Accessioning as Processing

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Abstract

This article explores the application of new methods, including those recommended by Mark A. Greene and Dennis Meissner in their article "More Product, Less Process," to reduce the amount of time to accession and process collections. The methods were applied during the accessioning of two collections and the arrangement and description of a large collection of family papers. The author describes the work completed, the time it took, and the consequences for operations throughout the repository.

For a number of years, archivists have bemoaned seemingly impossible problems in the core area of arrangement and description: the impossibility of keeping up with current accessions, the impossibility of reducing existing backlogs. In their superb article, "More Product, Less Process,"[1] Mark Greene and Dennis Meissner provide a foundation for understanding how the impossible can actually be accomplished. This analysis focuses on practical implementation of new approaches to arranging and describing incoming and backlog collections in our repositories and serves as a case study of application of the Greene and Meissner recommendations.

I am deputy director of Manuscripts and Archives in the Yale University Library. We have a staff of twenty-six, 58,000 linear feet of holdings, and an average of 5,000 reference requests each year. Six unit heads report to me. I manage the budget and serve on the reference desk. I am actively involved in the collection development work of the repository and supervise much of the processing of materials I bring in.

Because of this wide range of responsibilities, and after almost twenty-five years in the profession, I have developed a keen sense of the many competing demands on the time, money, and staff we have available to carry out our core functions. The scope of work involved in doing so has constantly increased over the past decade. Arrangement and description now includes preparing on-line

This article is based on a paper delivered at the Society of American Archivists' Annual Meeting in August 2005. The author thanks Tom Hyry for the title and his insightful critique of this work.

[1] Mark A. Greene and Dennis Meissner, "More Product, Less Process: Revamping Traditional Archival Processing," *American Archivist* (Fall/Winter 2005): 208–63.

finding aids. Reference now includes digitizing photographs, preparing exhibits, managing reproduction and registration forms, and answering increasing numbers of reference inquiries because of the ease of submitting them via e-mail. Collection development now involves handling electronic records and also responding to increasing offers of significant collections of audiovisual materials, which the donors always seem to want digitized. For any repository located within a parent institution, be it an academic library or a corporation, chances are good that members of its staff will be asked to work on important, but time-consuming, institutionwide projects. Too much to do and too little time to do it is a refrain that runs through my head on most days. I do not believe that this is specific to Yale by any means. Over the past two years, I have talked with a number of heads of repositories smaller than Yale, and they too say that the demands they face each day, particularly in the area of arrangement and description, exceed the resources they have to meet them.

In Manuscripts and Archives, we recognized this trend about five years ago when we did a backlog analysis. If we were ever going to reduce the backlog, we acknowledged that it simply was not possible to do arrangement and description down to and within the folder level, which we had all been trained to do and had been doing for as far back as any of us could remember. We instituted what we call "minimum standards"—the minimum level of arrangement and description that would meet the needs of researchers to locate specific boxes of materials (and sometimes specific folders) and meet the expectations of donors. The standards included arrangement at the series level only, rehousing of materials into acid-free folders and boxes, a written finding aid consisting of a summary introduction to the papers, a box and folder listing, and a catalog record. We began to apply these standards to all processing projects in the department, not only to backlog collections, and used them flexibly across and within collections. Sometimes we gave an entire collection minimal treatment; sometimes we applied the standards to portions, but not all, of a collection. In the latter case, if we determined that particular portions of a collection were valuable enough to warrant more in-depth processing, they received it. We found out over the next several years, however, that even these fairly revolutionary steps did not go far enough in helping us reduce the backlog and keep up with incoming accessions. All of the collections in our backlog had a catalog record and some kind of minimum description, most often at the box level. We now accept that for most collections, this level of processing is satisfactory and that we will never go back to them to do more work. Tom Hyry, then head of arrangement and description in our repository, detailed this transition in our thinking at the 2004 Annual Meeting of the Society of American Archivists in Boston.[2]

[2] Thomas Hyry, "How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Backlog: Using Minimum Standards and Appraisal to Process Modern Collections," paper delivered at the Society of American Archivists Annual Meeting, 2004.

