

# Planning for Archival Repositories: A Common-Sense Approach

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## ABSTRACT

In 2005, with limited time, personnel, and financial resources, the staff of Special Collections at the University of Arkansas Libraries embarked on a planning project. Departmental staff identified key issues, conducted research on approaches to archival planning, and developed a process that required minimal time and money. A four-member task force assumed major responsibility, while a larger advisory committee reviewed and provided input to the plan. The task force adopted a mission statement for the archives and then tackled the tougher issues. The process educated staff and provided a plan for addressing sixteen key initiatives.

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## KEY WORDS

Planning, Archives

As the great sports commentator Yogi Berra once said, “You’ve got to be very careful if you don’t know where you are going, because you might not get there.”<sup>1</sup> This is especially true in an archives, for without forethought and planning, the repository can lose its focus and become a proverbial “junk drawer” of valuable materials. Today, planning has evolved into a management trend that is mandated by progressive administrators, but often turns into a painful exercise mired in unnecessary complexity and minutiae. However, effective planning does not require vast expenditures of time and money. In 2005, we, both faculty members in Special Collections at the University of Arkansas Libraries, led a planning project that did not follow traditional procedures. This case study describes the literature of planning in libraries, archives, and business organizations, and the process followed. Although this planning process was successful overall, we identified some aspects that could have been improved, hoping that other archival organizations will benefit from the lessons we learned.

### Background: Planning at the University of Arkansas Libraries

In 2005, the head of Special Collections at the University of Arkansas Libraries asked us to formulate a plan for the Manuscripts Unit, which is responsible for collecting, processing, and maintaining the manuscripts and the book collections. Neither of us had been with the organization more than a few months, and the department head had been there only one year. Although we reviewed the strategic planning literature, we decided against following the conventional guidelines set forth in that literature, mainly because of limited time, staff, and financial resources. Instead of working with an outside consultant, conducting endless meetings, and developing detailed objectives and action plans, we chose a more practical and intuitive approach that was flexible and less time consuming. We asked for help from all departmental staff to identify our major strengths, as well as the problems they saw as impeding progress. Only then did we set about actual planning to remedy those problems and circumvent possible future problems. Our approach ended up being a hybrid of tactical, operational, and strategic planning.

From the earliest history of the University of Arkansas’s main campus in Fayetteville, established in 1871 and located in the northwestern part of the state, librarians and teaching faculty assembled an outstanding collection of materials related to Arkansas history and culture. This formed the backbone of Special Collections, which was established in 1967. The department collects, organizes, and provides access to research materials documenting the political, social, cultural, economic, and physical history of Arkansas. The role of the state in the regional, national, and international communities is also part of the agency mission.

Special Collections is the oldest and largest academic archives in the state and the second largest archival repository after the state archives in Little Rock. At the beginning of the project, the department consisted of fifteen employees, including faculty, paraprofessional, and student workers. Six of the archives' professional employees had worked in Special Collections for years, knew the strengths and weaknesses of the repository, and had a deep understanding of the institution's history. In addition, three professional employees had experience at other institutions, but were only recently hired at the University of Arkansas.

The unique materials held by Special Collections support research and study in a variety of subject fields, such as history, geosciences, architecture, literature, anthropology, political science, music history, business history, and others, mostly documenting Arkansas and the region. The department houses papers documenting everyday life in Arkansas, as well as collections of well-known Arkansans, including African American composers Florence Price and William Grant Still, and Congressmen J. William Fulbright, Dale Bumpers, David Pryor, and John Paul Hammerschmidt. The records of international organizations such as the National Association of Foreign Student Advisors (NAFSA), the Council for International Exchange of Scholars (CIES), and Peace Links, a women's organization devoted to education about nuclear war, are also held by Special Collections, documenting the involvement of Senator Fulbright and Betty Bumpers—wife of Senator Dale Bumpers—with international programs and causes. With over two thousand collections, the agency maintains more than fifteen thousand linear feet of manuscripts. In addition to a strong manuscripts collection, the monograph and serial holdings on Arkansas are comprehensive.

By 2005, the repository had become disorganized. Several factors contributed to this situation, specifically insufficient staff and money, staff turnover, an increasing number of unprocessed collections, inadequate space plus rapid technological change and cultural shifts that increased researcher expectations for instant access and gratification. The planning process was our attempt to bring order to the manuscripts unit of the archives. A change in leadership presented an opportunity to evaluate existing practices and set goals for improvement.

