

Extensible Processing for
ARCHIVES
AND SPECIAL
COLLECTIONS

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DANIEL A. SANTAMARIA

Extensible Processing for
ARCHIVES
AND SPECIAL
COLLECTIONS

Reducing Processing Backlogs

Neal-Schuman

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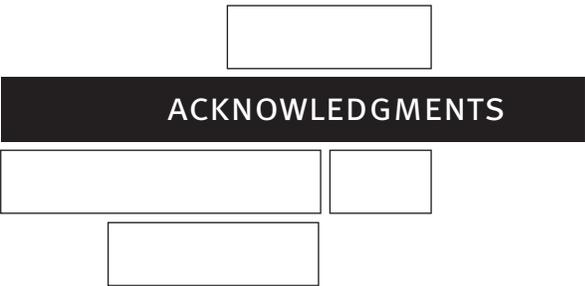
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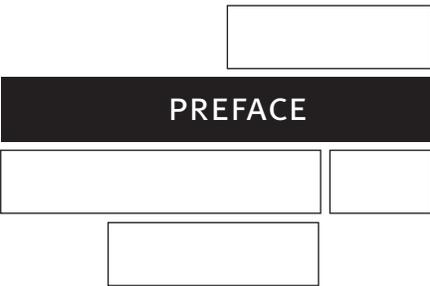
Mark Greene and Dennis Meissner have had as significant an impact on my career as anyone could without having ever worked directly with them. The "Implementing MPLP" workshop I developed would not have happened without their efforts to shine a light on inefficient processing practices, and this book would not have been written without the workshop. Their work continues to be an inspiration in my, and many other archivists, day-to-day work.

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archivist. Although it feels strange that he's not still there mentoring the next generation of young archivists passing through the Bentley processing room, his processing philosophy is presented throughout this book.

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PREFACE

ARCHIVES EXIST TO be used. Archivists expend enormous amounts of time, energy, and resources describing archival material so that it can be discovered, understood, and viewed by researchers. Yet, for many years, archivists have struggled to keep pace in describing material brought in to their repositories. Large processing backlogs—resulting in collections that are not described and essentially hidden from potential users—have been documented and extensively discussed throughout the world of archives and special collections for at least a decade, but recent evidence suggests that the problem persists.

One strategy that has emerged as a solution to the problem of hidden collections is extensible processing. Extensible processing is an iterative approach to archival processing that involves creating a baseline level of access to all holdings in an archival repository, then conducting additional processing based on user demand and further assessment of collections. This book is designed to introduce extensible processing principles and provide strategies that will allow for both the elimination of backlogs of collections material already in the possession of archives and special collections, and the development of procedures to avoid the accumulation (or reaccumulation) of backlogs in the first place.

Writing a book about processing and backlog reduction in archives and special collections can be complicated because of the varying levels of

staffing and funding available to institutions. There are no magic bullets when it comes to reducing backlogs. No one set of procedures will work for all repositories in all situations. One of the strengths of extensible processing, however, is its flexibility. Instead of attempting to find perfect solutions for all situations, archivists can strive to find solutions that are “good enough” to make material available to users, and then find ways to improve access and solve problems in successive steps. This is exactly what extensible processing recommends.

This book will discuss both general principles applicable to all types of repositories and specific case studies and strategies successfully employed by a variety of institutions. The book should be useful to both supervisors and managers of processing, who are responsible for designing sustainable descriptive programs, and archivists and librarians who do the actual processing work. Throughout the book, however, emphasis is placed on decision-making, prioritization, and adherence to archival principles and standards—concepts that apply to archivists at many levels and in every kind of organization. Whether working on a project involving one collection or hundreds of collections, these strategies are the key to effective processing.

Eliminating backlogs is not a simple task. Many archives and special collections libraries, never the most well-funded of institutions and programs, have faced dwindling funding and institutional support in recent years, while continuing to grapple with an ever-expanding universe of material to collect. Archivists, however, can draw on a unique set of principles, standards, and skills to address these challenges. A backlog, in fact, can be seen as an opportunity to demonstrate the value of professional skills and archival principles to resource allocators; archivists who are able to eliminate their backlogs and demonstrate increased interest in and use of their collections are very likely to impress their supervisors, as well as the donors and administrators who control resources.

Managers, processors, and archivists who are both all need to focus on the larger goal of providing broad access to *all* of the material held within an archives or special collections. Although this big-picture focus can be challenging, removing barriers to access of collections material is also very rewarding. Despite all the challenges involved with archival work, the best archival processors know that there is something they can do every day to make things better and to make access easier, whether it’s talking to a donor about restrictions, arranging boxes into series, creating assessment data, or simply posting collection descriptions online. This book aims to give archivists the tools, confidence, and freedom they need to make things better for our users, day by day and step by step.

