


MPLP as Intentional, not Necessarily Minimal, Processing: The Rudolf W. Becking Collection at Humboldt State University

Adrienne R. S. Harling

ABSTRACT

This case study documents how “More Product, Less Process” (MPLP) was used to process a large twentieth-century manuscript collection at Humboldt State University Library Special Collections. HSU is a small, publicly funded repository quite different from those previously discussed in the MPLP literature. In contrast to many published examples of MPLP in practice, MPLP was not used at HSU to address an overwhelming backlog through widespread minimal processing or by adopting a baseline processing metric. Instead, MPLP served more broadly as a framework for deciding how to allocate available resources to best fulfill the repository’s mission and benefit the end users of the collections. This case study supports a nuanced understanding of MPLP as a decision-making framework (not a set of processing techniques) and the potential value of MPLP to a wide range of archival scenarios.

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KEY WORDS

College and University Archives, Processing, Archival Theory and Principles

In their 2005 article “More Product, Less Process: Revamping Traditional Archival Processing,” Mark A. Greene and Dennis Meissner implored archivists to lower their processing standards significantly to reflect accurately the nature of contemporary archival collections. They argued that in the majority of cases, archivists can only afford to process collections to a very basic level. They called this “minimal processing” and described specific guidelines for how to implement it.¹ The term “MPLP” (an acronym for the title of the article) was quickly adopted in the archives community to refer to the concepts that Greene and Meissner presented in their 2005 article.

In a follow-up perspective piece five years later, Mark Greene acknowledged that MPLP had been interpreted “in some circles” as a “one-size-fits-all approach to processing.”² This is an interpretation that the authors had warned against in their original article. Greene and Meissner had stated clearly that they were arguing against the practice of using one processing standard to fit all collections and circumstances. Rather, they were suggesting that archivists accept a wider range of processing levels to make the daunting math of backlog management start to approach feasibility. A minimum processing standard would be established to address problems of unmanageable backlogs, and processing above and beyond that minimal standard would be thoughtfully determined on a case-by-case basis. Greene and Meissner made a strong case that time-consuming traditional processing protocols should not be implemented when they jeopardize the most basic access to growing numbers of collections in the backlog.³ However, their primary point was that processing decisions should be customized to each collection and/or series based on the “mission, audience, and resources of the present.”⁴

While Greene and Meissner did not present MPLP as synonymous with minimal processing, the association between the two terms has become so close that the lines between them are sometimes blurred. Several factors contribute to this. First, the original article focused on a textbook scenario describing when minimal processing is most warranted and did not illustrate how MPLP might be applied in different kinds of repositories. Greene and Meissner’s message was targeted at large, formal archives with climate-controlled storage, an unwieldy backlog of unprocessed collections, and a permanent staff of multiple archival specialists. Their description implied that those processing collections in this setting would be doing meticulous work including item-level arrangement, comprehensive preservation tasks, and well-researched and carefully written finding aids. Meanwhile, new collections would be acquired at a steady rate (adding to the already unmanageable backlog), donors would regularly inquire about why their collections were not yet available, and researchers would be unaware that the collections in the backlog existed.

The year after the debut of MPLP, two case studies were published on implementing MPLP at repositories that closely resembled Greene and Meissner's textbook scenario. Christine Weideman and Donna McCrea each wrote about implementing MPLP in large repositories with unmanageable backlogs (Yale University and the University of Montana at Missoula, respectively). At Yale, minimal processing was not only applied to collections in the backlog, but was adapted to maximize time-saving opportunities and resources during the acquisition of new collections. At both institutions, custom decisions were made for each collection and/or series, and some exceptional collections received more traditional processing. However, in both cases implementing MPLP meant that minimal processing was the rule and more detailed processing was the rare exception.⁵

Another factor leading to the close association between MPLP and minimal processing was Greene and Meissner's proposed processing metric that, if adhered to, would limit how much flexibility could realistically be applied to processing decisions. Despite their warning against processing proscriptions, they suggested that "large twentieth-century collections" should be processed at an average of four hours per linear foot. As Carl Van Ness pointed out in his critique of the original MPLP article, such a metric does not allow much flexibility to address the variety of collections for which many repositories are responsible. It also does not realistically factor in the wide range of staffing patterns that exist in archival repositories.⁶ The MPLP metric suggests minimal processing as a primary tool to be used across repositories and for most collections.