## Planning Literature

Before the project began, we surveyed the literature on strategic planning, which is abundant in business publications but sparse in the archival literature. T. R. Schellenberg, in his 1956 landmark book, *Modern Archives: Principles and Techniques*, had this to say about planning in archival organizations:

The work of an archival institution is never ended. It is work for posterity in the double sense of being done for and by posterity. There is no limit to the amount of time that can be spent in analyzing archives, in perfecting their arrangement, and in creating finding aids to them. . . . Because they are usually engaged a lifetime in their work, archivists are often thought of as old men, bearded and bent, working in ill-lit stacks, and puttering around in musty documents. This conception is not an accurate one. If an archivist dealing with modern records is to accomplish his tasks, even to a moderate degree, he must be an efficient administrator, capable of planning and directing the work of his staff.<sup>2</sup>

In retrospect, the stereotype Schellenberg refuted of archivists as “old men, bearded and bent, working in ill-lit stacks” is only slightly quaint than his description of planning. Schellenberg devoted only one page to planning in his “Bible” of archival practice. In very general terms, he described the necessity of determining what work there is to do, such as dividing records into “archives groups,” “record groups,” or “record series,” putting materials into good order, and describing materials in sufficient detail to make them available for use. Further, Schellenberg urged that the archivist proceed uniformly and progressively in “accomplishing his programs, step by step, year by year, working ahead on all his record units in all phases of his activities to the extent that monetary and personnel resources are made available to him.”<sup>3</sup>

Modern strategic planning began as a tool for business management in the 1960s and has been widely adopted by nonprofit and educational organizations in recent decades. Management scholar Henry Mintzberg traced the history of strategic planning in his book *The Rise and Fall of Strategic Planning*. The popularity of strategic planning, according to Mintzberg, peaked in the 1970s and then “submerged in the wave of anti-planning sentiment that continued for a decade or more.”<sup>4</sup> He maintained that strategic planning should be considered “in a more reasonable way, as neither a panacea nor the pits, but a process with particular benefit in particular contexts.”<sup>5</sup>

Libraries and archival repositories are often required by their parent organizations to engage in planning, often a time-consuming activity, despite the lack of hard data to support its effectiveness. Edward J. Miech wrote that educators encounter the education version of strategic planning, assuming that this management tool rests on a solid foundation in the private sector,<sup>6</sup> an assumption both Miech and Mintzberg refuted. Why, then, spend time on what appears to be the latest in a long line of management fads?

The term “strategic” is often used for any kind of planning project, yet technically not all plans are strategic. Hitt, Black, and Porter, in their 2012 book on management, described three different types of planning: strategic, tactical, and operational.<sup>7</sup> These plans differ in time horizons, scope, complexity, impact, and interdependence.<sup>8</sup>

Strategic plans focus on the broad future, typically five years or more. They often involve both internal and external analysis and are usually done by top management. Tactical plans outline specific goals for specific parts of the organization. They usually cover a shorter time period of three to five years and are narrower in scope. Tactical plans are typically done at the department or unit level. Operational planning translates tactical plans into specific goals and actions. This type of planning is less complex than the other types of planning and affects only one department or unit. The time period covered is usually twelve months or less.

The literature on planning in libraries is plentiful. One of the best sources is *Strategic Planning and Management for Library Managers* by Joseph R. Matthews,<sup>9</sup> a detailed and well-researched guide to implementing formal strategic planning in libraries. Mintzberg believed that not all planning is truly “strategic,” yet his criteria for calling a plan “strategic” are unclear. Matthews, however, defined “strategy” as a determination of how to grow the organization, how to satisfy customers, how to overcome the pressures of competitors, how to respond to changing market conditions, how to manage the organization, and how to develop organizational capabilities—a broad definition covering nearly all organizational activities. “Strategy” is simply the means by which organizations plan to get from where they are to where they hope to be. It includes both planned strategies and “emergent” or unplanned strategies that arise from changing circumstances. An archival example of an emergent strategy might be a plan to digitize specific materials because unexpected funding becomes available.

While library planning literature is abundant, planning in archival repositories is not as well documented. Michael J. Kurtz, in *Managing Archival and Manuscript Repositories*,<sup>10</sup> wrote that strategic planning examines external factors such as the political, technical, and sociocultural trends in the environment; the relationship of the repository with the parent institution and with constituents and user groups; plus funding, technological, and demographic changes. He also described internal strategic factors to be considered, such as the flexibility and adaptability of the organization and staff, and the strengths and weaknesses of its technical and facility infrastructure. Kurtz maintained that a trained facilitator from outside of the organization is necessary to achieve a sound plan. Another type of planning necessary to organizational success, according to Kurtz, is operational planning, covering program activities, work expected to be accomplished, and time to be expended on various tasks. Many elements in Kurtz’s operational planning are reminiscent of Schellenberg’s limited definition of planning.

