Taking Stock and Making Hay: Archival Collections Assessment

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Introduction

Archival collections assessment is an important component of a successful collections management program. In most institutions, however, conducting an assessment is feasible only with additional resources. For this and a number of other reasons, collections assessment has not been a regular part of collections management practice. In recent years, however, a number of institutions have created or adapted collections assessment tools, employed them successfully, and made them available for use by others. The wheel has been invented.

What is Archival Collections Assessment?

In this report, the term "archival collections assessment" is used to refer to the systematic, purposeful gathering of information about archival collections. It includes collection surveys of all kinds, including those undertaken for purposes of appraisal, setting processing and other priorities, conservation decision-making, and collection management.

An accurate census of its archival collections enables the institution to act strategically in meeting user needs, allocating available resources, and securing additional funding. The systematic gathering of quantitative and qualitative data about collections makes possible the creation of adequate, consistent, collection-level descriptions; affords a better understanding of unmet preservation needs; and informs important decisions regarding collection management, processing priorities, and selection and other activities associated with digitization and exhibit preparation.

A Common Approach?

Although a number of institutions have undertaken collections assessments, a single, commonly-understood approach neither exists nor is practical. Rather than recommending a single strategy or advocating a particular approach, this report identifies and characterizes existing surveys that can be used as-is by, or serve as models for, librarians, archivists, and others who are considering collections assessment to meet one or several institutional needs. It describes the many possible components of collections assessment; emphasizes the importance of approaching collections assessment with an informed understanding of its

purpose and desired outcome(s); and provides pointers to existing methodologies and tools that have been used by various institutions.

Our goal in assembling this report and making it available to the widest possible audience is to encourage the archival and special collections communities to use existing approaches in order to leverage good work, foster a growing community of practice, and encourage efficiencies for institutions both individually and collectively.

How to Use This Report

This report provides both food for thought and fuel for activity. It presents a rationale for conducting a collections assessment; describes the components of archival collections assessment; and encourages readers to consider their own needs and capacities. Additionally, we hope this report will serve to inspire and empower those who are considering collections assessment by suggesting an array of possibilities that can be readily applied to meet immediate and/or long-term needs. Appendix A contains pointers to a variety of exemplar projects, many of which have tools and more information available online. Appendices B and C are links to project documentation, which contain useful instructions and definitions.

Current Context: Tackling the Backlog Problem

It is no longer a "dirty little secret" (Tabb 2004, 123) that libraries, archives, and cultural institutions hold significant amounts of special collections material that have not been adequately described and therefore are not known, cannot be discovered, and will not be used. These uncataloged and unprocessed (i.e., "hidden") collections have become the focus of considerable attention in recent years and efforts to address the problems they represent are numerous, varied and well documented (ARL 2008; CLIR 2011; Hewitt and Panitch 2003; Pritchard 2009; Schreyer 2007; Steele 2008).

More Product, Less Process

Cataloging and processing backlogs have long been the bane of the cultural heritage institution, and calls for addressing them have been around for almost as long as the backlogs themselves. One of the most recent of these was put forth in "More Product, Less Process: Revamping Traditional Archival Processing," an article by Mark Greene and Dennis Meissner that gave voice to the small but growing number of archivists who have quietly abandoned traditional approaches to archival processing in favor of those that expedite user access to archival collections (2005).

In their article, Greene and Meissner issue a call for change that specifically references the successful reduction of cataloging backlogs in large research libraries through various procedural and technical innovations and by redefining quality. In redefining quality as it applies to processing, they assert that,

> 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. 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. What this means is that all collections should have collection-level intellectual control before any collection receives folder-level intellectual control. More importantly, researchers cannot come to do research if at least minimal information about the collections is not available to them. (237)

In other words, "Describe everything in general before describing anything in detail." And make those descriptions available to the widest possible audience.

Exposing Hidden Collections

It is worth noting that the same principle was endorsed by those participating in the "Exposing Hidden Collections" conference that took place in September 2003 at the Library of Congress. A working conference planned by the Association of Research Libraries (ARL) Task Force on Special Collections, "Exposing Hidden Collections" served as a forum for interaction between various communities of professionals and set the stage for the collaborative development of an action plan aimed at surfacing "hidden" collections. One of the overriding themes of the conference was "Some access to all is preferable to no access to some." In fact it was proposed at the outset of the two-day event that one of the outcomes of the conference should be "a pledge by participants to return to their institutions committed to providing a web-accessible collection-level record for all unprocessed materials (ARL 2009)."

This apparently has proven to be either more difficult or more problematic than the conference participants imagined. For some institutions, providing a web-accessible collection-level record for an unprocessed collection is difficult because an appropriate record neither exists nor is easily created until the collection is processed. Some institutions might be reluctant to provide a web-accessible collection-level record for an unprocessed collection because it would suggest that the collection is available for use when, for any of a variety of reasons, it might not be. Although few of the conference participants followed through on that pledge, some institutions have made descriptions of their unprocessed collections available via the web.