Finally, the strong language Greene and Meissner used in their discussions of traditional processing practices and the archivists who employ them confused some readers as to which aspects of traditional processing are "baby" and which are "bathwater." In what Van Ness described as a "harsh assessment of the archives profession,"⁷ Greene and Meissner made the case that the professional archives culture had not responded to a significant body of previously published literature that pointed to the very guidelines they were restating and further defining. They referred to archivists who are imprisoned by "chains of unhelpful practice that hold us to inadequate productivity"; that "have utterly failed to come to grips with a critical administrative reality"; that "evinced a dismaying lack of concern for user access to our holdings"; and so on.⁸ While Greene and Meissner were successful in engaging archivists in a discussion about the need for change, the tone of their argument skewed my own initial understanding of their message as "minimal processing is good, traditional processing is bad." More focused study of the authors' ideas and discussions with my supervisors corrected that impression, but Greene and Meissner themselves have reported many instances in which archivists have misinterpreted MPLP in much the same way.⁹

At Humboldt State University (HSU), an archival setting very different from Greene and Meissner's textbook scenario, we did not apply MPLP as a programmatic approach to backlog management; it did not inspire a new processing standard; and it did not provoke use of processing metrics. HSU Special Collections is a small repository with a low accession rate and a significant but manageable backlog. Processing to various levels based on the available resources and the content, size, and condition of collections has been the norm at HSU since the archives was established. However, when MPLP training was included as part of a grant to process the Rudolf W. Becking Collection (a large twentieth-century collection), MPLP proved to be valuable as a conceptual foundation for making better processing decisions even without a structured repository-wide program in place.

At HSU, MPLP provided a strong grounding in the fundamental mission of archival work and a conceptual framework for prioritizing processing activities according to that mission. We used MPLP principles to decide what processing activities to undertake (from the full spectrum of minimal to traditional) and how to invest our available resources to yield the greatest potential returns to the end users of the collection. This case study is intended to provide a counterpoint to examples of MPLP implementation in more textbook scenarios, to illustrate a broader application of MPLP, and to explore potential benefits of MPLP for repositories and collections of all types.

Background

HUMBOLDT STATE UNIVERSITY LIBRARY SPECIAL COLLECTIONS

While not a formal archives within a research institution, HSU's special collections serve an otherwise unmet need for scholars and other researchers interested in Humboldt County or the broader northwestern California area. HSU Library is the only academic library at a public, four-year university in a greater than two-hundred-mile radius, and donors to its special collections often have a strong desire for their materials to remain in the region. HSU is an example of a different but not uncommon kind of archival repository—one that provides unique archival resources and services from a small department in a library where the institutional commitment to archives is not central.

HSU does not have environmental controls. The acquisition rate is relatively low, under a hundred cubic feet per year. Approximately five thousand cubic feet of holdings are available to researchers, with a relatively manageable backlog of a thousand cubic feet. Most unprocessed collections are minimally described on the website and made available to researchers by appointment.

HSU's dedicated archives staff averages 1.3 full-time equivalent (FTE) per year. This includes staff for the reading room, which is managed through a combination of supervision and trust in the goodwill of patrons (not formal registration or management of belongings as is common at larger archival institutions).