The Society of American Archivists tackled planning in its *Planning for the Archival Profession: A Report of the SAA Task Force on Goals and Priorities*.<sup>11</sup> This report

identified broad priorities for the profession, such as “identification and retention of records of enduring value,” and “administration of archival programs to ensure preservation of records of enduring value,” clarified with goals and exercises. The report was “intended to institutionalize planning as an ongoing process . . . [and to] provide a framework for planning and decision making by the associations, repositories, and individuals that comprise the archival community. . . .”<sup>12</sup>

Kurtz described two early strategic planning efforts at the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) between 1992 and 2000.<sup>13</sup> NARA embarked on its first strategic planning process in 1992, in response to criticism and pressure to improve the agency’s performance. The archivist of the United States issued the plan in 1993, shortly after he announced his resignation. Kurtz observed, “Leadership turmoil clearly mitigated the effectiveness of the process, the results, and the subsequent implementation.”<sup>14</sup> However, the effort to identify and discuss issues and problems laid the foundation for progress in the 1995 planning effort and contributed to “the first stirrings of openness to change and experimentation.”<sup>15</sup>

The 1995 NARA initiative involved a new U.S. archivist who revamped the planning process with more involvement from staff and constituents. The project was driven by a top-level leadership team that worked with a cross-section of NARA staff to gather information and to encourage creative discussions. The 1995 strategic planning effort included elements of organizational development, such as trust-building exercises, team-building efforts, development of facilitation skills, as well as solicitation of external input from individuals and outside groups. In addition to staff and external constituent inputs, NARA gathered information from a review of its statutory and legislative authority and mandates, previous planning documents and reports, and staff and patron surveys. Built around the main mission statement concerning “ready access to essential evidence,”<sup>16</sup> the archivist and leadership team articulated four goals that addressed essential evidence, ready access, space and preservation, and infrastructure. These goals were further refined with strategies, key performance targets, and measures to be taken. A determined effort was made to encourage review and to gain both internal and external “buy-in” needed for the implementation phase. NARA’s approach to strategic planning was traditional. It also required financial and staff resources that are beyond the means of the average archival repository.

As Kurtz observed, the organization’s senior executive must be committed, involved, and have a stable position. Senior leaders of the department and parent organization must be fully engaged, as implementation requires time, effort, and commitment at all levels of the organization. Kurtz warned that

without planning, organizations will be constantly consumed with ever-arising problems and issues with no framework for dealing with them.<sup>17</sup>

Since those early efforts, NARA has produced three strategic plans that are available on its website. NARA's "Ready Access to Essential Evidence: The Strategic Plan of the National Archives and Records Administration, 1997–2008, Revised 2003," "Preserving the Past to Protect the Future: The Strategic Plan of the National Archives and Records Administration, 2006–2016," and "Strategic Plan: Fiscal Year 2014 to 2018." The latest plan has drawn criticism for its seeming neglect of preservation as a core function. However, it is intended to build upon, not supersede, goals articulated in previous plans. The plan focuses on four "simple yet dynamic" goals: "Make Access Happen," "Connect with Customers," "Maximize NARA's Value to the Nation," and "Build Our Future through Our People."<sup>18</sup> This 2014–2018 plan emphasizes electronic records, public relations, and staff development.

The New York Metropolitan Reference and Research Library Agency (now known as Metropolitan New York Library Council) issued a five-year plan with four broad objectives or priorities in 1989.<sup>19</sup> The first objective concerned strengthening the "administration of historical records" in terms of fund-raising, long-range planning, and improvements to facilities and space. The second, "archival skills," focused on strengthening description of records. "Collection development," the third priority area, dealt with "accessioning new collections and documentation strategies to improve the overall adequacy of archival documentation in the METRO region." The last objective/priority was "public awareness and outreach," which focused on publicity about the value of historical records and gaining support for their preservation and use.<sup>20</sup> Each objective/priority was accompanied by implementation activities and task checklists. The plan has been continuously updated.

*Strategic Planning in ARL Libraries* is a compilation of planning documents from ten university Association of Research Libraries members.<sup>21</sup> It also includes the results of a survey of sixty-nine university libraries pertaining to their use and methods of planning. Many of the plans are lengthy and detailed. The University of Alberta's plan is broad in scope and includes an international economic analysis. Other plans are short and succinct, but not necessarily strategic.

The South Carolina State Historical Records Advisory Board published an excellent archival strategic plan, *Into the 21st Century: A Plan for South Carolina's Historical Records 2000–2005*,<sup>22</sup> which was updated in 2007 and again in 2010.<sup>23</sup> This plan follows a conventional strategic planning format with priorities, goals, objectives, and activities. The South Carolina plan appears to be the result of a large investment of time, money, and study. The final plan is exceptionally readable, beginning with a summary, with each subsequent section providing greater detail.