Cataloging Hidden Collections

A 1998 survey of ARL member institutions revealed that "significant portions" of special collections material have not been processed or cataloged and therefore are not known, cannot be discovered, and will not be used (Panitch 2001, 8). The survey results suggest that 15% of printed volumes, 27% of manuscripts, and 35% of the audio and video collections held by the 100 ARL respondents were unprocessed or uncataloged at that time. By comparison, a 2009 survey of a broader population of North American research libraries revealed that the situation has improved only marginally over the last decade, in spite of widespread focus on the hidden collections problem. Fifteen percent of printed volumes still are not cataloged online, while for other formats, the situation may even have worsened. The survey suggests that a large percentage of materials lack online access, including 44% of archives and manuscripts, 58% of cartographic materials, and almost 25% of video and audiovisual materials. Perhaps the most sobering statistic: 71% of born digital materials held in special collections are not represented in online catalogs. (Dooley and Luce 2010, 46). This represents a staggering amount of material that is neither known by nor available to the research community.

Help Is on the Way

Heightened awareness of both the scope and the implications of the hidden collections "problem" is, fortunately, matched by a number of new and existing initiatives aimed at addressing it.

The most recent of these—launched in 2008—is the Cataloging Hidden Special Collections and Archives Program. With generous funding from The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, the Council on Library and Information Resources (CLIR) administers this national program that awards grants in support of "innovative, efficient description of large volumes of material of high value to scholars." Projects are evaluated and selected for funding according to the following criteria:

- potential national impact on scholarship and teaching;

- use of innovative and/or highly efficient approaches to description that could serve as models for others;

- adoption of workflow and outreach practices that maximize connections to scholarly and other user communities; and

- application of descriptive and other standards that would provide interoperability and long-term sustainability of project data in the online environment.

Over the course of its three-year history, the Cataloging Hidden Special Collections and Archives Program has awarded more than $11.9 million to a total of 46 projects selected from approximately 300 proposals. In coordination with this program, CLIR maintains a web-accessible registry of hidden collections, based upon information supplied by applicants and others (CLIR 2011).

The National Historical Publications and Records Commission (NHPRC) has a long history of providing funds for "fundamental archival activities" in the form of basic processing projects that "reveal collections that researchers cannot easily discover" (NARA 2011). Institutions are required to

- create and share collection-level information;

- develop or implement appraisal, processing, and other techniques that will eliminate existing backlogs and/or prevent future backlogs; and

- promote the use of processed collections.

The National Endowment for the Humanities' (NEH) Humanities Collections and Reference Resources program (NEH 2011) supports efforts that "provide an essential foundation for scholarship, education, and public programming in the humanities" by funding projects that address one or more of the following activities:

- arranging and describing archival and manuscript collections;

- cataloging collections of printed works, photographs, recorded sound, moving images, art, and material culture;

- providing conservation treatment for collections;

- digitizing collections;

- preserving and improving access to born-digital sources; and

- developing databases, virtual collections, or other electronic resources to codify information on a subject or to provide integrated access to selected humanities materials.

Practice with Purpose: Why Collections Assessment?

The first step when considering a collections assessment is a careful articulation of the reason—or reasons—for which it is to be undertaken. Because even a small survey project is very likely to be a complex undertaking, and because resource allocators are more likely to support an effort that prescribes one or more concrete outcomes, it is important to design the project in such a way that its objectives are clear, its audience is apparent, and its benefits are maximized. Depending upon its intended purpose and the resources allocated to it, a collections assessment can range from a one-time-only inventory of some or all holdings to a comprehensive, ongoing, data-gathering activity.

Most survey projects are undertaken for one or more of the four purposes described below. Although none of these precludes another, it is difficult to put equal emphasis on all of them. Early in the project, therefore, it is essential to decide which goals or outcomes are considered primary, which are considered secondary, and which will not be addressed. The assessment projects described later in this report have gathered information with the goal of accomplishing at least one of the four aims described below.

Expose Hidden Collections

Many institutions have undertaken a collections assessment for the primary purpose of preparing and sharing consistent, comparable, summary descriptions of some or all of the collections in their care. If this is indeed the primary goal, the assessment activity may consist primarily of assembling, normalizing, and/or augmenting existing descriptive information at the collection level; indicating whether or not the collection is available for research; and making this information available—preferably online. More often than not, however, creating uniform collection-level descriptions necessitates the gathering of information that can only be obtained by physically inspecting some portion of the collections and collecting information about those collections with a systematic, well-documented approach.

Some of the institutions that have undertaken collections assessments of this type have done so with the explicit intention of exchanging collection-level information with other

institutions and/or depositing collection-level descriptions in a consortially—or regionally—managed database (PACSCL 2009).

Establish Processing Priorities

Especially for institutions with large backlogs of un- and under-processed collections, a collections assessment serves as a very useful tool for planning, informing, and guiding priorities for collections processing. With this purpose as its primary goal, the collections assessment becomes a more complicated undertaking, as it requires collecting information and making judgments about various aspects of the collection, only some of which may already be known or are easily determined. A collections assessment aimed at establishing processing priorities includes but goes well beyond the gathering of basic information about the size, scope, and contents of the collection. It typically requires that surveyors assess the condition of the collection material as well as the containers in which it is housed; determine the ease with which material in the collection can be located; and evaluate the ease with which the collection can be discovered, identified as relevant, and used, based upon the existence and the accessibility of catalog records, finding aids, and other collection surrogates.