UNCOVERING CALIFORNIA'S ENVIRONMENTAL COLLECTIONS

The Becking Collection was processed between 2010 and 2012 with funds from a collaborative grant: "Uncovering California's Environmental Collections: A Collaborative Approach."¹⁰ This grant provided HSU with funds for a half-time, two-year, temporary position of processing archivist, which I filled. Eight other repositories also received funding from the grant, which focused on describing and making available forty-one environmentally themed archival collections that had previously been inaccessible to researchers. Grant participants were trained in MPLP and Archivists' Toolkit through SAA workshops; the decision whether or not to use MPLP or Archivists' Toolkit for the processing was left to each repository. Many institutions did implement MPLP and completed their processing projects more efficiently than originally expected. In these cases, the institutions were able to apply remaining funds to processing additional collections. All of the participating institutions generated EAD finding aids that were published on the Online Archive of California. Providing processing metrics to the grant administrators (California Digital Library) was encouraged but not required.¹¹

Two months after my position started, the HSU archivist and I attended a grant-sponsored SAA workshop on Implementing MPLP.¹² Studying MPLP stimulated discussions between us about the bigger picture of archival preservation and access at HSU. The resulting processing decisions about the Becking Collection reflect storage without climate control, uncertainty about future staff, the size and nature of the backlog, and the role of knowledgeable reference services in providing access to archival collections at HSU. In the spirit of MPLP, we set out to do only as much processing as would ensure good-enough preservation and access to the collection in light of our specific resources and circumstances.

The Rudolf W. Becking Collection

Rudolf W. Becking was a scientist and activist focused on environmental management in Humboldt County and the surrounding region in the 1960s through the 1990s. He was a professor of forestry and natural resources at Humboldt State University, with expertise in redwoods, sustainable forestry, and plant community ecology. Influenced by his upbringing and education in

Indonesia and the Netherlands, Becking had an entirely different view about forest management than most of his colleagues in the United States. He was an early environmentalist, effecting local and national policy including the establishment and expansion of Redwood National Park.

The personal papers that Becking donated to HSU include international correspondence between Becking and his colleagues, manuscripts of articles and books, data and research products, curriculum materials and teaching-related projects, records of involvement with local municipalities, photographs, illustrations, soil samples, and much more. His materials include significant content regarding northwestern California ecology and environmental politics. The Becking Collection is one of many environmentally related collections that make HSU a rich resource for primary source materials about natural resources industries as well as environmental activists and organizations.

PRESERVATION

Greene and Meissner proposed climate control as a foundation for minimal processing. Their argument was that climate control itself would serve as adequate preservation for most large contemporary collections and that additional time-consuming efforts (such as refolding and paper clip removal) would generally not result in enough improved preservation to make it worth the resources. Given the lack of climate-controlled storage at HSU, we used the MPLP framework to develop a custom strategy in which we would only implement preservation tasks that were likely to make a significant difference and were also relatively time efficient. For example, we removed staples only when they were rusted at the time of processing. We used interleaving between newspaper and nonnewspaper materials, but did not photocopy the extensive newspaper clippings in the collection. We used Mylar sleeves for selected photos, but did not separate photos from their surrounding materials. We did replace metal paper clips with Plastiklips, took items out of their original binders and envelopes and placed them in archival folders, and photocopied items printed on Thermofax and other extremely unstable papers.

However, we also encountered some materials that we felt warranted exceptions to this processing approach. These included unique items that required special preservation and/or storage attention, such as hundreds of sputograms (a mixture of saliva and soil applied to absorbent paper, dried, and mounted to backing paper on which additional information is added), herbaria specimens, mixed media, and oversized materials. In each of these cases, we had to make individual decisions, which itself took time. However, MPLP provided a framework that we used to evaluate the unique circumstances we faced. Ultimately, we chose to research the chemistry of the sputograms, to coordinate

the donation of herbaria specimens to our campus herbarium, to intensively process sections of the collection with especially high value, and to develop custom preservation plans for the different media in the collection.

In this process, we followed MPLP guidance on making exceptions to minimum processing in the case of high-value content. For example, the Becking Collection includes a series about Humboldt County logging history that comprises dozens of previously unavailable historical photographs and several rare documents. This series was carefully and comprehensively processed (item-level appraisal, preservation photocopying, sleeving of all individual photographs, and removal of all metal fasteners). However, in some of the cases requiring unique decisions, it was not the intellectual content of the materials that warranted higher-level processing, but the logistics of their storage and the limitations of our storage facilities. Examples include oversized and rolled items that were eventually stored in large textile boxes and digital files that were appraised, migrated to readable file formats, and backed up from 3.5-inch disks to a hard drive.