One of the better resources for planning is *Strategic Planning in College Libraries*, published by the College Library Information Packet Committee of the Association of College and Research Libraries. The book describes a survey administered to seventy-three colleges and universities concerning their use of and attitudes toward planning. The most helpful aspects of this publication are the thirty-nine examples of strategic plans from colleges and small universities. The plans range from simple one-page summaries to detailed thirty-page documents. This compilation is valuable in providing examples and in illustrating that libraries need not follow one strict formula in creating a plan. An excellent selected bibliography is included.<sup>24</sup> Of course, these plans represent only a fraction of the plans done by archives and libraries across the country.

### Getting Started

Actual planning in the University of Arkansas Special Collections Department began in January 2006 with an initial meeting attended by the department head, the manuscripts librarian, the special projects librarian, and the head of research services for Special Collections. These four individuals formed the planning task force. This early brainstorming meeting clarified the planning expectations of the department head and resulted in the selection of twenty-one advisory committee members, including selected library and repository staff, researchers, and other stakeholders. The advisory committee members' roles involved a minimal investment of time, mostly providing advice and critiquing the final plan. The formation of this advisory committee was our attempt to gather stakeholder input and obtain "buy-in" to the plan. Input was also gathered from staff through department-wide discussions.

We (the manuscripts librarian and the special projects librarian) headed the four-member task force of the repository leadership to plan and implement the project. This task force brainstormed principal concerns, desired outcomes, and the organizational structure of the plan. Over the course of a year, the task force identified and developed the components of the plan summarized below. Time contributions of individual task force members varied. The two of us spent considerable time on the planning project for the first six months, while the two other task force members contributed only when their involvement was needed for specific issues or plan components. The manuscripts librarian continued to work on various projects associated with the plan beyond the project period. These tasks consumed no resources beyond staff time. Because of limited monetary resources, we did not use the services of a planning consultant or facilitator.

Some of the broad statements commonly seen in archival planning documents, such as "improve access to historical materials," were assumed and not



explicitly stated in this plan. Except for the mission statement, the plan focused on the identification and practical remediation of specific problems associated with collecting, preserving, and providing access to historical materials.

## Plan Components

The planning task force identified sixteen initiatives and set forth to accomplish the associated goals, which included:

- Implement an Encoded Archival Description (EAD) pilot program;
- Integrate the use of EAD into the finding aid process;
- Write a user-friendly processing manual;
- Survey the manuscript collection backlog and establish processing priorities;
- Create a comprehensive manuscript collections database;
- Conduct a survey of finding aids;
- Write and implement a digitization plan;
- Write and implement a plan for maps and geospatial materials;
- Enhance existing procedures to improve access to and intellectual control of photographs;
- Write a plan to establish a University Archives;
- Develop an orientation process;
- Create a preservation plan;
- Implement a staff development program;
- Implement an architectural collections specialty;
- Completely staff Special Collections; and
- Re-evaluate strategic plan and goals.

Prior to the planning process, the Manuscripts Unit was not guided by a written mission statement. Early on we decided that to identify the goals and needs of the Manuscripts Unit effectively, a written mission statement was necessary. Many people maintain that a key component of strategic planning is the adoption of a mission statement, and we agreed. The department head recommended a mission statement, which the task force revised and, after discussion, adopted. The final wording is “The mission of the Manuscripts Unit is to collect, organize, preserve, and provide access to research materials documenting the state of Arkansas and its larger role in regional, national, and international communities.”

## Goals to Improve Access

### COMPREHENSIVE COLLECTIONS MANAGEMENT DATABASE

The first part of the plan described the department's need for a single comprehensive manuscripts administration database containing information about each collection's location, processing status, donor information, use restrictions, and a brief description of the collection. In previous years, the department relied on at least three different databases containing this information. The planning process kicked off a project to create this comprehensive database. Staff initially planned to custom design this database using Microsoft Access software, but discovered that Archivist's Toolkit, free collections accessioning software designed by the University of California at Berkeley, provided the necessary functionality. We also evaluated Archon, a similar product from the University of Illinois, which has since merged with Archivist's Toolkit. The merged product is now known as ArchivesSpace. The adoption of Archivist's Toolkit proved to be an ideal solution, not only because of its consolidation of multiple databases, but also for its ease of use.