A collections assessment intended to inform the assignment of priorities for processing should also include for each collection some kind of estimation of its research value for present and future users. Techniques for determining research value are described in the "Collecting Qualitative Information" section of this report.

Assess Condition

Even if establishing preservation and/or conservation priorities isn't the primary goal of a collections assessment, it is difficult to resist the opportunity to capture information about physical condition when a collections assessment is underway. This appears to be the case for all types of institutions and across all categories of collections. The information typically gathered ranges from a basic assessment of the overall condition of collection material and of the containers in which it is housed to a more detailed, systematic evaluation that provides the institution with a better understanding of the prevalence of specific conservation issues as well as unmet preservation challenges.

Libraries and archives have a long history of using a variety of well-established, well-documented methods to capture essential information about the current state and the ongoing needs of the collections in their care. Preservation surveys focus primarily on diagnosing large-scale and/or pervasive problems at the collection level and assessing the overall storage and housing environment, usually to make the case for facilities improvements

that will slow or prevent future damage. Conservation surveys tend to highlight the scope and the distribution of problems that plague particular media (such as acetate film, brittle paper, and deteriorating magnetic tape) and support the allocation of limited resources for treatment. Increasingly, however, the consideration of preservation challenges and/or conservation issues is but one component of a larger balancing act, the overarching goal of which is to make collections accessible.

Because collections that cannot be handled physically without causing additional damage cannot be used, information about physical condition is typically used to help answer basic questions such as "How is use of this collection hampered or limited?" and "Does the degree of damage or deterioration, or the value of the collection, justify reproduction or treatment?" For many institutions, however, laying the groundwork for the establishment of preservation and/or conservation priorities is the primary goal of the collections assessment, warranting greater emphasis on the comprehensive capture and systematic tracking of essential information about condition (see, for example, Columbia University 2011).

Manage Collections

Much of the information gathered during a collections assessment can be used almost immediately to address a number of collection management issues including optimizing storage efficiencies, identifying strengths and gaps in collecting areas, and validating de-accessioning decisions. A comprehensive inventory is the foundation of effective collection management, and, when coupled with the value judgments that usually accompany a collections assessment, provides a powerful tool for repositories with burgeoning backlogs of un- and under-processed collections, significant "information gaps" regarding the contents of collections, and/or pressing space concerns. Without exception, those institutions that have undertaken collections assessment for any of the first three primary purposes described above have reaped inevitable secondary benefits in the form of better informed, more active collection management.

Ready, Set, Go! Conducting the Assessment

Several important activities must be accomplished before the survey team can get to work. These include defining the scope of the project; determining the methodology and the resources that will be employed; and documenting the policies and procedures that will govern the assessment.

Scope

Guided largely by the purpose—or purposes—of the collections assessment, scope is a fundamental consideration that must be determined at the start of the project and carefully managed throughout. Other factors that should be taken into consideration when determining the scope of the assessment include the availability of resources (human and financial), time, and physical space. For many institutions, some or all of these may be limited, and the scope of the assessment undertaking should reflect that reality.

Will all collections be surveyed? Un- or under-processed collections only? Or will other criteria determine the scope of the collections assessment? With the exception of those surveys that have been undertaken primarily to amass information about conservation issues, the scope of a collections assessment is typically limited to un- and under-processed collections only. Often there are good reasons to limit the scope of an assessment undertaking to collections consisting of or containing certain types of material or special formats (such as artworks, audio-visual material, photographs, realia, etc.). Increasingly, however, institutions are using collections assessment for purposes that require a broader scope. Examples of purposes that necessitate surveying all collections include discerning changes to collection development policies and populating a collection management database (see, for example, UCB 2011).

Collecting Information

Collections assessment is essentially an information-gathering activity. It is centered on the systematic collection of quantitative and qualitative data about various characteristics of collections, including extent and contents, condition, accessibility (physical and intellectual), and research value. Its immediate result is an array of data that makes possible the provision of adequate, consistent, collection-level descriptions; affords a better understanding of

unmet preservation needs; and informs important decisions regarding collection management, processing priorities, and selection and other activities associated with digitization and exhibit preparation.

Methodology

The collections that have been identified for assessment are likely to vary considerably in many respects, including size, complexity, condition, and type of material. For each, however, the basic approach is the same: open the boxes and look at the stuff. In keeping with the stated objectives governing the assessment, surveyors will do some or all of the following for each collection:

- count and assess the condition of the containers in which collection material is housed;

- identify and assess the condition of the material(s) of which the collection consists;

- evaluate its arrangement in terms of the ease with which material can be located;

- determine the existence and the accessibility of catalog records, finding aids, and other collection surrogates; and

- assess its research value.