ARRANGEMENT

The Becking Collection went through many moves and came to HSU in three installments over six years. A relatively large collection (122 cubic feet after processing), it was not in any particular order at the start of processing.

Making sense of, or “grokking” the collection as we call it at HSU,¹³ was perhaps the processing task most dramatically affected by MPLP principles. Before learning about MPLP, I read samples of the contents of the binders and envelopes to understand the creator, the nature of his work, the relative research values of different parts of the collection, and how the collection was organized. However, my interest as a researcher all too easily eclipsed my judgment about time management as an archivist, illustrating a point Greene and Meissner made about some of the work archivists do being of primary benefit to themselves.

Learning about MPLP discouraged me from doing item-level work; however, my supervisors assured me that reading enough to arrange and describe the collection meaningfully was important. With this directive and the principles of MPLP, I developed a clear focus about the purpose of my investigation of the collection contents and did only as much as needed to serve that purpose. Tangential fascination with the collection contents gave way to a focused approach to establish basic familiarity with the collection and its creator. This initial investment saved time at later stages of processing because of the resulting clear arrangement scheme.

DESCRIPTION

For description tasks, I applied MPLP principles as well. I identified when to conduct research to provide more detailed descriptions and concluded that I wrote the highest-quality and lowest-cost series descriptions at the time of processing, when information gathered from exposure to content through preservation activities was fresh in my mind.

The MPLP framework also helped me recognize opportunities to maximize the ratio between time costs and long-term researcher access. For example, I noticed that Becking often wrote detailed summaries of his projects in correspondence with his colleagues. I saved time by quoting these passages for the finding aid rather than composing original descriptive text. This allowed for greater access to the content through detailed description, with minimal time input. Similarly, I found that detailed folder labels could bring out the nuances within a broader topic or capture hidden topics within folders, improving access throughout the collection without writing extra paragraphs in the finding aid.

Project Outcomes and Lessons Learned

Processing the Becking Collection resulted in 122.0 cubic feet (ninety-four record storage boxes and nine oversized boxes) of mixed materials adequately prepared for long-term storage in a basement (with stable but not externally controlled temperature and humidity) and an EAD finding aid (available through the Online Archive of California).¹⁴ While the majority of unprocessed collections at HSU are listed on the Special Collections website and made available by appointment, the Becking Collection was one of the few that was not suitable for researcher access before it was processed, so this project broadened what is available to researchers pertaining to the natural resources of northwestern California.

If understood as a synonym for minimal processing, MPLP would have been implemented differently than it was at HSU with the Becking Collection. As the processing archivist, I likely would have made specific rules to follow such as do not exceed a processing rate of four hours per linear foot, do not do preservation tasks, do not look inside folders, do not look at individual items, and so on. Instead, implementing MPLP prompted me to focus on the question, how can I best spend my time to provide the highest quality and quantity of access to HSU's collections for the researchers who will use them? In this way, MPLP principles served as a guide in developing efficient processing strategies well beyond Greene and Meissner's specific minimal processing recommendations. MPLP became the basis for how I approached the processing work flow. Any time that efficiency waned, or the rhythm of my work was

interrupted, I would “think MPLP” to find a streamlined solution that kept as the goal a reasonable balance of time efficiency and benefits to the end user.

Conclusion

MPLP was initially framed around managing and/or preventing backlogs at large formal archives by using minimal processing practices. However, the message and value of MPLP apply broadly to the diverse realities influencing processing decisions at any given holding institution. MPLP is a conceptual model that can be used to navigate the tradeoffs between quantity and quality of processing and access in any circumstance. As Greene and Meissner themselves put it in one of their many attempts to clarify their original message: “MPLP recommendations are broad strokes that can help archivists make decisions about balancing resources so as to accomplish their larger ends and achieve economies in doing so. Practitioners must shape them into their own institutional contexts.”¹⁵ At HSU, where special collections are secondary to the information needs of undergraduates and a significant portion of use of the archival collections is by researchers new to primary sources, MPLP helped establish the priorities for processing the Rudolf W. Becking Collection that were most suitable to our end users.

NOTES

- ¹ Mark A. Greene and Dennis Meissner, “More Product, Less Process: Revamping Traditional Archival Processing,” *The American Archivist* 68 (Fall/Winter 2005): 208–63.
- ² Mark A. Greene, “MPLP: It’s Not Just for Processing Anymore,” *The American Archivist*, 73 (Spring/Summer 2010): 175–203.
- ³ Greene and Meissner, “More Product, Less Process,” 208–63.
- ⁴ Greene, “MPLP: It’s Not Just for Processing Anymore,” 175–203.
- ⁵ Christine Weideman, “Accessioning as Processing,” *The American Archivist* 69, no. 2 (2006): 274–83; Donna E. McCrea, “Getting More for Less: Testing a New Processing Model at the University of Montana,” *The American Archivist* 69, no. 2 (2006): 284–90.
- ⁶ Carl Van Ness, “Much Ado about Paper Clips: ‘More Product, Less Process’ and the Modern Manuscript Repository,” *The American Archivist* 73, no. 1 (2010): 129–45.
- ⁷ Van Ness, “Much Ado about Paper Clips,” 129–45.
- ⁸ Greene and Meissner. “More Product, Less Process,” 208–63.
- ⁹ See Dennis Meissner and Mark A. Greene, “More Application while Less Appreciation: The Adopters and Antagonists of MPLP,” *Journal of Archival Organization* 8 (2010): 3–4, 174–226. An example from page 199 reads: “It seems like every few months we see a spate of A&A list postings on a new MPLP thread declaring that MPLP approaches require a processing archivist to always do this, or to never, ever do that, or to live in shame if they don’t maintain a seasonal batting average of 400 (boxes per year).”
- ¹⁰ “Uncovering California’s Environmental Collections: A Collaborative Approach” was coordinated by the California Digital Library, administered by the Council of Library and Information Resources as part of its Cataloging Hidden Special Collections and Archives Program, and funded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. Finding Aids for 36 of the 41 collections processed through

this grant, including the Becking Collection, are published on the California Digital Library's Online Archive of California, <http://www.oac.cdlib.org>.

- ¹¹ California Digital Library intern Melanie Wisner reported on the collected metrics in "Uncovering California's Environmental Collections: A Collaborative Approach (CLIR UCEC)—Processing Metrics Report" (October 2011), <http://www.clir.org/hiddencollections/resources/UCECFinalRev.pdf>.
- ¹² The workshop took place in April 2010 at the UC Berkeley campus and was attended by other Northern California grant participants. Jennifer Meehan of the Beinicke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale University taught the course.
- ¹³ The word "grok" was coined by Robert A. Heinlein in his 1961 science fiction novel *Stranger in a Strange Land* to describe the act of understanding something profoundly.
- ¹⁴ See the finding aid at Online Archives of California, "Rudolf W. Becking Collection 2003.04," <http://www.oac.cdlib.org/findaid/ark:/13030/kt9x0nf6g9>.
- ¹⁵ Meissner and Greene, "More Application while Less Appreciation," 174–226.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Adrienne R. S. Harling is an independent library and archives consultant living and working in the Klamath River region of northern California. She received her MLIS from San Jose State University in 2008 and became a certified archivist in 2012. Harling's professional interests include ethical management of indigenous cultural heritage information and documenting geographic regions, grassroots movements, and underrepresented activities, people, and communities. She currently is consulting for a tribe in northern California that is planning and developing a comprehensive archives and library infrastructure for both digital and analog cultural materials. She is also project archivist for a regional nonprofit environmental organization, processing a large collection that will be deposited at Humboldt State University.