### SURVEY OF FINDING AIDS

Over the forty years of its existence, the repository's processing procedures and finding aid formats had changed dramatically. Older collections had only paper finding aids in three-ring binders in the department's reading room and no Web presence, whereas newer collections had digital finding aids accessible via the Internet and an online catalog record in addition to the traditional paper copy. The planning process included a survey of existing finding aids to determine for each collection:

- if a finding aid existed;
- the format of the finding aid (print, electronic, etc.);
- where the finding aid was accessible (reading room, online catalog, Internet, accession file);
- whether a collection-level bibliographic record existed in the library's online catalog; and
- whether modifications were needed to bring the finding aid up to current standards and compatibility with EAD, the format in which all the department's new finding aids are created.

The data collected during this phase was incorporated into a larger project focusing on accession files. Eventually, all this information will be imported into Archivist's Toolkit to augment (and clean up) existing accession records.

## PLAN FOR IMPLEMENTATION OF EAD

Since a major goal of the department was conversion of finding aids to EAD format, the plan laid out a rough approach for this conversion process, including these steps:

- Develop a template for preparing finding aids in EAD format.
- Prepare a finding aid to test the EAD template.
- Post the test finding aid to the Web so its performance could be reviewed.
- Revise the template, if needed, after review.
- Train employees in the use of the EAD template.
- Begin use of EAD template for preparing all new finding aids created after January 31, 2009.
- Develop a priority list of existing finding aids to be converted to EAD format.
- Evaluate the option of outsourcing retrospective conversion of existing finding aids to EAD format.

Although we experienced difficulties with the EAD project due to a lack of staff, considerable progress has been made. We began creating all new finding aids in EAD format in January 2010, a year after the original goal date. Because the Manuscripts Unit depends heavily on student labor for processing collections and creating the associated finding aids, the manuscripts librarian felt it was essential to have a method of creating EAD finding aids without requiring workers to know the full library of tags.

With the assistance of the library's Web Services Department, a template was constructed, which allowed for easy input of pertinent information, such as title of the collection, accession number, and biographical information. A drop-down menu allowed the workers to select and change box and file numbers easily. The actual encoding was done once the data were submitted. The finding aid was then uploaded to the library Web server. Once it was edited, the finding aid was made live, and subject categories were assigned. This method allowed workers to quickly and efficiently create finding aids directly in EAD, thus bypassing the earlier step of creating it in word processing software. Even though Archivist's Toolkit has the capability to create EAD finding aids, we decided to forego this function because we believed the custom template would be easier to use. This approach has been successful.

## PHOTOGRAPHS AND IMAGES

The plan established goals and methods of improving access to and intellectual control of significant photographs and images. The "Picture Collection"

had been neglected to some extent, and accessioning of new photographs had lapsed when the manuscripts librarian was hired in 2005. The collection could be minimally accessed through card catalogs located in Special Collections, using subjects applied by the department's reference librarian, but there was room for improvement to make the photographs more accessible. Little progress has been made in this area, but with the anticipated hiring of an audiovisual archivist, the photographs should become a higher priority.

## Digitization

To facilitate access to the collections, various digitization projects had been proposed in the past. Efforts, however, had been frustrated by the lack of an integrated approach to digitization in the library as a whole, disagreement between the administration and archival staff about the appropriate image management software, and difficulties with file storage capacity, equipment, and technical support.

The department continues to implement a project to create a digital image collection to be built from three sources: 1) images in the old "Picture Collection"; 2) selected images from manuscript collections; and 3) images scanned over time for patron requests and departmental projects. Specific guidelines are being formulated based on specifications for scanning images proposed in the plan. Since some of the department's digitization issues resulted from the library's technology department's need to understand the nature of archival work, a committee was formed, including key information technology staff, to discuss the department's needs and the workflow of an archival digital repository with respect to images. Over time, the number of digital images had become unmanageable with many duplicates and no way to access the collection efficiently. Progress has been made, albeit very little, mainly in the area of identification and deletion of duplicates. With the anticipated hiring of an audiovisual archivist, we hope that sustained progress can be measured in this area.

Future projects will build upon experiences with previous digitization efforts. The plan stated the department's intention to seek funding to digitize materials. To date, the department has completed ten digital projects, each focusing on a specific manuscript collection, theme, or potential research use, with two being privately funded. Priorities will remain flexible to take advantage of opportunities afforded by funding for signature collections.

## SOFTWARE AND EQUIPMENT NEEDS

The plan articulated our desire to work with appropriate library employees to identify the best software for our needs, and it detailed hardware and

equipment needs. Ultimately, CONTENTdm became the *de facto* digitization software, and the library administration eventually endorsed this selection.

## Streamlining Processing

The plan noted that the backlog of unprocessed collections, common in most archives, had become daunting. Some collections had been in the processing queue for as long as fifteen years. The repository's unprocessed collections comprised over four thousand linear feet. Processing practices had been inconsistent over the forty years of the repository's existence, and the processing manual desperately needed revision. These issues were addressed through the completion of a backlog survey, a new processing manual, and development of new processing guidelines.