About This Book

The book consists of ten chapters.

Chapter 1 will define and explain the problem of backlogs and discuss processing approaches introduced by Mark Greene and Dennis Meissner's "More Product, Less Process" (MPLP) methodology and the professional debates that their work has inspired.

Chapter 2 moves beyond MPLP to define and describe extensible processing. The chapter presents the six core principles underlying this processing approach.

Chapters 3 through 8 cover specific aspects and essential components of an extensible processing program. This section of the book starts with an overview of processing and backlog reduction strategies in chapters 3 and 4, but also includes information on archival functions closely related to processing: accessioning new collections material (chapter 5), descriptive standards (chapter 6), and digitization (chapter 7). Although they are not always thought of in the context of efficient processing methods, all three play critical roles in extensible processing programs: accessioning to ensure that newly acquired material does not lead to new or additional backlogs; descriptive standards to enable data to be reused in multiple ways; and digitization to meet user expectations for access to the material in our holdings. Chapter 8 deals with big-picture issues such as planning, management, and supervision. Supervision is one of the biggest challenges in developing an extensible processing approach, because it typically involves either training new staff or asking experienced staff to relearn procedures that they've performed for years. In addition to staff and resource allocation, this section focuses on creating processing plans, establishing processing rates and processing metrics that can be used to help evaluate the effectiveness of a processing program.

Chapter 9 addresses some of the most frequently asked questions and concerns about the implications of extensible processing approaches, including questions about privacy and confidentiality, security, preservation, and non-traditional record and document formats. In addition to raising these issues, strategies for dealing with problems or complications in each of these areas will be presented.

Although examples will be discussed at appropriate points throughout the book, the first four appendixes are devoted to case studies of a variety of institutions that have eliminated or reduced their backlogs using extensible processing principles. These eight case studies demonstrate the viability of extensible processing approaches and the necessity of developing sustainable descriptive practices.

Additional appendixes include several examples of finding aids and work plans that illustrate the concepts and strategies described in the body of the book. The last decade has seen a wealth of literature and conference sessions concerning archival processing, description, digitization, and related topics. Many of these are listed in the bibliographies found in the appendixes. All of these resources will be of help to archivists interested in implementing an extensible processing program and in making their holdings available to users.

The Backlog Problem and Archival Processing

AT THE BEGINNING of most manuals or introductory texts about archival processing, authors include several sentences defining processing and declaring it a fundamental archival function that is central to the work of any archives or special collections library. They write that archivists process material to gain intellectual, as well as physical, control of their holdings. Many also argue that archivists arrange and describe material so that it may be used by patrons. This concept of processing to provide access is central to the work of all archivists. Prominent archivists such as T. R. Schellenberg have argued for decades that “use is the end of all archival effort.”¹ The Society of American Archivists’ (SAA) Glossary of Archives and Records Terminology prominently mentions use in its definition of archival processing.²

Over the years, however, archivists have seemed to require reminders that archival material is collected, processed, and described so that it may be used. Maynard J. Brichford, in his 1980 address as the incoming president of the SAA, admonished archivists who see themselves as “keepers,” stating, “We are keepers for a purpose and that purpose is not ‘keeping,’ but using.”³ The title that Brichford gave his address, “Seven Sinful Thoughts,” seems to provide a clue that he thought most archivists could do more to provide access to archival users. In the years since 1980, there have been similar calls. In their groundbreaking 2005 article, “More Product, Less

Process: Revamping Traditional Archival Processing,” Mark Greene and Dennis Meissner argue for placing use and access to collections material at the forefront of archival work, writing that “we should give heed to SAA’s *Planning for the Archival Profession* when it calls ‘the use of archival records . . . the ultimate purpose of identification and administration.’”⁴

Despite these reminders, however, processing backlogs remain a persistent problem for archives and special collections both large and small. These backlogs consist of collections material that is not described in finding aids, catalog records, or other online forms, which leaves the material essentially hidden from the public. In an extensive survey of archival repositories, Greene and Meissner found that 34 percent had more than half of their holdings unprocessed, with 60 percent of repositories having at least a third of their collections unprocessed.⁵ This data matches a 1998 survey conducted by the Association of Research Libraries (ARL) of archives and special collections units that reported that backlogs among manuscript collections averaged nearly one-third of repository holdings.⁶ This is particularly troubling because the ARL survey counted material described in hard-copy formats such as cards in catalogs and print finding aids, as well as online descriptive records, as processed.