Clear instructions—including definitions, illustrations and examples—for all of the above are essential. The survey tool, along with accompanying forms, checklists, etc., should be thoroughly tested before actual surveying begins. Although survey data may be recorded on paper worksheets, it is typically stored in a relational database, such as FileMaker Pro or Microsoft Access, where it can be accessed and manipulated as necessary.

Staffing

Who will do the surveying? What do they need to know? Although appropriately staffing the assessment is an important consideration, and in some cases the availability of human resources may have the effect of defining or limiting the scope of the assessment, successful assessment projects have been accomplished with a variety of staffing models, ranging from those that employ experienced archivists, curators, and conservators (experts/professionals) to those that rely on individuals who have some knowledge but no experience with the collections (generalists) to those that draw on a large body of students, volunteers, and/or others who have neither knowledge of nor experience with collections (novices). In all cases, adequate training and good documentation are key factors to a successful undertaking.

Collecting Quantitative Information

In collections assessment, quantitative methods are used to collect basic information about the extent of each collection and the types of materials of which it consists. Collecting quantitative information should be relatively easy and require little or no judgment. "How many of what?" is the basic question; because it can be asked—and answered—in a number of ways, however, it is important to consider the following:

- Will every box be opened, or is some form of sampling OK?

- How will extent be measured (items, boxes, linear feet, shelf feet)?

- How will content (in terms of types of materials, special formats, etc.) be identified and categorized (checklists, guidelines, etc.)?

Anticipating with good planning and addressing with good documentation, these and similar questions are essential.

Collecting Qualitative Information

Qualitative methods are used to collect information about the condition, physical accessibility (arrangement), intellectual accessibility (description), and research value of the collection. Collecting qualitative information usually requires making some kind of judgment in order to assign a rating (value) along a numeric or descriptive continuum (scale). In a numeric continuum, 1 is usually the lowest or worst rating and 5 is the highest or best. In a descriptive continuum, values range from, for example, "poor" to "excellent" or from "negligible" or "none" to "significant" or "very high." Ratings can (and should) be defined and documented in such a way that they can be assigned systematically and consistently. Other possibilities for measures include estimating the amount of collection material that meets a particular criterion, for example, "What percentage of the collection needs new housing?"

Condition

Assessing the physical condition of collection material and the quality of the housing in which it is contained is often one of the most important—and most difficult—activities in collections assessment. This is especially the case for collections that contain or consist primarily of material in formats other than paper. It is helpful to keep in mind that a collections assessment is neither a preservation planning survey nor a collection condition survey. As such, effort is not usually dedicated to noting the condition of particular items or to identifying groups of materials of particular concern, although these may be called out in some way. Assessing physical condition and housing quality as one component of a larger, more general

collections survey is aimed at providing a better understanding of the overall condition of collection material, the overall quality of the boxes, folders, and other containers in which it is housed, and the degree to which one or both of these might or will hinder its use.

Arrangement

Also potentially hindering the use of a collection is its physical arrangement, which is one of the reasons why collections assessment typically includes an evaluation of the ease with which material in the collection can be located. That evaluation usually takes into account both the size and the complexity of the collection, does not assume that arrangement to the item level is necessary or desirable, and is focused on rating the collection in terms of how successfully it can be used for research. A small, relatively homogenous collection in rough order, for example, is generally more physically accessible than a large, heterogeneous collection in rough order, and the ratings should reflect that.

Description

Before a collection can be used, however, it must be discovered and identified as relevant. Both of these depend upon the existence and the accessibility of catalog records, finding aids, and other collection surrogates. Rating the "intellectual accessibility" of a collection, then, typically requires determining if and how well the collection is described (in an accession report, catalog record, finding aid, etc.) and evaluating the accessibility—especially the online availability—of any existing descriptions. While a catalog record and/or a simple inventory might provide adequate access to a small, relatively straightforward collection, neither is sufficient for a large or complex collection. Finding aids typically provide the best intellectual access to archival collections, especially large and/or complex collections, and the ratings that are assigned during this component of a collections assessment are governed by that assumption. The ratings also reflect the expectation that a collection is only truly accessible when a researcher can find information about it online. The best rating, therefore, is reserved for those collections that are described online; the worst is assigned to those that are not described at all or are described only in an accession record, donor/control file, or other document that is inaccessible to researchers.

Research Value

Assessing research value is probably the most troublesome component of collections assessment for a number of reasons, most of which can be attributed to the difficulty—real or perceived—attendant in defining and measuring "research value" in the first place. Assuming, however, that it can be defined and measured, a thoughtful assessment of research value usually provides compelling information that can be used to inform important decisions

regarding collection management, processing priorities, and selection and other activities associated with digitization and exhibit preparation.

In the collections assessment context, the term "research value" usually refers to the value of the collection in terms of the extent to which it includes relatively rare, extensive, and/or detailed information about a topic that has received considerable prior attention, is gaining currency, and/or has apparent potential to attract significant interest. It is frequently expressed as a composite of two measures: documentation interest and documentation quality.