### BACKLOG SURVEY

The plan set in motion a comprehensive survey to identify unprocessed collections, their storage location, size, and condition. Due to some inaccuracies in existing location lists, a comprehensive manual survey of the shelves of unprocessed materials became necessary. After determining the scale of the manuscripts processing backlog, the manuscripts librarian devised a plan for reducing the backlog, which included setting priorities for processing. Processing priorities were based on the significance of the collection, its support of the university's curriculum, the acquisition date, and requests for use. The department now maintains a list of ten high-priority unprocessed collections that is periodically updated as materials are processed or circumstances change.

### NEW PROCESSING MANUAL

We wrote a new manual to assist processors in their training and to ensure consistency in processing practices. The manual in use was outdated and too theoretical; it was not user friendly. Inexperienced processors had difficulty using and understanding it, despite extensive training. The new processing manual is arranged chronologically, from acquisition of collections to preliminary processing, arrangement and description, boxing, and labeling. Processors trained with the new manual are now brought up to speed more quickly. A thorough table of contents provides for ease of use and quick access to information. The manual was well-received by the processors, and it is updated regularly with advice from them and as policies change.

## GUIDELINES FOR DETERMINING PROCESSING LEVELS

As part of the plan's creation, the repository leadership examined the practice of "minimal processing" as described by Mark Greene and Dennis Meissner<sup>25</sup> but decided against implementing minimal processing across the board. Instead, the plan called for a meeting to be held before processing begins on each collection, at which the manuscripts librarian and processors discuss the uniqueness of the collection and its research value, preservation needs, and other information gleaned from an assessment conducted after acquisition. From this discussion, they develop a plan for processing, which will sometimes include selected techniques of minimal processing, such as only removing rusted staples and paper clips and not putting folder contents in chronological order. This approach was especially useful in processing large political collections. The greatest challenge in utilizing minimal processing techniques was that some long-time processors resisted them, feeling they compromised the standards they had been taught. This mindset is changing as we get more experienced with our new procedures.

These changes have benefited the Manuscripts Unit in terms of expediting access to our holdings, thus leading to higher usage, more visibility, and goodwill. Despite the continuous acquisition of new materials, these new procedures have decreased the backlog, including two large political collections, totaling close to two thousand linear feet.

### Collection Development

The plan called for the creation of a policy to establish collecting priorities. Emphasizing the need for flexibility, the policy stresses that priorities for pursuing and acquiring future collections would be driven by the need to build on subject strengths of existing collections, the need to fill gaps identified as necessary to support the department's and university's missions, and the desire to take advantage of unanticipated opportunities consistent with those missions. A formal collection development policy was not finalized; however, an informal policy identifies collections of interest that augment and enhance current holdings.

### Physical Facilities

Typical of archival repositories within university libraries, Special Collections at the University of Arkansas is housed below grade in the four-story main library, which was constructed in 1968. A 1997 library addition expanded the stacks area of the main building and the Special Collections manuscript

storage area. While the new space was welcomed, unexpected issues arose in the area where the old and new buildings adjoined, resulting in occasional water leaks during exceptionally heavy rains, a condition that has been evaluated with few results. An off-site facility, built in the early 2000s, provides much-needed storage space for manuscripts. A library courier service transports collections back and forth between the two buildings.

The manuscripts planning document states that, as in most archival repositories, sorting collections is a consuming process, demanding great labor, time, and space. Once processed, manuscript collections should be stored in spaces that meet archival standards and will ensure their preservation for future generations.

#### EQUIPMENT AND SPACE NEEDS

The plan identified space needs for processing such as the following: "Every processing archivist or assistant needs more large tables where papers can be spread about as collections are organized. Situated close to the work table should be shelving suitable for holding large manuscript boxes, a chair and/or stool, and access to computers, though not necessarily one at each table." Also, a permanent encapsulation workstation, a conservation room, and a receiving station, preferably off-site, where collections can be safely assessed for preservation issues and fumigated, if necessary, were cited as needs.

The plan also established the need to identify problems in the current manuscript shelving areas, followed by actions to minimize the threats. Inadequate air movement was recognized as a significant problem, specifically in the main storage area. To combat this, large oscillating fans were purchased and are still employed to circulate the air. The repository's off-site storage facility remains superior in terms of environmental control. Space remains an issue in both facilities, more so in the main library. There, manuscript collections are transferred in and out depending on use. Subsequent discussions about a future library renovation addressed a number of our needs, but no progress has been made.