Most archivists are aware that Greene and Meissner’s work sparked extensive discussion and debate about archival processing methods and the problem of backlogs. The annual SAA conference has included at least one (and often multiple) sessions on “More Product, Less Process” (commonly referred to as “MPLP”) every year since 2004, with even more frequent sessions presented at regional association meetings. By many measures, backlog reduction, MPLP, and efficient processing models have been the most discussed topics in the archives world over the last eight years. Yet even with all the attention being paid to processing backlogs, more recent data about processing backlogs indicates that they remain serious problems.

In a survey published in late 2010, OCLC Research reviewed published research and surveyed a selection of smaller academic libraries about their holdings and operations.⁷ Some of the most revealing data concerned the persistence of processing backlogs, despite the frequent discussion, attention, and debates surrounding processing practices over the preceding five to seven years. Key findings from the survey are included in table 1.1. Perhaps the most striking finding is that internet-accessible finding aids currently exist for only 44 percent of archival collections.⁸

In summarizing the results of their survey, Jackie Dooley and Katherine Luce write that the “question that looms the largest for many readers of this report may be: To what extent have we succeeded in ‘exposing hidden collections’ in the decade since ARL’s benchmark survey in 1998? The short

TABLE 1.1.
**OCLC “Taking Our Pulse” Survey:
 Percentage of Material Not Represented in Online Catalogs**

FORMAT	MATERIAL LACKING ONLINE RECORD	MATERIAL LACKING ANY RECORD
Printed Volumes	15%	8%
Archives and Manuscripts	44%	30%
Manuscript Items	[not reported]	23%
Cartographic Materials	58%	35%
Visual and Audiovisual Materials	25%	36%
Born-Digital Materials	71%	34%

answer: far from enough. Some progress has been made, but vast quantities of special collections material are not yet discoverable online.”⁹

What Causes Backlogs?

Why does the backlog problem exist? Greene and Meissner’s research, which included a review of NHPRC grant files and of an extensive range of literature, also surveyed archival repositories. Their results indicate that many archivists adhered to a narrow and rigid definition of processing, which typically included frequent and in-depth physical processing, arrangement, and conservation work; detailed description; and often thorough screening of material due to privacy concerns. Collections were typically not considered “processed” until all of these actions were completed. These practices, they argue, are simply not sufficient to keep pace with the size and scope of twentieth and twenty-first century archival collections.

Data from Greene and Meissner’s 2003–2004 survey on processing practices is shown in figures 1.1 through 1.4. The data indicated that, at the time of the survey, the vast majority of archivists were performing item-level arrangement, weeding duplicates, and taking conservation actions such as preservation photocopying and removal of metal fasteners. Even more troubling was the evidence that few repositories created finding aids for every collection in their holdings, and that for many repositories expectations for processing productivity were very low, in many cases well under one linear foot (or one box) per day. Although this data is nearly ten years old, a more recent OCLC survey indicates that these problems persist.

FIGURE 1.1.
Percentage of Archivists That Engage in Physical Processing Practices According to Greene and Meissner Survey

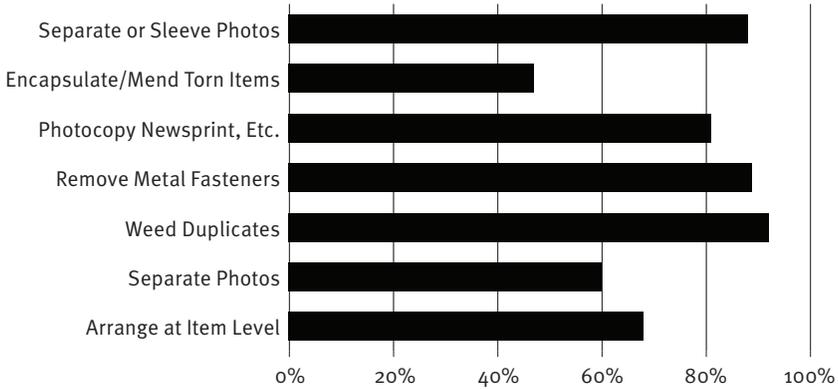


FIGURE 1.2.
Percentage of Archivists That “Usually or Always” Create Descriptive Records According to Greene and Meissner Survey

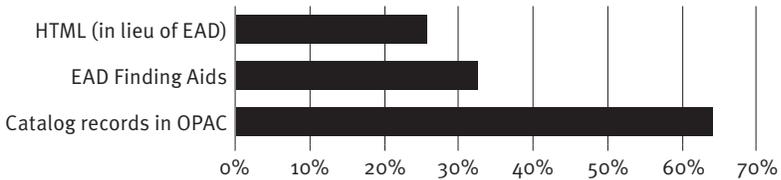


FIGURE 1.3.
Percentage of Archivists That “Seldom or Never” Create Descriptive Records According to Greene and Meissner Survey

