeminent objective
  - Access to collections trumps precise arrangement, granular description, and interpretation of content. Access to...
    - Online finding aids
    - For all types of collections, via common discovery & access tools
    - Digitized collection materials
- Opening the blinds, and throwing away the cookie cutters
  - Transparency about collection holdings
  - Openness to archival innovation
  - Institutional practice limited only by resources (no methodological straitjackets)

#### What does MPLP mean for Humanities research and *Special Collections*?

- Broad approach to leveraging our *collective* ability to provide access to research collections
- Extensible to deal with novel problem spaces: Digitization, sound & visual, books, 3D objects
- Economy in resource description is positive benefit in networked environments
  - Economic approaches *driving* innovations in practice: Description; archival approaches; digitization

#### Early Implementers: Positive impacts for archivists

- University of Montana—Missoula; Yale University (Archives and Manuscripts, and Beinecke Library)
  - No physical work *within* file folders
  - Uniform collection-level descriptive access

- No weeding below series level for backlog
- No notable user acceptance problems
- 2 hours per linear foot on average
- American Heritage Center, Univ. of Wyoming
  - NHPRC grant funded 1 processing archivist for 2 years
  - 700 collection-level MARC records added to OPAC: 175% performance to budget
  - 265 EAD finding aids for larger collections: 132% performance to budget
  - Significant increase in discovery and use
  - Public service impact:
    - Positive outcomes overall
    - Requires more reference involvement from other staff
    - Follow-on Innovation: *Process on Demand*
- University of Alaska—Fairbanks
  - Series level processing of extensive photographs
  - Lets use drive more intensive processing
  - Involves donor in processing continuum
  - Solicits \$\$ donations from donors for *more* processing
- University of Wisconsin—Oshkosh
  - Series level processing of *digitized collections*
  - High-speed bi-tonal scanning of photocopied collection materials
  - The perfect is the enemy of the good
  - Move metadata level from item to folder level
- Minnesota Historical Society
  - Walter Mondale Papers
    - NEH “We the People” Project
    - High productivity + high-value products
    - Mondale finding aid
  - Rethinking items as *collections*
    - Photographs (albums and loose images, as well)
    - Sheet music
    - Bound publications
    - Maps
    - Oral histories
    - Audio and moving image materials ???
    - *Use PDFs to inexpensively bundle and present complex objects*
      - PDFs: low-cost digital carriers

#### Indictments of MPLP approaches

- Loss of item-level control
  - Specious argument; item-level control has never dominated archival processing
- Exposure of “sensitive” and third-party materials
  - Vulnerability to litigation and public/donor displeasure greatly overstated
- Unfair burden imposed on researchers
  - MPLP seeks a fair distribution of costs between all transaction parties
- Invitation to document thieves
- Professional status of archivists is weakened
  - Please! Professional status should not be based on finding aids