The documentation interest rating provides an indication of the value of the collection in terms of its topical significance, with values ranging from 1 (negligible or none) to 5 (very high). Similarly, the documentation quality rating provides an indication of the value of the collection in terms of its topical richness, again with values ranging from 1 (slight) to 5 (very rich). Research value can then be expressed as the sum of the documentation interest rating and the documentation quality rating.

Here it must be pointed out that many collections have values in addition to, or even other than, research value, and that these can—and should—be measured if the overall purpose of the assessment warrants such an evaluation. Examples of these "other" values include intrinsic value and local or institutional value.

Collecting "Other" Information

In addition to collecting the above-described information about the collection, many institutions also collect information about the assessment process itself, including who conducted the assessment, when it was accomplished, how long it took and if any activity (such as reboxing) was undertaken.

Putting it All Together

Of course, the reason for collecting assessment data is to put it to use. Here are some examples of collection assessment in action.

The following example (figures 1 and 2) from the University of Michigan Special Collections Library shows that while the collection rates fairly high in terms of research value, it is intellectually inaccessible and physically difficult to use.

```
COLLECTION

Creator:                        Ann Arbor Tenants' Union
Title:                          Ann Arbor Tenants' Union Records
Type:                           records
Dates (Inclusive):              1969-1995
Dates (Bulk):                   1969-1980
Language (Primary):             English
Language (Secondary):           Spanish


Extent: manuscript boxes                          01
Extent: records center boxes (filed legal)        11
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Figure 1. University of Michigan Special Collections Library collection sample

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RATINGS

Housing Quality                       3
Physical Condition                    3
Physical Access                       2
Intellectual access                   1
    Documentation Interest      4
    Documentation Quality       3
Research Value (calculated)           7
Exhibition Value (yes/no)             yes

Notes (Ratings):
```

Figure 2. University of Michigan Special Collections Library ratings sample

The Smithsonian Archives uses collections assessment to measure and demonstrate change over time in their preservation module. Represented in figure 4, the initial assessment of this collection in 2001 (Accession 000182 United States Civil Service Commission) shows an Overall Priority score of 2.

Figure 3. Smithsonian Archives preservation model: initial assessment of United States Civil Service Commission 2001 collection (Accession 000182)

In 2003, the collection was re-assessed after preservation actions were taken (shown in figure 4). Some items were discovered to be rolled while reboxing the collection and a score of 2 was given to the Difficult Formats/Sizes category. While the overall Priority Score for this collection did not change at this time, the Holdings Maintenance Score went from a 6 to a 2.

Figure 4. Smithsonian Archives preservation module: reassessment of United States Civil Service Commission 2001 collection (Accession 000182)

Finally, the entire collection was assessed before moving the collection offsite in 2006. This generated a new overall Priority Score of 5 (shown in figure 5).

Title:
Correspondence

Location:
NUS

CONDITION ASSESSMENT

Priority Score: 5

This collection has been assessed for condition.

HOLDINGS MAINTENANCE

Housing Needs		
0% needs to be placed on shelves or in boxes, folders, or drawers	0	**Assessment Key:** 0 = 0% 1 = <25% 2 = 25-75% 3 = >75%
Housing Materials 0% are in acidic boxes, or have acidic containers or folders	0	
Positioning of Records 0% are in boxes that are too full or too loose, or file folders that are messy or too full.	0	**Holdings Maintenance Score:** 0
Difficult Formats Sizes 0% are the wrong size or format for its current housing	0	**Holdings Maintenance Grade:** C
Damaging Attachments 0% has inappropriate attachments like staples, paperclips, and poor quality adhesives	0	**Key to Holdings Maintenance Grade:** 10-15 = A 5-9 = B 0-4 = C

PHYSICAL CONDITION

Physical Damage	
-25% has damage like dirt, staining, losses, embrittlement	1
Unstable Materials +75% of the collection is inherently unstable, like newsprint, magnetic media, colored photographs	3

Condition Grade: B

ALERTS

Comments

Active Mold	
This collection has mold.	
Treated Mold This collection has been treated for mold.	
Active Pests This collection has a pest infestation.	

Figure 5. Smithsonian Archives preservation module: final assessment (pre-offsite move) of United States Civil Service Commission 2001 collection (Accession 000182)

The Logjam Project (Northwest Archives Council, UK) provided an "audit toolkit" as a data collection tool (shown in figure 6). The toolkit provides a calculation that generates an estimate of Cataloging Resources for collections, taking into account such factors as the Extent of the collection, main Covering Dates, Level of Cataloging necessary and the potential Complexity of cataloging the collection[*]. Each data field is weighted and a Resources Score is generated, producing a cataloging estimate for each collection, with times given for both professionals and paraprofessionals. Calculations are based on regional norms, but could be adjusted for other circumstances.

Collection: Archer Family, Earls of Borsetshire **Covering Dates**: 18th-19th century
Cataloguing Complexity: Complex
Level of Cataloguing: High - uncatalogued
Extent: 40 linear metres
Resources Score: 290
Cataloguing Resources: 9-12 months archivist time and 2 months paraprofessional time

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Figure 6. Logjam audit kit sample from Northwest Archives Council, UK

[*]Logjam gives definitions for values for "level of cataloguing" (High—Uncatalogued; Medium—Box-listed; Low—Listed to series level; and "cataloguing complexity" (Very Complex, Complex, Moderate, Moderate Straightforward, Straightforward).