Today in Manuscripts and Archives, most processing consists of arrangement at the series level and description in the form of a catalog record and box listing. Greene and Meissner recommend these steps as well. They explicitly call for an end to refoldering and item-level preservation, to which we also subscribe. Every now and then, for what we determine to be "flagship collections," we arrange, describe, and preserve down to and within the folder level. The "flagship" cases are few and far between, however, and most often require grant funding or a financial donation by the donor to support the work. Five years ago, they were typical of the way we processed collections; today they are the exception.[3]

The reasons why such approaches are necessary today are clear. As Greene and Meissner document, to meet the demands of both researchers and donors we need to reduce the amount of time it takes to make a collection available for research. Many of the collections we now accept are larger than in the past. Unless we decide to stop collecting, we need to find a way to accept these collections but keep them out of the backlog. We need to accomplish more processing in less time because those archivists who once spent all of their time processing are now also involved in EAD reconversion projects, planning and carrying out digitizing projects, designing an infrastructure to handle electronic records, applying for grants to preserve audio and video collections, or designing new storage areas and moving materials into them.

Accessioning as processing is now the goal in Manuscripts and Archives. During the accessioning process, whenever possible, we arrange and describe the materials, including the creation of the finding aid, so that they are ready for research use and never enter our backlog. In short, we apply processing standards such as those recommended by Greene and Meissner during the accessioning process.

This process begins when I meet with a donor and discuss the materials being offered. When I understand the entirety of the offering, I explain that our goal is to make the materials available for research as soon as possible. I describe the materials in which we are most interested and the major series into which I envision arranging them. I discuss what we will do with the materials within each series. If I envision box listings only, I explain why. If I envision a box and folder listing, I explain that as well. I explain that we refolder only if absolutely necessary. I do not discuss item-level arrangement, and I explain preservation in terms of where the materials will be stored and what makes that location an excellent place for the long-term preservation of the collection. If a computer with Internet accessibility is available, I show the donor an example of an on-line finding aid so he or she can see what the end product, or at least the inventory, looks like. When the donor describes a sizable amount of unorganized

[3] A "flagship collection" is one that we believe has very high research value, based on the achievements of the creator and substantive documentation of those achievements in the collection.

material, I begin a conversation about what can be done with it. I discuss what the ideal would be and, if we are not going to do it, I explain why and what we will do instead. The whys almost always have to do with lack of resources or the time-consuming nature of the work. On several occasions during the past year, this kind of conversation led donors to do the “ideal” themselves, or a variation of it, before turning the materials over to us. In discussing what we will do with the materials, I always ask the donor whether the collection contains “sensitive” materials, and, if so, how he or she defines “sensitive.” We discuss what we and the donor can reasonably do to identify and segregate those materials.

This engagement with donors about how we arrange and describe the materials is part of a larger effort to educate them about the work we do and to invite them to participate in the process of preserving their materials. They do not have the storage space, reading room, or bibliographic databases necessary to preserve and make their collections available for research. If they want to, however, they can certainly assist with the arrangement and description of the materials, especially given the ease of explaining and applying standards such as those proposed by Greene and Meissner.

To carry this process even one step further, when I think it is appropriate, I now ask donors who created the materials to write all or some of the series descriptions for our inventories. Since we are doing less arrangement and description below the series level we have less to say about the research strengths of the materials. The donors who created the materials, however, often have excellent insight into what the materials document and how they can and should be used with other materials in the collection. Once we have the listing portion of the inventory complete, I send the donor a copy and describe what needs to be written. The donor sends me a Word file and I copy it into the finding aid template. I edit it as necessary, and so far my editing has not offended anyone. This is another example of engaging donors in the work we do and relieving us of some of the burden in the one core function with which donors can actively assist us.

In the “old days” in Manuscripts and Archives, when we accessioned anything over one linear foot, we created a box-level inventory and catalog record and opened the collection for research unless the deed of gift contained restrictions, or we thought it was so messy as to be unusable. The collection was almost always added to our processing backlog, and we completed a collection analysis worksheet on which we detailed the further work needed. When the collection worked its way to the top of the backlog, which often took years, we used the analysis worksheet to determine what work to do on it.

Now we spend a little extra time during the accessioning process and often end up with a collection that is ready for research quickly and never enters the backlog. For example, we recently accessioned sixteen linear feet of the records of the Center for Information on America. The purpose of this organization, which existed for three decades, was to publish works that furthered public understanding of America's self-governing, democratic process. Although the collection would normally fall outside of our collecting scope, we decided to accept the records.[4] The principal projects of this organization were its publications, and the best way to document its work would be to collect its publications. A Yale faculty member[5] familiar with the organization's work confirmed this assumption. The publications were already in the Yale Library.

Most of the records were in folders in good shape. Although the folders were not particularly well arranged, we were able to identify major groupings quickly by function and form such as administration, minutes, reports, financial, publications, and correspondence/subject files. The latter appeared to have originally been arranged in alphabetical order and that is how we pulled them together. Nothing obvious jumped out at us in terms of materials that should be separated from the collection, either because they were duplicates or entirely out of the scope of the work of the organization. No obvious confidentiality or preservation problems needed addressing. We only looked inside folders when they were unlabeled and we needed to identify the materials in them. We did not rearrange any of the materials inside folders and we did no item-level preservation. We kept the materials in record cartons. We created a box inventory on paper, and a support staff member entered it into our template. For the correspondence/subject files, we listed the letters of the alphabet covered in each box. Our inventories always begin with what we call an "Overview of the Papers or Records," which contains fields that map to the MARC record. A professional archivist wrote and entered the information in the fields in the overview, from which the support staff member created the catalog record. They worked together to determine access points for the catalog record. A student prepared the box labels and affixed them to the containers. A professional archivist created the EAD and paper instances of the finding aid. At the end of the accessioning process, the addition was completely cataloged and usable by researchers and was not placed in our backlog.[6]

Four professionals, one support staff member, and one student spent a total of 320 minutes accessioning, doing minimal arrangement and description, and cataloging these sixteen linear feet, at an average of twenty minutes per linear foot. When we recently applied the same practices during the accessioning of a

[4] The self-governing process in America is not a subject area we document. Certain faculty members at Yale, however, had been directly involved in running the organization and expressed a very strong desire, to persons within and outside the repository, to have the records placed in Manuscripts and Archives. We agreed to take them.

[5] Although this faculty member had written publications for the organization, he was not one of those who advocated placing its records in Manuscripts and Archives.

[6] See the on-line finding aid at http://mssa.library.yale.edu/findaids/stream.php?xmlfile=mssa.ms.1855.xml.

seven-foot addition to a personal papers collection, we averaged twenty-five minutes per linear foot. Greene and Meissner cite published studies of the average times repositories spend arranging and describing collections that range from six to forty hours per foot. Those numbers are no longer acceptable. In a fraction of that time, we processed as we accessioned. We ended up with perfectly usable collections that will be in good shape for years to come and to which we will never return to do more work.

A slightly different case, one related to actual processing more than accessioning, is that of the Brooks Family Papers.[7] The collection came to us in large part because Brooks family members were relatives of the Woodruff family, whose papers form one of our substantive colonial America family collections. It arrived in two accessions, six years apart, comprised of forty linear feet. The collection included the personal papers of the donor, Allen Brooks, a noted architectural historian.[8]

For the first accession of Brooks Family Papers, a typical family papers collection donated in 1998 comprising fourteen linear feet, we created a minimal box listing and catalog record and closed the collection to researchers because it included many letters in envelopes, loose photographs, and a large amount of unsorted material. In May 2004, Allen called to report that he was ready to donate the last of the materials to be added to the collection. He also expressed unhappiness that we had not made any progress in processing the papers. I collected the additional twenty-six linear feet from him and told him we would begin processing later that year.

Three months after my visit to Allen to pick up the last of the materials, I read a pre-publication version of the Greene and Meissner article. I decided to determine whether their recommendations would be as valuable for family papers as for large organizational records or personal papers. We had not tried to apply our own "minimum standards" procedures to family papers, but I had to begin work on the Brooks Family Papers and I knew that we simply did not have the time or resources to process it the way we had processed family papers collections in the past. I also knew, however, given Allen's expectations, that we could not just do a box listing for the collection. A very bright graduate student assisted me with the work. We discussed how to approach the papers, and as he did the hands-on work, I reviewed it. We determined to arrange the collection into four series: the papers of Allen's mother, Mildred; the papers of Allen's father, Harold; and Allen's own papers, which were divided into two series: research and nonresearch files. In the process of assembling the files into their respective series, we reboxed from record cartons into document cases.

[7] See the on-line finding aid at http://mssa.library.yale.edu/findaids/stream.php?xmlfile=mssa.ms.1784.xml.

[8] Architectural history is an active collecting area in Manuscripts and Archives.

The easy part of processing these papers was done. We then had to determine what levels of arrangement, description, and preservation to apply within each series.

We arranged only Allen's materials because Series III, his Personal Papers, Correspondence, and Writings, lent itself to some obvious subseries arrangement, and we decided to do more detailed arrangement for Series IV, his Research Files, because of their potential research value. When materials within a series could easily be pulled together, such as Mildred's diaries or Allen's correspondence, we did so. Loose materials that could be identified were placed in folders and appropriately labeled. Loose materials that could only be broadly identified were placed in folders labeled "General." We arranged correspondence in all four series and Allen's short writings by year. Throughout we tried to maintain original order as much as possible, especially for Allen's Research Files.

We wrote a short description for each series, and sometimes we went beyond a box-level listing and listed folder titles. Looking back, I think we could have done less of this in Mildred's, Harold's, and Allen's nonresearch series, but Allen is happier for it, and because of their potential research value, we thought it was important to do for his Research Files. A graduate student majoring in women's history spent two hours assessing Mildred's diaries for me. The student thought they documented the life of a fairly typical white, middle-class woman. Her summary of subjects discussed in the diaries was included in the series description. For titles with multiple folders, we put the number of folders in brackets in both the finding aid and on the folders. We did this so that a researcher would not reach into a box, take out the first folder with a particular heading, and assume that it was the only folder with that heading. Whenever possible we provided span dates for folder headings. We think they are important both for the researcher and the reference archivist, but this too involves item-level work. To get the dates, we scanned folder contents very quickly and I cannot attest to the degree of their accuracy. We created EAD and paper instances of the finding aid.

As for preservation, we refoldered only when original folders were falling apart. Sometimes folders had extensive and valuable notes written by Allen on the outside. If a folder was falling apart and had to be replaced, we photocopied that portion of the original that contained notes and included the copy inside the new folder. Materials encased in plastic were removed and placed in a new folder. Folders housed by the donor in flip-top boxes were removed and placed in document cases. Rolls of negatives were rolled up in fairly acidic paper, so we removed the paper and placed the rolls in small, archival containers. Allen sometimes used sticky notes to write descriptions of materials. We removed and photocopied those we saw and placed the photocopies inside the appropriate folders, but I have no doubt that we missed some.

We did not do a number of things when we processed this collection. We did not arrange the materials in Mildred's or Harold's series. We did little arrangement of items within folders. We did not take the time to list the individual papers found in the twenty-four folders of Allen's short writings, even though we think they might contain unpublished items. We did not attempt to summarize the rather thorough descriptions he provided for the visual materials in the collection; rather we noted in the series descriptions when they were well identified. We did not remove letters from envelopes (and noted this in the series descriptions). For the most part, we did not remove Allen's many slides and negatives from their original containers, which included plastic boxes, cardboard boxes of the kind used by photo processors, and metal boxes. We thought they were doing fine where they were.[9] To house Allen's containers as found required us to use a variety of our own archival containers, some of which had been in our supply room for years.[10] We did no item-level preservation other than removal of obvious sticky notes and acidic paper from rolls of negatives. We did not interleave the many photographs.

When the calculations were in, we spent slightly more than 2.5 hours per linear foot to process the collection. Although I do not have specific benchmarks, based on my experience I have no doubt that we processed the collection far faster than we would have in the past, even if we had applied a version of our own "minimum standards."

