Much Ado about Paper Clips: "More Product, Less Process" and the Modern Manuscript Repository

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Abstract

This article is a critical examination of the methodology and arguments of Mark Greene and Dennis Meissner's influential article "More Product, Less Process." Greene and Meissner rely heavily on data from a survey of the profession's processing habits, which is skewed to manuscript repositories at colleges and universities rather than institutional archives. This article also examines untested assumptions underlying their arguments, reflects on why manuscript repositories resist change, and questions the wisdom of a standard metric for large manuscript collections. It asks whether "More Product, Less Process" addresses the critical issues facing manuscript repositories.

Since its publication in 2005, Mark Greene and Dennis Meissner's article, "More Product, Less Process" (commonly known as MPLP) has inspired a loyal group of archivists dedicated to challenging the traditional processing practices of archival and manuscript repositories.[1] The article has also been the wellspring for grant initiatives as well as for lively and mostly adulatory discussion at professional meetings. Criticism of MPLP has been largely confined to the profession's blogs and listservs. For example, a discussion at the spring 2008 MARAC meeting entitled "MPLP, Friend or Foe?" prompted the following post on the *ArchivesNext* blog:

The author wishes to thank Sara Russell Gonzalez, University of Florida, and Jennifer Marshall, University of South Carolina, for their assistance with this article.

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

> My impression (correct me if I'm wrong readers,) is that there was a general consensus in the room that MPLP was, in many ways, just a restatement or validation of what most archives had always been doing.

This post elicited six comments, most critical of MPLP, including one government archivist who wrote:

> . . . a few of us government archivists have been interested (read: amused) in the bandwagon mentality sweeping the archives world over MPLP because we've been doing this all along.[2]

A recent survey conducted to determine the effect of MPLP on processing practices supports these informal responses. Sixty institutions participated in the survey; 36 repositories reported that they follow the processing practices advocated in MPLP and 24 said they did not. Of the 36 that do, however, 26 had implemented the procedures before the article's publication. In a few cases, these repositories had done so as early as the 1970s or 1980s.[3] These survey results and the comments from *ArchivesNext* are a far cry from Greene and Meissner's description of "the small but growing number of archivists who have quietly abandoned traditional approaches to processing."[4]

That many repositories already employed procedures comparable to those described in MPLP prior to its publication is not unexpected. As Greene and Meissner themselves point out, many of their recommendations have been accepted practice for decades. The question is whether those practices prevail in the profession or if they are, in fact, exceptional. Greene and Meissner would have us believe the latter.

At my own repository, the University of Florida,[5] many of Greene and Meissner's recommendations have been standard practice since the 1980s. