Getting More for Less: Testing a New Processing Model at the University of Montana

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Abstract

This paper presents a case study in backlog management. The author discusses how a new approach to both the philosophy and practice of archival processing, largely inspired by the recommendations of Mark A. Greene and Dennis Meissner in their article "More Product, Less Process," resulted in a decrease in both processing time and in the backlog of unprocessed collections at the University of Montana at Missoula.

Mark Greene and Dennis Meissner shared the results of their research on processing backlogs at the 2004 conference of the Society of American Archivists.[1] Only a few months earlier, I had started a project to manage the backlog at the archives at the University of Montana. At that time, I defined as "backlog" any collection that had been in the archives for more than twelve months and had not been arranged and described in a traditional finding aid. By this definition, in early 2004, the backlog at the University of Montana archives comprised over one-quarter of our total holdings. Although this backlog was typical according to the Greene/Meissner survey, it was too large for my comfort. Particularly disturbing, the only recorded information for the bulk of this backlog was creator name, date of donation, and collection size. There were no box lists or inventories, no subject headings or index terms, and frequently no historical or biographical information.

When I arrived at the university in 2003, I had virtually no intellectual control over 3,000 feet of material. To complicate the matter, I am not from

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[1] Published as Mark A. Greene and Dennis Meissner, "More Product, Less Process: Revamping Traditional Archival Processing," *American Archivist* 68 (Fall/Winter 2005): 208–63.

Montana, so many of the collection creators were unknown to me. After my first year at the archives, I no longer felt "I'm new" was an appropriate response to researchers, or to donors and potential donors, who asked about unprocessed holdings. I needed an effective way to make the backlog accessible to researchers and to me. Greene and Meissner's recommendations were perfectly timed for my situation. Over the next year, I incorporated many of their suggestions into daily practice at our archives—with much success. More importantly, perhaps, is that during that same period, inspired largely by their article and my own experiences, I underwent a transformation in my thinking about what constitutes both backlog and processing practice.

The University of Montana at Missoula was founded in 1893 and is the major liberal arts campus in the state. It currently enrolls about 11,000 undergraduate and 1,700 graduate students. The Mansfield Library, which houses the archives, is the largest library in the state. The archives was officially established in 1968 and has nearly 12,000 linear feet of material, including university records, manuscript collections, photographs, oral histories, video and film, unpublished maps, and architectural drawings. In addition to my time, the archives employs a paraprofessional staff for seventy hours a week and student assistants for about forty. It is open to the public a minimum of forty hours each week. In 2005, 2,100 patrons visited the department, and staff answered 300 queries received by telephone and e-mail.

Over the last five to ten years, although the archives has not engaged in a proactive acquisitions program, it has acquired an average of 150 to 200 feet of manuscript material each year. The archives has no official mandate to collect university records—yet—but typically gets an additional thirty to fifty linear feet per year from campus offices. Professional literature[2] estimates that it should take between three and forty hours *per linear foot* to process archival materials. The most frequently cited time for processing in the Greene/Meissner survey was eight hours per linear foot. A full-time processor who took eight hours to process each linear foot would just barely keep up with what the archives acquires in a year. Using that same eight hours as an estimate, it would take someone working forty hours a week, who never got sick, never took vacation, never answered reference questions, and never attended meetings, eleven and a half years to get through our backlog! Right now the archives is better staffed than it ever has been, and though we each do what processing we can, it rarely adds up to eight hours a day among all of us. It is unlikely that the archives will get a university-paid professional—or even paraprofessional—position to dedicate to processing. I was in a quandary: I had a decade's worth of backlog to make available for research and no conceivable way to get through it in a reasonable amount of time. Furthermore, I want to be doing *proactive* collection

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[2] For an excellent summary of this topic, see Greene and Meissner, "More Product, Less Process."

development for both university records and manuscript collections, and I want to begin implementing digitization projects. Because, however, I believe that an archivist at a public institution has an obligation to make collections available, gaining control of the unprocessed materials became my priority.

Fortunately for me, several events occurred just as I was beginning to panic about my backlog. First, I mentioned my situation to Christine Weideman, who shared a paper she had given at the Midwest Archives Conference in 2001 summarizing the "Minimum Standards" processing work at Yale.[3] Second, the Finding Aids Fair at SAA in 2004 featured strategies for dealing with backlogs from a number of institutions across the country. And third, I learned about the Greene/Meissner research and got a draft of their article. Reading these documents and talking with the people involved convinced me that it was time for me to adopt a brand new way of thinking about processing and gave me guidelines for how to begin. I wrote a proposal to the university in which I lamented the large number of uncataloged collections in the archives (the library's administrator asked me not to use the word *backlog* because of the negative connotation) and was awarded a Faculty Research Grant, which I used to hire an outstanding former student for about eight weeks of full-time work. Together we implemented new "minimal processing" methods for selected collections in the backlog.

Students and staff began by creating initial inventories consisting of folder titles when available, or subject summaries of loose material, for about seventy unprocessed collections. The collections ranged in size from one to sixty linear feet and included personal papers, university records, and records of local businesses and organizations. All of the collections comprised twentieth-century materials, and none contained electronic records. All were free of donor restrictions. Based on my knowledge of research requests, perception of donor relations, and analysis of these initial inventories, I selected thirty collections that met at least one of the following criteria: 1) a potential for negative impact on donor relations if the collection remained unprocessed; 2) if processed the collection could attract monetary donors or "friends" to the library, a very important issue for our dean and thus for the relationship between the archives and administration; 3) if processed the collection could attract materials of similar scope; or 4) the only way to understand the potential demand for research was by making the collection available.

In my grant proposal, I estimated it would take an average of four hours per linear foot to process each collection, not including EAD markup (which I was just learning) or the creation of a MARC record for our local OPAC. The research assistant tracked her time to review the collection, determine series,

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[3] Thomas Hyry and Christine Weideman, "Minimum Standards—Maximum Value," delivered by Christine Weideman at the Midwest Archives Conference, May 2001.

rehouse materials, arrange folders, handle preservation issues, conduct research for biographical or historical notes, label boxes, and create a Microsoft Word finding aid with container list and fields that would map to a MARC record. When a student helped her, that time was tracked as well.

For the minimal processing project, I made several changes to the archives' traditional processing practices as they related to preservation, all of which were inspired by or supported by suggestions in Greene and Meissner's article. For example, struck by their observation that no studies have been done to determine whether refoldering actually helps materials, in most cases, we stopped refoldering altogether. If folders were in reasonably good shape, we kept them. When we came across a collection where the folder labels were brittle and popping off, but the folders were otherwise intact, we simply stapled the labels back on. As you might suspect, these practices alone translated to huge savings in both labor and supplies. We have largely given up removing metal fasteners; Montana has a dry climate and our stacks area has a stable temperature and humidity. We no longer routinely photocopy clippings or separate photographs, and we are leaving far more materials in their original housings. Occasionally I worry that we may miss some significant preservation issue, such as an incidence of mold or the presence of nitrate film, but these same preservation issues exist when the collection remains unprocessed.

Based on Greene and Meissner's article, we also changed a number of our arrangement practices. We are doing far less physical moving of folders, relying instead on an intellectual arrangement through a finding aid and key word searchability of electronic documents. While this may require us to retrieve more boxes for a researcher, or to spend more time on a question when doing reference work ourselves, this time is likely far less than that for the reordering of materials during processing. Because we are no longer looking in every folder, we don't remove or even see duplicates at the folder level. Is it possible that not looking in each folder may cause us to leave a sensitive document unrestricted? Yes. Researchers have, however, had access to the majority of our unprocessed collections, and unless an experienced archivist examines every document, there is no guarantee something won't be missed even during very detailed processing. Again, because we are not touching every folder during processing, we have stopped automatically labeling each folder with collection, box, and folder number. We allow researchers to have access to only one collection at a time, coach them to use only one box at a time, and do all photocopying ourselves, so there should be no occasion for folders to be placed in the wrong collections. At the worst, a folder will get out of order within a box, but a researcher or staff member should be able to locate it quickly. In some cases, as when we are processing at the box or series level, we are no longer neatly foldering all loose or irregularly housed materials. Does this lead to wasted space? I'm sure it does, but probably not an excessive amount, and I

currently have just a bit more space than I do time or staff. At any rate, this material likely took up just as much space, if not more, in my backlog.

We have made changes in our descriptive practices as well. Though we do list folder titles when we have them, in some cases I have just listed subjects in a box. Placing dates on folders is no longer a given. When folders have been dated by the creator, I transcribe those dates; for other collections I make a series-by-series determination about whether we will look in folders for dates, and even then we only generalize and do not look at every document. I rarely identify individual photographs and am willing to lump several, even hundreds, together under a single heading. We have also shortened our historical, biographical, and scope notes, leaving more of the burden of discovery on the user rather than on archives staff. I'm looking forward to Encoded Archival Context and a time when researchers can add comments to our on-line finding aids, perhaps through finding aid wikis or a similar interactive format. It is possible that with minimal processing we will miss, and so fail to describe, a particularly important or unique component of a collection, but students who do the majority of our processing might not recognize such a component anyway. If we miss something significant, I'll just have to trust that researchers will bring it to my attention. Finally, I don't spend much time trying to categorize random documents, and I am using the term *miscellaneous* more frequently and with far less guilt.

For my initial processing project, I selected collections I felt had good potential to be used successfully without detailed arrangement and description, because I was not sure how I would feel about minimal processing. I also was uncertain what the reaction of donors and researchers would be. I can tell you now that I am a believer.

Using the procedures I have just described, within one year we moved a total of 464 linear feet of university records and manuscript materials from backlog to processed in 623 hours. This included the time to create a finding aid in Microsoft Word complete with MARC record fields and, at the minimum, a box-level, and almost always a folder-level list. In the following eight months, we processed 338 linear feet of university records in 748 hours. In other words, it is consistently taking about two hours per linear foot to process collections using minimal processing procedures.