The project proved the importance of flexibility in thinking about arrangement and description today, a point that Greene and Meissner emphasize. Although most of our work was at the series level, we did some work at the folder and item levels. The decision about whether to do any item-level work will vary from collection to collection. The trick is to find a happy medium and we're still feeling our way. We learned about the need to refine our thinking as we gain more experience testing new arrangement and description methods. We are pleased with what we have achieved by revising how we arrange and describe many of our collections, but we recognize that such methods have important consequences for donors, staff, researchers, and reference archivists.

Our initial conversations with potential donors, for example, now involve extensive discussions about the state of collections and the work we will do on them. The professional archivists involved in these discussions must know a good deal about the arrangement and description practices of the repository. Processors who apply these new methods of arrangement and description have

[9] The decision in this case was based on my years of experience in assessing the preservation state of collections, an understanding of the preservation controls in place in the storage area where the materials would be permanently housed, and an assessment of the content of the materials.

[10] The kinds and types of archival containers that a repository has on hand will affect some of the decisions made in determining rehousing.

much less contact with the materials than they used to have. We all know of very good archivists whose primary interest is to work closely with the materials. These methods of arrangement and description afford fewer opportunities to do so. We now expect processors in our repository to be familiar with a range of arrangement and description methods and to be able to demonstrate flexibility and understanding in determining which to apply to any given collection.

By doing so little work beneath the series level and within folders, the accuracy of the finding aid is potentially compromised for researchers and reference archivists. Because of conversations with the donor, we trusted Allen's original foldering and labeling to be accurate. What if, however, this had been one of those collections that had been reboxed and refoldered many times down through the years, or that came to us in folders that had distinctly different labels on both sides of the folder tabs? In those cases, which are likely more common with family papers than with the records of large organizations, we probably would have had to spend much more time at and within the folder level.

Prior to processing this collection, the processor, a graduate student majoring in religious studies, had extensive processing experience working mostly on "flagship collections." He believes the greatest time savings was achieved by not refoldering, but he also believes that we could have done more description with little additional time. Most people doing archival box listings these days are fast keyboarders, so we could have, for instance, done a listing of Allen's short writings. It would not have added much time to the project, yet would have provided a level of description valuable to researchers.

We believe the Brooks family finding aid meets our obligations to both donor and researcher. Allen has seen it and is pleased. If you worry that a donor might be unhappy with an inventory that is primarily a box listing, do not underestimate the value of putting that inventory on-line. My experience has been that donors are dazzled when they see an inventory for their papers, no matter how detailed, in an on-line format. We have a researcher who is currently preparing to use the Brooks family collection. He has not experienced problems using the finding aid to determine the materials he wants to examine.[11]

From my years as a reference archivist, I realize that less arrangement and description could well impact the extent to which reference archivists can answer reference requests. I think we will have to adjust by putting more of the burden of answering those requests on the researchers themselves. Long distance researchers, in particular, may have to hire research assistants more frequently. It is another trade-off, but at least the collection will be available and

[11] I will talk with the researcher after he has completed his work in Manuscripts and Archives to learn about the effect of the finding aid and the arrangement, description, and preservation of the materials on his research.

usable. We will sometimes have to retrieve more boxes for researchers because our descriptions are not as detailed as they have been. For us, that is an acceptable cost for making the materials available for research more quickly and keeping them out of the backlog, but it might not be so acceptable for a small repository with limited staff.

Greene and Meissner's article is an outstanding summary of the literature and analysis of the diverse states of arrangement and description in our profession. It offers viable alternatives to past practices. We can attest that applying their recommendations will make materials available to researchers more quickly than in the past. We believe the most important contribution they make, however, is to encourage thinking about arrangement and description in flexible and creative ways. Every repository (and every collection) has unique circumstances that will dictate what can and should be done in the area of arrangement and description. In the past, it has primarily been arrangement, description, and preservation down to the folder and/or item level. For many of us, this is no longer a realistic option for every collection that we take in or that is already in our backlog. As some repositories have already begun to do,[12] we have to be willing to test new methods, analyze their consequences, refine as needed, and share our experiences with colleagues throughout the profession.

[12] See especially Greene and Meissner, "More Product, Less Process," 236–39.