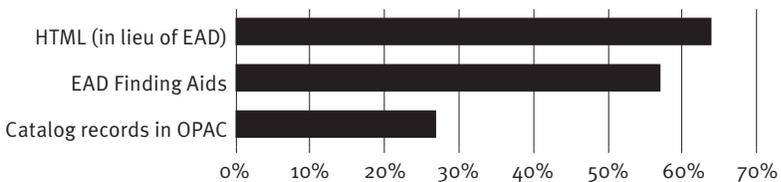
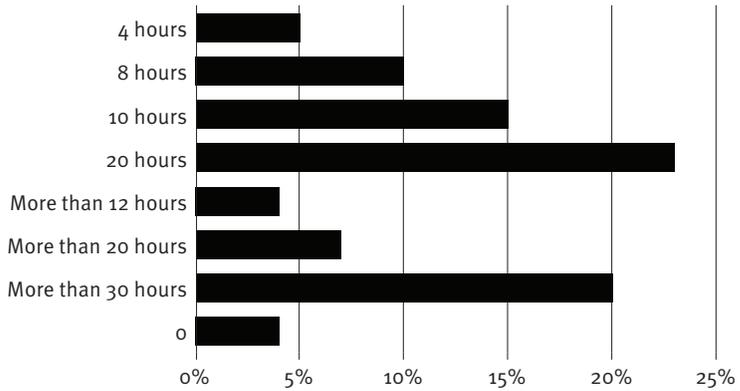


FIGURE 1.4.

**Reported Processing Productivity per Linear Foot,
According to Greene and Meissner Survey**



Greene and Meissner concluded that these traditional approaches to processing were based on assumptions that archival material and the information it contains is scarce, and that exceptional measures must be taken to keep it safe. Preservation actions, such as refoldering and reboxing all collections material, focused on meeting the perceived needs of the material rather than the demonstrated needs of users who might never know that materials exist if descriptions are not available. Archivists' fears and anxiety about being perceived as sloppy, careless, or irresponsible by researchers, or even by other archivists, also contributed to these practices. Essentially, many archivists felt it was their obligation to perform detailed arrangement, description, and conservation work in every situation and on every collection with which they worked. In the majority of cases, collections were not considered open to the public unless they were fully processed; 56 percent of repositories reported that they "do not permit researcher access to collections that are unprocessed," even though more than 61 percent of respondents reported that more than 30 percent of their holdings were unprocessed. Overall, this rigid approach to processing led to situations where only a few collections were processed to a very detailed level, leaving the majority of collections undiscoverable and unavailable to users.

Since the publication of "More Product, Less Process" (MPLP), some archivists have argued that there are aspects of archival administration that also contribute to creating processing backlogs. These arguments, which are valid but do not represent the full picture, are examined in more detail in chapter 9.

Why are Backlogs a Problem?

Unprocessed and under-described collection materials cause a number of problems for archives and special collections libraries. Although many of these issues will be obvious to experienced archivists, given the continued existence of backlogs it is useful to examine why backlogs are harmful to both archival repositories and their users. In 2003, the Association of Research Libraries produced a white paper on backlogs that listed several concrete problems, which are shown in figure 1.5.¹⁰

FIGURE 1.5.
Problems Resulting from Backlogs

1. Uncataloged or under processed collections are at a greater risk of being lost or stolen, and are difficult or impossible to recover from legal authorities if they are under documented. Unique and rare materials are particularly vulnerable.
2. They are inaccessible to the scholarly community and thus hinder research and research results. Even when unprocessed collections are made available—which is a security risk—they are difficult, if not impossible, for researchers to locate unless they happen to suspect that the institution in question might have such a collection
3. Undergraduates, graduate students, and junior faculty, many of whom lack the financial wherewithal to travel to other institutions, are particularly affected by the lack of access to unprocessed collections in their own institutions
4. In the digital environment, there is an ever-growing user interest in accessing special collections remotely and a challenge in reallocating staff for this processing.
5. Access to unprocessed collections is staff-dependent, to the detriment of the institution and the patron. Long-time staff become the source of expertise for these collections; when they move on or retire, that undocumented “institutional memory” is lost.
6. Often special collections have been excluded from general library retrospective conversion projects because of their perceived “exceptional” nature. When they have been included, in many cases the access points are misleading or even erroneous.
7. In at least one public university, state auditors became concerned that books purchased with state funds were inaccessible to the public for years after purchase.
8. Space constraints at the core campus are leading some institutions to build high density storage facilities in which ONLY processed collections that can be readily retrieved can be housed.
9. Unprocessed collections often result in purchasing duplicates already owned.
10. Poor donor relations can result from not making collections available in a timely fashion.

