Retrospective Accessioning

Chela Scott Weber
Senior Program Officer, OCLC Research Library Partnership

Chapter preprint originally published in:

Eagle Yun, Audra (ed.). 2021. *Archival Accessioning*. Chicago: Society of American Archivists.

Please direct correspondence to:
OCLC Research
oclcresearch@oclc.org

ORCID ID
Chela Scott Weber https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6358-5128.

Chapter citation:

Weber, Chela Scott. 2021. “Retrospective Accessioning.” In *Archival Accessioning*, edited by Audra Eagle Yun, 129–38. Chicago: Society of American Archivists.
OCLC Research Chapter Preprint. https://doi.org/10.25333/t4g8-jt78.

Book citation

Eagle Yun, Audra (ed.). 2021. *Archival Accessioning*. Chicago: Society of American Archivists.

Background

To truly reap the benefits of a thoughtful and consistent accessioning program, a repository must develop a baseline understanding of all of the collections in its care. Retrospective accessioning draws a distinction between types of backlogs - those that are merely unprocessed, and those that have not been accessioned. Searcy defines accessioning as "the processes by which we examine, analyze, stabilize, and document our knowledge about a grouping of archival materials upon their arrival in order to confirm our stewardship of them."[1] This definition is useful in the context of thinking about accessioning programmatically because it emphasizes the important examination and analysis that takes place at accessioning and knowledge it creates. For many institutions, accessioning is a function that has been managed variably over time, and such examination, analysis, and documentation of knowledge has not regularly occurred upon arrival of collections. This leads not just challenges in managing collections individually, but also to an inability to understand and manage a repository's holdings *in toto*. Retrospective accessioning remedies inconsistent past practice by holistically identifying and attending to gaps in accessioning practice and establishing baseline controls and documenting understanding for backlogs of un- and under-accessioned collections, confirming our stewardship of them and making them easier to holistically manage.

Retrospective accessioning projects are similar to backlog processing projects but differ somewhat in goals and scope. The primary goal of backlog processing projects is to provide access to currently inaccessible collections, and they largely deal with arrangement and description activities that result in online descriptive surrogates of collections. In contrast, retrospective accessioning projects seek to develop the baseline levels of stabilization, understanding, and control that are the goal of accessioning. They thus may not result in immediate access to all collections, though they will build an important incremental step toward access. While the scope of retrospective accessioning encompasses arrangement and description activities, it will also include some or all other aspects of a typical accessioning program: review and documentation of legal ownership and terms of access to collections, shelf reads for administration of location information and confirmation of size of collections, and some physical remediation of collections and their housing. Both types of projects may include gathering survey data to quantify and understand different aspects and future needs of collections.

Planning for a retrospective accessioning project should be situated within a holistic archival management program. These projects can be used as an opportunity to build comprehensive understanding for informed decision-making in collection development, collection management, resource allocation and fundraising, as well as transparent communication of holdings to researchers. The design of such a project should work in concert with your accessioning program, aligning with any systems and standards you have already put in place, or helping to

[1] Searcy, Rachel. "Beyond Control: Accessioning Practices for Extensible Archival Management." *Journal of Archival Organization*, (October 16, 2018): 1–23. https://doi.org/10.1080/15332748.2018.1517292.

build systems and standards that will be used in accessioning work going forward. A retrospective accessioning project can help to test out and refine a newly implemented accessioning program, or re-assess and adjust an established one, but each should inform the other. If the institution does not already have an accessioning program, a project like this can show its value by providing a concrete example of the large-scale work required to address its absence, as well as build systems and workflows which can remain in place post-project.

Planning a retrospective accessioning project is an exercise in professional judgement, and requires putting what you know about your collections and program to work in service of finding the right balance between needs and resources. A retrospective accessioning project can be a significant undertaking, and depending on the size of an institution's holdings, program, and staff, may require either additional project staff or reprioritization of current staff responsibilities. That doesn't mean retrospective accessioning need be out of reach for lone-arrangers and small shops, just that thoughtful, intentional, and realistic planning is required.

The following sections and accompanying questions are designed to help you think through what an appropriate retrospective accessioning project might look like in your institution. They may also be used as the basis for structured interviews with key stakeholders to ensure you get a broad set of perspectives on repository needs, and to help build buy-in for the project.

Designing a Retrospective Accessioning Project

Overall Project Goals

Broadly, a retrospective accessioning project is a chance to build baseline control and holistic understanding about your collections to facilitate future decision making, and guard against loss of data and collection mismanagement. It is an opportunity to build a system of record about your collections, and a data set that can be updated and serve you into the future. It is also a chance to remediate gaps in past work that impede current work, address evolving needs of particular formats, or attend to other high priorities. While the project will ultimately deal with individual collections, it is also a repository-wide effort, and therefore calls for systems thinking and a cross-functional mindset. Though resourcing realities may cause you to reduce scope or execute a project in phases, it is useful to begin with a big-picture mindset that takes all functions in the archival enterprise into account, and with the whole of the project in mind. What that will look like in practice will vary for different institutions.

- How does the current state of collections impact day to day operations, including reference, collection development, fundraising, project planning, and community outreach?
- What kinds of projects and planning do you anticipate in the near- and mid-term future, and do you have the information about your collections you need to accomplish them?
- Are there ongoing pain points that repository staff or researchers deal with regularly? Might they be systematically addressed in your project?
- What tools or processes do you currently have to use in order to answer questions about your collections? How would you like this to change?

- What knowledge do you want to have about your collection, and what do you already know about it that you want to better understand? What information would help you to better manage your collections?
- Who are your stakeholders, how will a project like this impact them, and what will you need to communicate to them about it?

Systems and Standards - Building a System of Record

In order to support the goal of building systematic understanding and decision-making around collections, information management must be taken seriously. Retrospective accessioning builds a large body of data that needs to be reliably accessible into the future, so that it can be consulted and updated as you iterate on the foundational work of this project. Taking time to consider the systems you use to record data, and the standards you use to guide this work, is vital to creating a system of record that can support collection management into the future. Additionally, a retrospective accessioning project can be just as much about bringing existing information together and making it standardized and shareable as it can be about creating new information. In designing a project, think carefully about your existing sources of information, how they can currently be accessed, and what level of risk there is of losing information, as well as what an ideal information management program might look like.

- What systems are you currently using for collection management administrative and descriptive data? Are they adequate, or is this an opportunity to improve or migrate data, or realign systems?
- What descriptive standards do you use? Is this practice well-documented?
- How are you able to answer questions about your collections via your systems now? Is there adequate reporting functionality, and does your data support that reporting?
- Will the scale of data to be collected in this project work with current systems? How are you going to maintain this data? What's a realistic plan to make sure you can manage this moving forward?
- Who are your stakeholders? Who will use this system, and can they easily get the information they need?

Pre-Custodial Documentation and Administrative Control

Unlike accessioning proper, often much time will have passed between when the collection came in and when the retrospective accessioning project is taking place. Because of this, collection creators and original curators may not be available to provide important information about the context of creation, custodial history, appraisal decisions, and agreements about access restrictions and intellectual property. The project design will have to address this gap as much as possible via existing records of pre-accession interventions with collections and their creators, including notes about appraisal, preliminary assessment, negotiations with donors, and curatorial decision making; deeds of gift or other transfer agreements; and correspondence with records creators, donors, and dealers. The work of interpreting these kinds of documents and transparently communicating their contents to users at a project scale must also be

considered. Decision trees, copyright guides, and standardized language for notes fields can be important tools in making a project run smoothly.[2]

- What existing information do you have in collection or accession files, curator's offices and inboxes, deeds of gift, or other records of appraisal, transfer, etc?
- Do you have these records for all of your collections? If not, do you want to track gaps as part of the project?
- What formats are these records in? Are they already recorded in your system of record, and if not, are they recorded in structured data anywhere that might be migrated to your system of record?
- What information do you need to transfer to your system of record, and what can remain on paper?
- Do you have training and guidance for project staff who will be asked to interpret a large and varied body of deeds of gift, purchase agreements, and other documentation transferring ownership and outlining access and rights restrictions?
- Do you have standardized or agreed upon language to use in your descriptive outputs that represents intellectual property status and conditions of access?
- How will you communicate in descriptive outputs instances when you do not have records of provenance or intellectual property status?