#### TEMPERATURE AND HUMIDITY GOALS

An earlier library-wide preservation study conducted in late fall/early winter found that temperatures in our repository's facilities fluctuated between 72 and 80 degrees, and humidity levels fluctuated between 29 and 62 percent. The plan established an ultimate goal to have physical facilities with a constant year-round temperature of 70 degrees Fahrenheit and a relative humidity of less than 50 percent. This standard would be a marked improvement over existing

conditions. The use of the aforementioned oscillating fans helped decrease both temperature and humidity levels in the main storage area.

## Preservation

To preserve the repository's historically valuable collections, the plan outlined the need for a preservation component to gather data about both the materials and the storage facilities. The chief priority identified during the planning process was the need for a facility designed specifically for archival storage with effective environmental controls. Second, an ongoing system of environmental monitoring was developed. This program includes systematically measuring temperature and humidity levels and checking potential trouble areas for moisture and other problems. The chief difficulty in our preservation planning is the lack of resources the library can devote to preservation and upgraded facilities. Despite our best efforts, the department is still experiencing environmental issues related to preservation.

## Staffing

### NEEDS AND GOALS

The plan outlined current staffing levels and future staffing goals such as hiring additional permanent processors, a university archivist, a photograph archivist, interns, and graduate assistants. In the past, the repository had relied excessively on temporary student processors, who often were employed for only one semester and not necessarily interested in archival work.

While additional permanent processors have not been hired, a university archivist was hired in 2010, and, most recently, the department got approval to hire an audiovisual archivist. The repository continues to benefit from its relationship with the university's Honors College, which originally placed interns in Special Collections in 2004. Initially, the program was experimental, but due to its success, it is now on a more permanent basis. To date, Special Collections has mentored twenty-eight Honors College interns.

### TRAINING AND CONTINUING EDUCATION

Training and employee development are vital in maintaining a professional and knowledgeable work force. The plan established the goals of educating all employees on the proper processing of manuscript collections, sending employees to conferences and workshops, and encouraging employees to join



professional organizations. Considerable progress toward these goals has been made. In addition to in-house workshops on processing procedures, implementation of EAD, and other development activities, the parent organization now provides travel support for conferences and other meetings. Additionally, employees have raised their professional visibility, obtaining certification from the Academy of Certified Archivists.

## New Programs and Specialties

### ARKANSAS ARCHITECTURE EMPHASIS

The plan outlined the department's goal to create and build on a collection specialty in Arkansas architecture records. The department already had an excellent nucleus of architectural collections, including the records of nationally famous Arkansas architects E. Fay Jones and Edward Durell Stone. No other repository in the state specializes in this area. Past collecting efforts had been disorganized, so acquiring Arkansas architecture materials needed to be more focused and proactive. To assist in that effort, the Arkansas Architectural Archives was created and an archivist with an architecture degree was hired.

### UNIVERSITY ARCHIVES

Although the official records of the university had been collected before Special Collections was established in 1967, the university did not have a formalized archives program, nor staff devoted to this function. The department lacked the space, staff, and funding resources to administer a full-fledged university archives and records management operation. This plan outlined an alternative proposal—that Special Collections identify, collect, and preserve only the most historically significant inactive records of the university. The planning document identified a potential collecting policy for such a program, along with staffing, space, and equipment needs. As mentioned above, a university archivist was hired in 2010.

### MAPS AND GEOSPATIAL COLLECTIONS

The maps and geospatial resources in Special Collections support research ranging from general map questions to the specialized needs of faculty, graduate students, and other researchers requiring geospatial data and imagery. The plan addressed the need for cataloging and shelving requirements for maps, aerial photographs, and geospatial materials, as well as staffing requirements

and scanning policies for these materials. The death of the library's geosciences librarian and difficulties in hiring a replacement impeded progress.

## Resources and Funding

This section of the plan comprised a general statement that Special Collections would increasingly pursue grants for special projects and would work with the library development officer in seeking monetary gifts both to fund projects and to build the endowment. The primary strategy was to increase the quantity of grant applications. This goal has had limited success. The repository increased its number of grant applications, but was awarded mostly small grants. The parent organization has identified grants as a major thrust, which has reinvigorated the repository's efforts.

## Lessons Learned During the Planning Process

The plan set out tentative goal dates, spread over a three- to five-year period, for accomplishment of sixteen initiatives. Within five years of completion of the plan, adopted in 2007, twelve out of sixteen initiatives outlined were either completed or well underway. Initiatives accomplished included:

- implementation of the EAD pilot project;
- creation of a new processing manual;
- completion of a processing backlog survey;
- the use of EAD in the preparation of new finding aids;
- creation and implementation of a plan for a University Archives program;
- implementation of an architectural collecting specialty; and
- creation of an orientation and training manual for all Manuscripts Unit staff.