11. Unprocessed collections are often totally inaccessible because they are likely to be in closed stacks, eliminating the possibility of discovery by browsing.

12. Unprocessed collections often get lost and forgotten in storage areas and sustain physical damage from unstable temperature and humidity

13. Often materials have manual finding aids that can be used only in the repository—pencil markings in one set of books, a faded typewritten finding aid, etc. Even in that repository, nonstandard guides and non-current card catalogs are likely to be underutilized or even unknown to researchers.

Greene and Meissner’s MPLP article, which primarily focused on resource allocators and donors, presents further evidence that backlogs are damaging to archival institutions. They contend that hidden collections damage archivists’ reputations as responsible custodians of the material in their care. Greene and Meissner’s survey of archival repositories revealed that in 51 percent of repositories, researchers, donors, and/or resource allocators had been upset by backlogs.¹¹ This displeasure was manifested in complaints that a donor’s collection had not yet been processed, and potential donors sometimes had second thoughts about donating a collection.¹² These practical considerations surrounding archivists’ ability to develop successful relationships with donors and resource allocators are tremendously important; if an archives or special collections cannot demonstrate that it can be trusted with collections material or financial resources, it will have difficulty securing the funding and resources necessary to survive as a functioning repository. As the International Council on Archives’ (ICA) “Principles on Access to Archives” states, an access service “influences whether the public will trust the custodians of archives and the services they provide.”¹³

Beyond practical considerations, access to archives is an ethical issue for many archivists. James O’Toole’s introductory text on archives notes that archivists “develop a characteristic set of values about what they do, why they do it, and why it is important to do.”¹⁴ One of these central values is that “archival records exist to be used, not merely saved for their own sake.”¹⁵ The ICA access principles provide an even stronger articulation that “archives are preserved for use by present and future generations,” by arguing that even repositories facing “operation constraints” cannot let resource limitations prevent access to their holdings.¹⁶ This ethical argument is the most compelling reason to eliminate processing backlogs. How can archivists expect patrons and users to discover and make use of their collections if they don’t make even the most basic information about them available? If, as the SAA Code of Ethics states, archivists strive to provide open and equitable access to the material in their holdings, they must develop methods to ensure that this material can be discovered and accessed by all users, not just the elite and fortunate few who may happen to hear about them by word of mouth.¹⁷

Archival Responses to Backlogs: “More Product, Less Process”

Archival processing strategies have been discussed in the archival literature prior to 2005, but the publication of Greene and Meissner’s MPLP article in 2005 led to a spike in discussions about processing. The original article has been frequently debated (and often misinterpreted), in journal articles, conference presentations, online forums, and archives and libraries across the country. It is worth reviewing Greene and Meissner’s recommendations before discussing how they apply to an extensible processing program.

Greene and Meissner’s main thesis is that processing practices as of 2005 were not sufficient for managing the size and scope of modern archival collections. They argued that archivists typically process to an ideal level rather than focusing only on the work that is necessary to make collections available to the public, and that archivists focus on the needs of collections rather than the needs of users. Another theme running throughout the article is that archivists often let fear and anxiety outweigh their commitment to accessibility. Their fear of being perceived as sloppy or careless when physically processing collection material, or failing to identify all documents that could potentially contain private or restricted information, has led to a level of processing that is not sustainable.

To address these problems, Greene and Meissner make recommendations in four areas: arrangement, description, preservation, and policies and metrics.

ARRANGEMENT

Greene and Meissner’s recommendations for arrangement have not received as much attention as their recommendations in other areas—particularly preservation and description—but they get to the heart of their overall argument. They recommend relying on the principle of original order, writing that “this organic order is the true intellectual basis for arrangement of collection materials, and is the objective we ought to be pursuing.”¹⁸ Maintaining the existing order of a collection not only adheres to archival principles of arrangement and description, but also improves efficiency. In fact, Greene and Meissner go so far as to say that traditional archival arrangement and physical processing, including refolding material, arranging folders and items within folders, and removing metal fasteners from documents, amount to “overzealous housekeeping, because “much of what passes for arrangement in processing work is really just overzealous housekeeping, writ large. Our professional fastidiousness, our reluctance to be perceived as sloppy or uncaring by users and others has encouraged a widespread fixation on tasks that do not need to be performed.”¹⁹

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