The statement made by Mark Greene and Dennis Meissner that it's time to focus on what it is *necessary* to do has been a clarion call for me. I now start with the assumption that a collection will receive minimal processing—meaning no item-level preservation such as removing paperclips, sleeving photographs, or photocopying clippings; no refoldering, and typically no looking in folders; no searching for duplicates; little or no rearrangement of materials; and only a minimal amount of descriptive work. I make decisions about the level of processing work that will be done on a collection-by-collection, and often a series-by-series, basis. Only in extraordinary circumstances, such as with our true gems or when

a collection is completely unusable without it, will we invest time and resources in intensive arrangement and description. I no longer pretend that at that elusive point in the future when I have all the time and staff and resources I could ask for I will go back and reprocess these minimally processed collections. The vast majority of these collections are done, and without apology. It is a very liberating feeling.

Let me anticipate two questions. The first is about appraisal. In most cases I am not doing careful appraisal of collections in our backlog. Almost all of these collections were at the archives when I arrived. I am going to trust that my predecessors made intelligent decisions when they acquired the materials—there should be no need to discard entire series, and there should be some level of perceived researcher interest in each collection. I am making these collections available using minimal standards; if lots of researchers request one, I will know I have a gem. But if not, I have not spent eight hours, or more, per linear foot on detailed arrangement and description.

The other question I anticipate is: What about the user? What can be said about researcher satisfaction with collections that are minimally processed? Well, to be honest, it is too soon to tell for sure. Obviously, I believe that I am addressing the needs of the users by moving collections out of the backlog and into their hands. In the past, when I offered access to an unprocessed collection, no researcher said that he or she would rather return when the collection is arranged and described. Already several researchers have discovered collections they did not know we had. Records for these collections have been submitted to NUCMC, the library's cataloger has added them in our local OPAC, and many of these collections now have records in WorldCat and the Northwest Digital Archives. I hope that over the next few years I will be able to gather good data about researcher reaction to minimally processed collections and, of course, I will share that data with anyone interested.

And what do donors think? So far the donors I have worked with have been very pleased to see finding aids created for their collections and to know that their materials are available for research. As a bonus, I have acquired several excellent collections in a field I was specifically targeting with my minimal processing project largely because their donors saw we had similar collections available for research. I have been asked by other archivists whether I tell donors that their collections will be minimally processed. The answer is that in general I do, though not in so many words. I no longer include a discussion about acid-free folders as part of my "pitch," and instead spend time emphasizing the importance of temperature and humidity control and the goal of making materials available in a timely manner. Greene and Meissner state that archivists must "distinguish what we really need to do from

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[4] Greene and Meissner, "More Product, Less Process," 209.

what we only believe we need to do."[4] No stigma should be associated with minimal processing when applied intelligently to appropriate collections.

In the eighteen months that I have been working with and thinking about minimal processing, my thinking about processing has evolved, and the department has undergone a revolution in the way we are working through collections. Mark Greene and Dennis Meissner write:

> We need to articulate a new set of arrangement, preservation, and description guidelines that 1) expedites getting collection materials into the hands of our users; 2) assures arrangement of materials *adequate* to user needs; 3) takes the *minimal* steps necessary to physically preserve collection materials; and 4) describes materials *sufficient* to promote use.[5]

The Greene and Meissner article helped me see that I am not boldly going where no one has gone before but rediscovering a fundamental principle of archival processing. Their literature review showed me that for decades archivists have been advocating what I am implementing at the University of Montana: do only as much as is reasonable. I am happy with the work the students and para-professional staff are doing and can only imagine what professional archivists applying minimal processing procedures could accomplish. I truly believe (and comments in conference presentations and on the Archives and Archivists listserv appear to confirm) that many archivists have been doing this type of "minimal" processing for years, recognizing that researchers need to know what we have but also recognizing the impossibility, given existing resources, of doing the detailed arrangement and description that has been held up as the standard for the profession. Personally, I think it is time for a new standard.

What is my new definition of backlog? Based on the suggestions made by Greene and Meissner, I have decided to create initial inventories and collection-level records for the vast majority of our unprocessed collections. In this way, I will be both providing a means for potential researchers to discover our resources and allowing interest in collections to help determine our processing priorities. For some collections, this inventory and collection-level record is as far as I will ever go. So now, I define as backlog any collection that has been in the archives for more than a year and does not have at least collection-level access through an initial inventory, a local MARC record, and a notice on our Web site.

Some archivists equate backlog with job security, but I completely disagree. Backlog is job insecurity. Backlog means I'm not achieving my mission to make materials available for research, and the time I spend dealing with backlog is time I do not spend in intelligent appraisal, proactive collection development, processing new acquisitions, thoughtful marketing, or helping the next generation learn to use and appreciate primary source materials. Minimal processing is truly getting more for less.

[5] Greene and Meissner, "More Product, Less Process," 212–13.