What's Missing from This Picture?

By providing both the opportunity and a process for documenting a wide range of characteristics about the collections in our care, archival collections assessment can be used to address a variety of important needs, including collection management issues and processing priority-setting. Existing practices, however, do not fully support other equally-pressing concerns.

Researcher Needs

Much of the focus of archival collections assessment is oriented to the needs of the collections themselves. Which require rehousing? Need basic conservation? Lack adequate description? The ever-increasing emphasis in libraries and archives on meeting the needs of researchers—for whom we have collections in the first place—will likely result in less support for assessment activities that do not include the identification of collections that are expected to be of high research interest.

Assigning a research value rating as a component of archival collections assessment is one way to estimate potential scholarly significance; another might be mining use and other data to determine how heavily used a particular collection, or group of collections, is, especially in relationship to other collections. Although recording "amount and type of use" is not typically integrated into collections assessment activities, and would in fact require data external to the survey process per se, it should feature more prominently in our user-centric world.

Collection Development Policies

The 2009 survey of special collections and archives in North American academic and research libraries paints a picture that is both encouraging and sobering. Among the key findings described in the report are the following:

- monetary resources are shrinking;

- collections, and user demand for access to them, are growing; and

- space for collections is inadequate.

This "trifecta" of sorts serves to remind us of the importance of acquiring and devoting resources to the needs of those collections that are most valuable from a research perspective and that fit best within existing collection strengths. The fact that few institutions are likely to secure additional storage capacity, and even fewer are likely to stop collecting, underscores the importance of collecting policies.

Only half of the respondents in the 1998 survey of special collections in ARL libraries indicated that they have formal collection development policies. By revealing existing collection strengths, collections assessment can serve as a powerful motivator for those institutions that need to develop and/or refine meaningful collecting policies. Collections assessment data can also be used, when necessary, to make a case for deaccessioning "out of scope" and "not a good fit" collections.

Digitization Readiness

In a world that is increasingly shaped by the view that "if it isn't online it doesn't exist," digitization of special collections material is—or should be—at or near the top of our priority list. Although some of the data gathered during the course of a "typical" collections assessment contributes significant value to the selection for digitization process, other important data is not usually collected. By anticipating the need to answer questions about copyrights, access and/or use restrictions, and the extent to which a particular collection (or related collections) has already been digitized, archival collections assessment can play a critical role in helping us move forward in this important arena.

Conclusion

The combination of almost limitless collecting opportunities and increasingly limited resources with which to get the job done requires that we identify, articulate and focus our attention on the priorities that are most central to our mission. Whether undertaken as a one-time, for-one-purpose-only project or integrated into an overall approach to managing collections, archival collections assessment can help us set those priorities by taking much of the guesswork out of the picture.

Appendix A: Project Descriptions

The Black Metropolis Research Consortium

Consortial Survey Initiative of African American Materials (January 2009-December 2011)
http://lucian.uchicago.edu/blogs/bmrcsurvey/

With funding provided by The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, the Chicago-based Black Metropolis Research Consortium (BMRC) is undertaking a comprehensive survey of collections of materials that document African American and African diasporic culture, history, and politics held by its 14 member institutions and by 20 community-based African American organizations and creators. The goals of the survey are several and include making possible the creation of preliminary descriptions of collections that are inaccessible to researchers; informing the prioritization of preservation and access needs; and enabling collaboration, building partnerships, and sharing "best practices" between and among initiative participants. The project website includes links to survey documentation, status reports, and the Second Space Initiative, which facilitates access to relevant research material held outside the library, museum, and archival communities.

Canadian Museum of Nature

Assessing and Managing Risks to Your Collections
http://nature.ca/en/research-collections/our-scientific-services/assessing-managing-risks-your-collections

The Canadian Museum of Nature regularly offers workshops on identifying, ranking, and mitigating risks to collections of cultural property. Based upon the Cultural Property Risk Analysis Model developed by the Canadian Museum of Nature, the workshop provides participants with a methodological approach to identifying types of risk, calculating magnitudes of risk, determining methods for controlling risks, and evaluating mitigation strategies. Participants receive a manual and a Risk Assessment Worksheet (in Excel) designed for use in a comprehensive collection risk assessment.

Chicago History Museum

Manuscripts Cataloging, Survey, and Processing Project (October 2009-March 2010)
For more information, e-mail Peter Alter (alter@chicagohistory.org)

With funding from the National Historical Publications and Records Commission (NHPRC), the Chicago History Museum conducted a cataloging and assessment survey of the Museum's archival and manuscripts holdings. Informed by projects at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania and the Philadelphia Area Consortium of Special Collections Libraries (PACSCL), the survey methodology was modified to support the Museum's MPLP-based, tiered processing approach. The purpose of the survey was to (1) create and/or verify and enrich catalog records for all collections of half a linear foot or larger; (2) assess holdings to determine each collection's ideal minimal processing level (i.e., collection, series, sub-series, or folder); (3) identify un- and under-processed collections (4); prioritize collections for processing and (5) flag "found in collection" material (unaccessioned collections and/or collections with inadequate accession documentation). Project staff verified and enhanced more than 1,000 catalog records describing the Museum's manuscript holdings, created approximately 30 new catalog records, and generated a non-public database to guide the planning and management of future preservation and processing activity. More than 100 collections (totaling nearly 1,300 linear feet) were processed to the series-level in a later phase of the project, and approximately 300 "found in collection" problems were resolved through legal and/or administrative measures.