Physical Control and Stabilization Interventions

Gaining better physical control of collections can be a fairly straightforward part of a retrospective accessioning project which can have huge benefits for collections management. However, when the physical reality of dealing with a large body of records is not carefully planned and scoped, it has the potential to send a project significantly off-schedule. Where and how collections are stored, and the physical work necessary to pull and work with boxes, can significantly impact the time and effort it takes to complete all aspects of the project, but especially portions that require hands-on interaction with materials. The less physical control you have over your collections, and the less you understand about the history of their storage environments or condition upon arrival, the more likely you are to run into surprises that can slow work down. Project timelines should allow some margin for dealing with such issues.

Similarly, trying to remediate the physical condition of collections and their containers can eat up huge amounts of time. True physical needs must be carefully considered and the work strictly scoped, usually with an iterative approach which addresses only baseline stabilization and documents where further work is needed. When considering need for physical remediations like replacing housing, take into account the quality of your preventive conservation measures, like

[2] See, for example, the standardized language for Conditions Governing Use and Conditions Governing Access notes in the NYU ArchivesSpace Users Manual: Archival Collections Management Unit, NYU Libraries. "ACM ArchivesSpace Manual for Local Usage at NYU," 2016, 29-32. http://bit.ly/nyu-archivesspace.

levels of temperature and humidity control, how the collections will be stored and moved, and the potential timeline for further work.[3]

- Do you know how many collections you have, and where they all are stored?
- Do you know the extent of all of your collections? Do you know how many boxes and of what size/type are in each collection? If not, do you need to know this?
- How does your current level of physical control impact all of your repository operations?
- How do your collections circulate through request, paging, reproduction, and other functions? What level of physical control do you need for these functions?
- Who needs access to location information in support of different functions throughout your repository, and can they currently access it?
- What are your temperature and humidity control conditions? Do you have policies and procedures for handling, use, and maintenance for storage? Do you have an integrated pest management program? How do the answers to these questions impact your baseline collection housing needs?
- What are your goals with regard to movement of collections? Do they need to move off-site, from storage into the reading room, or just between storage and workspace? How often might they move? What are the collection housing needs to facilitate this movement?
- Will currently closed collections be accessible to researchers at the conclusion of the project? If so, what are the physical needs related to paging and serving collections to researchers?
- Think about your physical storage spaces and how they may impact your project preparation and execution. Are your rooms and storage furniture named and numbered in a standard way? Are they clearly labeled? Do different storage locations require different amounts of time, workspace configurations, or safety considerations in the project plan?

Gathering Quantitative Data to Build Understanding and Gauge Future Needs

It can be helpful to record detailed data and value judgements via survey methodologies, especially for understanding repository-wide issues that would be hard to process and understand en masse via prose. Physical condition of materials and housing can be assessed to identify unmet preservation needs. Current levels of intellectual control and anticipated research value of collections can be assessed in order to develop informed processing priorities. Perhaps the best known approach to assessing these and other related issues is the PACSCL survey methodology model.[4] Many institutions have drawn upon the PACSCL survey

[3] See McCann, Laura. “Preservation as Obstacle or Opportunity? Rethinking the Preservation-Access Model in the Age of MPLP.” *Journal of Archival Organization* 11, no. 1–2 (January 1, 2013): 23–48. https://doi.org/10.1080/15332748.2013.871972 for further discussion of the relationship between preservation needs and a preventive conservation program.

[4] Philadelphia Area Consortium of Special Collections Libraries (PACSCL). “PACSCL Consortial Survey Initiative - About the Project.” PACSCL Consortial Survey Initiative, August 23, 2007. https://web.archive.org/web/20160223151530/http://pacsclsurvey.org/about.html.

and other methodologies and altered them to fit institutional needs.[5] Similarly, it may be useful to gather quantitative data about specific formats in the collections that you are trying to understand and address holistically, such as born-digital or audio-visual materials.

- What do you currently know about the physical condition of your collections and of their housing? How does this impact your operations? What would you like to know?
- What do you currently know about the level of intellectual access of your collections? How does this impact your operations? What would you like to know?
- If you gather data via a ratings system, how will you train and ensure consistency in applying ratings across the project team? Will you continue to assign ratings through this same mechanism to new collections as part of your regular accessioning workflow?
- Do you know the extent of your audio-visual and born-digital holdings? Do you know which collections contain these materials? What information do you need about these materials to do iterative planning and advocate for their care?
- What other repository-wide or format-specific understanding would you like to have about your collections?
- How might you use the data you are considering collecting?

Baseline Intellectual Control and Descriptive Surrogates

It is important to be clear about expectations for any baseline description that will be created in a retrospective accessioning project. It can be a challenge to find the right balance between imparting enough information and expending only the time and effort appropriate to a retrospective project, especially for archivists used to doing more detailed descriptive work. Defining expectations that are appropriate to your needs and the information you've decided is important to gather will help the project and your project team be successful. The required fields of a DACS single-level minimum record may not be sufficient to document and communicate to users the understanding you are building through the project, and you may wish to consider adding Acquisition and Appraisal or Conditions Governing Access and Use elements. Project teams will also want to discuss how to communicate to users in clear and transparent language about unknown provenance or other gaps in knowledge inherent to such projects.

- Is the information required in a DACS single-level minimum record sufficient for your baseline intellectual control needs?
- How will you define a minimal record? What are the fields you will require, and what fields will you use as necessary? What will you not include?
- How will you assess, adjust, and refine descriptive practice over the course of the project? What will supervision and record review look like at the beginning of the project, and as it progresses and is more established?

[5] See O'Hara Conway, Martha, and Merrilee Proffitt. "Taking Stock and Making Hay: Archival Collections Assessment." Dublin, OH, 2011. http://www.oclc.org/research/publications/library/2011/2011-07.pdf for more detail on adapting collection assessment practices to fit your institutional needs.

Adjusting Scope

Carefully determining the scope of the project and sticking to that scope is a key to successful completion. When dealing with a large body of under-controlled collections, you will surely find plenty of work you would like to do, and gems of collections that you want to make fully accessible right away. But giving into the temptation to do work beyond the scope of the project is the most surefire way to get off schedule and endanger successfully finishing the whole of your work.

Once you have worked through the range of potential needs to be addressed, you may need to alter scope, break the project into phases, or think about alternate ways to staff the project depending on how needs match up with resources. In repositories with significant needs, it can be a challenge to find a balance between what is sustainable and manageable for your organization while also addressing pressing collection stewardship responsibilities. These types of projects do not always require additional staff and can be accomplished using only existing staffing resources.[6] Keeping iteration in mind can help break a project into manageable phases that will still yield tangible results.

- What timeline are you comfortable with, and do you have any external deadlines or dependencies that might influence schedule?
- What kind of labor can you devote to the project? What are the main tasks, and who across your team is best suited to carry them out? Is there expertise or capacity elsewhere in the organization that can be drawn on?
- What scope of work could you accomplish with existing resources and staff, and what could only be done with additional resources?
- If the project will be done without additional resources or staffing, what impact will this have on ongoing operations, what other work will not be able to be done, and how and to whom will this need to be communicated?
- What resources are available for the next iteration of work after this project? How likely is it that issues identified will be able to be addressed in the near- or mid-term?

It can be helpful to do a trial run of each phase or section of a proposed project on small subset of materials, to test assumptions about timing, order of operations, assignment of responsibilities, and to get a concrete example of outputs that can be reviewed and discussed by the project team and stakeholders. This can allow for adjustments to scope and workplan before large-scale work begins, as well as help to think about managing and communicating project expectations to stakeholders. When your project design is clear, think through the documentation and training materials you will need to communicate both procedure and scoping

[6] For examples of two similar projects with different staffing models, see: Cox, Robert S. “Maximal Processing, or, Archivist on a Pale Horse.” *Journal of Archival Organization* 8, no. 2 (May 28, 2010): 143–147. https://doi.org/10.1080/15332748.2010.526086, and Weber, Chela Scott, and Matthew B. Gorham. “Creating Access and Establishing Control: Conducting a Comprehensive Survey to Reveal a Hidden Repository.” In *Description: Innovative Practices for Archives and Special Collections*, ed. Kate Theimer, 35–52. New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2014.

decisions to the project team, how to help any new staff better understand the context and impact of their work, and what supervision will be needed to keep the project on track.

Scenario

East Coast University is a major research university with three distinct archival repositories within its library system. Three years ago, the libraries created an archival technical services department to oversee collection management for the roughly 35,000 linear feet of archival materials held in all three repositories, with a staff of six full-time professional archivists dedicated to collection management activities. They have had a dedicated accessioning archivist and a unified accessioning program in place for two and a half years. Collections are housed both at the library and in an off-site storage facility.

Prior to the unified accessioning program, accessioning was done inconsistently both across and within the repositories, resulting in a large backlog of collections without the baseline control and understanding. Location information had not been tracked systematically and had primarily been managed at the collection rather than box level, and extent information about some collections was unclear. All collections had accession files held in the three repositories, but not all collections had deeds of gift or other transfer agreements, and information about intellectual property rights has not been tracked in the collections management system, causing ongoing difficulties for public service staff trying to manage reproduction and use requests. A small but significant portion of collections had little to no descriptive information beyond title and creator, making holistic prioritization and decision making impossible. Curatorial units knew they had substantial audio-visual and born-digital materials within the collections, including magnetic media in need of reformatting, but did not have trustworthy information about location, quantity, or formats.

The library was planning to implement the Aeon request management system, which will require all boxes to be barcoded. The library was also planning a renovation of the special collections spaces, and all on-site collections would have to be moved in approximately three to five years to facilitate the renovation process, but the current level of control was not adequate to responsibly move their collections. Because of the time pressure of the renovation, the library was willing to allocate internal funds for professional project staff to work on a remediation project.

The archival collection management group worked in consultation with the three repositories to design a retrospective accessioning project that would ensure the baseline control necessary for collections to be moved in preparation for the upcoming renovation. It would also collect data to inform planning for future projects that were out of scope of the initial project, and to support informed decision making moving forward. Their resulting project design included a physical control phase, an administrative data analysis phase, and a survey phase.

The physical control phase included a full shelf read of on-site collections, recording location and extent for all collections at a box level, and limited physical remediation of containers to ensure that all boxes were stable enough to be picked up and moved, and had labels and

barcodes. They deemed this work necessary to prepare to responsibly move the collections, as well as to accurately understand the extent of their holdings in total and per collection. Barcodes were added to facilitate Aeon use, as well as make tracking of boxes in the upcoming move more efficient. Any collections that were candidates to be sent to off-site storage were earmarked for additional physical remediation in a future iteration.

The administrative data analysis phase sought to ensure accurate understanding across holdings of rights and responsibilities regarding ownership, copyright status, and restrictions to access or use, and communicate them clearly to users and public services staff. This required gathering of accession files from the three repositories, and analyzing deeds of gift in order to write accurate conditions governing use and access statements. A set of standardized language options developed by the accessioning program was used whenever appropriate, both to save time and to communicate clearly and consistently. The project team also tracked absence or presence of a deed of gift or other transfer agreement, so that ACM and the curatorial units could design a later project to deal with collections without clear ownership status.

The survey phase of the project gathered qualitative and quantitative information about current level of physical and intellectual control over collections, based on the PACSCL survey instrument. A census of born-digital and audio-visual material was also included in this phase, to identify where these materials were held and quantify them; it gathered count, carrier, and capacity of carrier information for all audio-visual and born-digital holdings. For collections without descriptive records meeting the accessioning program requirements for a baseline accession record, the descriptive record was created or augmented. The information gathered in this phase was deemed necessary to responsibly manage collections going forward, including making informed decisions about processing priorities, prioritizing preservation reformatting for audio-visual collections, planning a project to address the born-digital formats in the backlog, and identifying which collections could be safely sent off-site in preparation for the renovation.

As a result of the work undertaken in the project, East Coast University was able to confidently move collections within their building to facilitate the renovation. They can make informed decisions about which collections to move to off-site storage, and design an accurate work plan for any remediation necessary for off-sighting. They will use the a/v and born-digital census information to be able to better advocate for and address the needs of these specific formats, including making preservation reformatting prioritization decisions, and building the staff skills and equipment necessary for the imaging and file transfer off of the born-digital media in their collections. The survey methodology used in the project will become an ongoing part of the accessioning program, so that the body of knowledge built in the project will continue to be useful and used as they build their collections moving forward.