

Introduction—Encoded Archival Description: Case Studies

The six papers published in the summer 1997 issue of the *American Archivist* provided an overview of the development of Encoded Archival Description (EAD) and of its intended place in an integrated system of archival description and access. In the present issue, case studies are used to describe the experiences of six archival repositories that have been “early implementers” of this new descriptive standard.

Each of these repositories leaped into the pool while EAD was still under development, two or more years before it was a finished, stable encoding scheme ready for use by all archival repositories. Such pioneering activity is not for the fainthearted! When these archivists began applying EAD, documentation had not yet been published; software tools were not yet stable, affordable, or easy to use; and the structure of EAD itself was in a considerable state of flux. Even so, archivists at these institutions saw the potential of EAD to standardize their finding aid practices and, in so doing, to improve the quality and functionality of their archival information access and delivery systems. Who are these pioneers, and what perspectives do they bring to the archival community’s understanding of EAD?

Dennis Meissner’s paper on the Minnesota Historical Society’s project to “reengineer” its finding aids in preparation for EAD implementation should be required reading for all archivists planning to make their collection guides available within a distributed information environment such as the World Wide Web. He succinctly describes some of the ways in which we all must rethink the nature of our finding aids when they are to be delivered electronically to remote searchers rather than handed to researchers within the context of an in-person reference interview.

Leslie Morris, leader of the Digital Finding Aids Project at Harvard and Radcliffe, describes the careful approach that her team took to the analysis of data elements as a prelude to the development of a “pan-Harvard” finding aid system. Because this group of repositories had never before used a common finding aid standard, this approach presented considerable challenges, but as Morris describes, it has served the project very effectively.

Much like the situation at Harvard, archivists at Yale also used EAD to bring together several discrete repositories for implementation of a university-wide on-line finding aid system. Nicole Bouché describes characteristics of the overall project with a focus on the Beinecke Library’s participation. She particularly emphasizes the fact that rigorous use of a consistent database structure and format in past years made Beinecke’s conversion of thousands of pages of “legacy data” a veritable breeze.

Archivists in several divisions of the Library of Congress have been extremely active in testing both the technical and intellectual capabilities of EAD. In their detailed explanation of the various approaches taken at LC, Mary Lacy and Anne Mitchell describe a variety of finding aid types and approaches to EAD conversion within an environment fueled by the considerable expertise and resources of LC’s National Digital Library Program.

As director of the University of Virginia’s Electronic Text Unit, David Seaman was encoding texts in SGML using the Text Encoding Initiative DTD for several years before

the emergence of EAD. As such, he brings the special perspective of a seasoned SGML veteran to his oversight of Virginia's EAD efforts. This experience is apparent in the advice he offers on matters such as documentation, workflow, and development of efficiency-enhancing software tools.

To close this issue, Elizabeth Dow of the University of Vermont describes her one-person implementation of EAD in a relatively small repository. Her story evokes one's childhood memories of *The Little Engine That Could!* Dow's cautionary tale of advice sought, lessons learned, and how she would do it next time should be of great interest to the numerous archivists who cannot dream of commanding the institutional resources available to the other authors.

Numerous other archives in the United States and elsewhere already are implementing EAD, and one expects that our professional literature increasingly will be filled with reports of the particular challenges faced and lessons learned by each. For example, my own repository—Special Collections and University Archives at the University of California, Irvine—is a participant in the Online Archive of California (OAC), the consortial implementation of EAD by the nine-campus University of California system. Under development for less than two years, OAC already has been effective in raising the profile of archival collections university-wide by virtue of their early inclusion in UC's digital library. Three features of the UC project are of particular note. First, an explicit training component was included to ensure that EAD is successfully adopted as a standard technology in all UC repositories, both large and small. Second, participants were required to link to each EAD finding aid from a USMARC catalog record in UC's MELVYL® online catalog, in the same fashion that links are made to other types of electronic resources. And third, an invitation was extended to non-UC archival repositories throughout California to contribute their finding aids to be marked up by project staff and made available via the OAC database. The UC project has faced the obstacles inherent to a geographically dispersed consortium that includes repositories of widely varying size and automation expertise. Such project management issues will be reported upon following a formal evaluation phase led by Anne Gilliland-Swetland of UCLA's Department of Library and Information Science.

As the authors of the papers in this issue would no doubt agree, cooperative endeavors of this type may well be the key to the implementation of EAD and other new technologies, not only for large multi-repository institutions and consortia, but for many small and chronically underfunded repositories that are home to little-known cultural riches. As you read these case studies, think about your own natural allies and partners, and how you might work together to utilize technology to further your own mission and to make your archival riches ever better known to the audiences you seek.

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