Significant progress has been made on a number of initiatives, including:

- creation of a single comprehensive collections database;
- completion of a finding aids survey;
- creation and implementation of a digital projects plan;
- creation and implementation of procedures to improve access and intellectual control of photographs; and
- creation and implementation of a comprehensive staff development program.

Other initiatives, such as achieving full staffing, creating and implementing a preservation program, and creating and implementing a maps and geo-spatial materials plan, have seen little or no progress. The initiatives we did

not accomplish have become long-term goals that depend largely on improved funding. A re-evaluation of the plan has not been scheduled as of this writing.

The advisory board, composed of twenty-one library staff members and other stakeholders, proved to be too large. The size of the group eventually became unwieldy, and it ultimately functioned more as a “rubber stamp” after the initial brainstorming session. In essence, fewer are better, and we ended up forming ad hoc groups from the larger advisory board for advice on specific questions. Additionally, the time line was unrealistic; everything took more time than anticipated. This had a ripple effect and ultimately ended up affecting the entire project. To complicate things, a series of staffing vacancies, including resignations and retirements, left the department shorthanded and contributed to our lack of review and follow-up at the end of the five-year period.

One of the most important lessons learned during this process was that the administration of the parent organization must comprehend the need for the plan and be willing to implement and support change, both financially and otherwise. Without that support (especially financial), portions of this plan could not be implemented, particularly the large-ticket initiatives related to facilities, preservation, and staffing. Other priorities superseded certain goals and strategies, while other goals became more urgent due to situational needs. Obviously, repository leadership must support and actively work toward the goals.

The planning project was most beneficial in focusing staff on the identification of weaknesses, the creation of strategies to remediate those weaknesses, the brainstorming involved in this process, and the act of documenting these discussions. We constantly reminded ourselves to focus on the big picture and avoid getting bogged down in details, although sometimes that was hard to do. The planning process also emphasized that it was more effective for the organization to be proactive rather than reactive when dealing with projects and issues.

Flexibility was key, as strategies must adapt to a dynamic and changing environment, including personnel crises, economic downturns, shifting priorities on the part of both the repository leadership and the parent organization, and unexpected funding (or lack thereof) for specific projects. Another important lesson was the need to remain focused on the goal deadlines. It was easy to get distracted by other projects, which were always arising and causing us to miss key benchmark dates. In retrospect, we would add three additional topics to the plan: a public relations program, which we later implemented informally; a plan for dealing with digital records; and a project to review our accession records, which is nearing completion.

## Concluding Thoughts

The department created its plan as a rough road map to guide the repository in the years ahead. We believe it will help us align priorities and assign resources in a way that will foster excellence and greater efficiency. Although we neither followed the standard protocols typically used in strategic plans nor adhered to a strict set of procedures, our plan—which we believe is a hybrid among the different types of plans—has produced dramatic results. The twelve initiatives either completed or underway, as outlined above, were all vital steps in improving departmental performance. It is unlikely that these twelve initiatives would have seen such progress without the structure and impetus of the planning project. Strong departmental leadership and commitment to improvement, necessary preconditions to successful planning, helped us achieve these key initiatives. No plan, however perfect, will move an organization forward if it gathers dust on a shelf.

In reality, there is no such thing as a “foreseeable future.” Planning can become a futile and time-consuming exercise, often undertaken only because the bureaucracy mandates it. Its purpose should be to map the direction the organization aspires to go and to guide everyday decision making and resource allocation. There are thousands of articles, books, and websites devoted to strategic planning. After surveying this literature, the average archivist might be tempted to run and hide in the compact shelving!

Much of the literature presents planning as unnecessarily complex and financially prohibitive by prescribing a regimented format and strict procedures to follow. This is unfortunate. We knew that our institution did not have the time, staff, and financial resources to undertake a traditional strategic planning project, so we improvised by creating a hybrid plan. Some of the plan’s initiatives were broad and strategic, such as the creation of a mission statement and the goal of implementing a collecting specialty in Arkansas architecture. Other initiatives were more akin to operational or tactical plans, such as the implementation of EAD for finding aids and the survey of finding aids.

We believe that the ideas behind Greene and Meissner’s groundbreaking More Product, Less Process concept of minimal processing<sup>26</sup> are equally applicable to planning. While it is necessary to analyze a repository’s strengths and weaknesses, solicit input from staff and constituents, and consider external factors, it is not necessary to hire a planning consultant or spend vast amounts of time and money to formulate and achieve goals. Since little hard evidence supports the effectiveness of strategic planning in archives, planning in archives should be conducted with common sense according to the organization’s needs and resources. We evaluated the different types of planning—strategic, tactical, and operational—and decided to chart our own course.

## NOTES

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