Columbia University

Mellon Special Collections Materials Survey (2003-2004) http://www.columbia.edu/cu/lweb/services/preservation/surveyTools.html

Between October 2003 and July 2004, staff at Columbia University Libraries surveyed unprocessed collections held in the Rare Book and Manuscript Library, the Avery Architectural and Fine Art Library, and the C.V. Starr East Asian Library. In total, 1,588 survey hours were spent entering data on 569 collections and accounting for 26,299 units stretching 15,867 linear feet. These collections are composed of 8,703 feet of loose paper; 87,948 bound volumes of all types; 100,903 architectural drawings; 14,218 graphic works; 158,478 photographic materials; 136,457 negatives, slides, motion pictures and microfilm; 1,288 phonographs; 6,559 audiotapes, videotapes and computer media; 277 optical media items, and nearly 3,400 pieces of realia and memorabilia.

The project website includes a guide to the survey instrument/database and a description of the ratings, both of which are modeled on, but vary from those developed at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania. Staff in the Rare Book and Manuscript Library are using the database to track accessions and as a source for box lists and other forms of preliminary and intermediate access tools; Preservation Department staff rely on it for preservation and conservation planning and for establishing departmental goals and priorities.

Historical Society of Pennsylvania

Mellon Collections Preservation and Backlog Processing Planning Project (2000-2002) http://www2.hsp.org/collections/manuscripts/Mellon/about.html

This comprehensive survey appears to be the first in a series of Mellon-funded projects aimed at collecting qualitative and quantitative data about unprocessed special collections material. The model developed in this project includes measures of the following for each collection surveyed: physical condition, quality of housing, physical access (arrangement), intellectual access (description), and research value (interest and quality of documentation). Between 2000 and 2002, project staff surveyed approximately 5,000 collections, including 3,000 manuscript collections; 300,000 maps, prints, drawings, broadsides, and photographs; and approximately 11,000 art objects and artifacts.

North West Regional Archive Council (UK)

Logjam: An Audit of Uncatalogued Collections in the North West
http://www.northwestcultureobservatory.co.uk/ [You must create a free account. Once you are logged in, search for "Logjam" in the databank to download documentation.]

Taking the form of a detailed audit, the Logjam project was designed to "scope the size and type of uncatalogued collections held in 30 of the region's principle archive-holding institutions." The work was undertaken by the North West Museums, Libraries and Archives Council (NWMLAC) on behalf of North West Regional Archive Council (NWRAC). The project represents one component of a strategy aimed at improving and expanding access to the region's archives by making finding aids and collections more widely available and by developing a collaborative approach to cataloging backlogs. Specific goals of the project include (1) producing a detailed picture of the uncataloged archival collections held in each repository and in the region as a whole; (2) describing the resources required to catalog these collections; (3) assigning priorities for cataloging these collections and (4) identifying priorities for future collaborative projects within the region.

Philadelphia Area Consortium of Special Collections Libraries (PACSCL)

Consortial Survey Initiative (2006-2008)
http://www.pacsclsurvey.org/

The Philadelphia Area Consortium of Special Collections Libraries (PACSCL) Consortial Survey Initiative is a 30-month project funded by The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation to assess unprocessed, underprocessed, and underdescribed archival collections in a range of physical formats held in 22 Philadelphia area institutions. Modeled on the Historical Society of Pennsylvania project, the purpose of the survey is to collect data that can be used to (1) inform planning for, and prioritization of, collections work within individual institutions and across the consortium and (2) improve intellectual access to unprocessed and underprocessed collections by making collection-level records available to

the public. As of the end of October, 2,100 collections totaling over 19,400 linear feet in 22 institutions have been surveyed.

Survey data is recorded in a shared, publicly-accessible database developed specifically for the project. Because it includes fields that allow institutions to maintain internally significant data, such as location and provenance information, the database can be used as a basic accessions or collection management system by individual institutions. The website includes links to project documentation including a survey checklist, a description of the ratings, and a guide to the database.

Smithsonian Institution, National Museum of Natural History

Angels Project (1996)
http://cool.conservation-us.org/coolaic/sg/bpg/annual/v15/bp15-18.html

In conjunction with the annual meeting of the American Institute for Conservation, an Angels Project connects conservators with a collection that needs care. The project described in this report served as a pilot to develop and demonstrate "ideal" procedures for the processing, rehousing, and reformatting of an important collection of scientific illustrations.

Smithsonian Institution Archives

Preservation Assessment Component of Collection Management System
For more information, e-mail Sarah Stauderman (staudermans@si.edu)

The Preservation Assessment Component provides a mechanism for the capture and tracking of essential information about the condition of collections. Seven questions guide the assessment; answers (provided on a scale from 0 to 3) are used to automatically calculate and assign preservation priority. Assesses the percentage of the collection that needs housing; has inappropriate housing material (e.g., acidic folders, envelopes); is poorly positioned (e.g., messy, overstuffed); has format problems (e.g., crushed, folded, rolled); has damaging and/or inappropriate attachments (e.g., staples, paper clips, etc.); has physical damage (from dirt, adhesive, water, etc.); and has unstable materials (e.g., newspaper, thermo fax paper, color photographs, etc.). Also provides mechanisms for recording actions taken during the assessment, including rehousing and digitization, and for alerting preservation staff to immediate and/or long-term needs that cannot be addressed during the assessment.

University of California, Berkeley, The Bancroft Library

Manuscripts Survey Project (February 2008-January 2011)
http://blogs.lib.berkeley.edu/bancsurvey.php

With funds provided by The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and the Rosalinde and Arthur Gilbert Foundation, the Bancroft Library is undertaking a comprehensive survey of all manuscript holdings

processed before 1996, including a backlog of some 595 collections representing 25,000 linear feet of archival and manuscript material that is currently unavailable for research. Project staff, working over a three-year period, will apply standard archival appraisal methodologies to each collection in order to determine its scope and content, identify preservation needs, make recommendations regarding arrangement and description, and estimate the resources required to make it fully accessible to researchers. The survey will yield updated, accurate, and detailed information that will be used to establish processing goals, develop funding priorities, and facilitate collection management decisions, including those involving the de-accessioning of out-of-scope materials.

University of Michigan

Unprocessed Collections Survey Project (2009)
For more information, e-mail Martha Conway (moconway@umich.edu)

This project engaged masters-degree students at the School of Information in two consecutive projects surveying un- and under-processed collections held by the Special Collections Library. Working in teams of two and three, using an assessment methodology derived from the Historical Society of Pennsylvania project, 55 students collected quantitative and qualitative information on a total of 40 unprocessed collections of archival and manuscript material. Their findings, and the reports documenting their effort and their observations, have been used to populate a web-accessible database that the Special Collections Library will employ to create and make available adequate and uniform collection-level descriptions; understand more fully the prevalence of unmet preservation challenges; inform collection management decisions; and establish and guide processing priorities. Project documentation includes a field-by-field description of the database tables and an illustrated procedure manual.

University of Virginia

Andrew W. Mellon Special Collections Assessment Project (2002-2004)
https://www.lib.virginia.edu/small/collections/mellon/

Modeled on the Historical Society of Pennsylvania project, this survey of the archival and manuscript holdings in the Special Collections Library resulted in data that has been used to determine cataloging and processing priorities and to generate time and cost estimates for the work associated with collections that require additional processing. Project staff collected several types of use data to measure current interest in the holdings of the Special Collections Library, developed a methodology to identify current and future research trends that those collections might support, and evaluated the ease with which staff can locate and serve collection materials to patrons and the ability for patrons to identify relevant materials in those collections. The survey procedure manual and the data collection form are available at the project website.

Washington State University Libraries

Comprehensive Preservation Survey of Manuscript and Historical Photograph Collections (2004-2005)
http://www.wsulibs.wsu.edu/holland/masc/preservationsurvey.html

With a grant from the Washington Preservation Initiative, a LSTA-funded program administered by the Washington State Library, the Washington State University Libraries assessed the physical condition of processed manuscript and photograph collections held by Manuscripts, Archives, and Special Collections.

Staff surveyed approximately 4,400 linear feet of manuscripts and 120 collections containing more than 500,000 photographic images. The project website includes links to survey forms, sample database records, and a photo gallery.

WGBH Media Library and Archives

Assessment for Scholarly Use
http://openvault.wgbh.org/pdf/WGBHMLAAssessment.pdf

The WGBH Media Library and Archives (MLA) Assessment for Scholarly Use project, funded by The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, was designed to achieve two goals: to determine the educational value of WGBH's extensive archival collection for higher education research and instruction, and to accomplish this by designing an assessment instrument for surveying audio-visual collections that could be shared with other institutions. At the start of the project, the MLA housed approximately 29,000 programs with 570,000 related production elements and documents, numbers that suggest both the potential worth of this collection to the academic community and the complexity of evaluating its educational value. The study approached this challenge by (1) creating a framework and tool for collecting information about the archived programs (2) assembling a detailed composite portrait of the archival collection and (3) modeling potential approaches to analyzing and employing the data compiled through this work. The extensive project report includes the assessment tool and recommendations regarding its use by other institutions.

Appendix B: Procedure Manual (University of Michigan)

Available online: http://www.oclc.org/research/activities/backlogtools/michiganmanual.pdf

Appendix C: Ratings Descriptions (Columbia University)

Available online: http://www.oclc.org/research/activities/backlogtools/columbiaratings.pdf

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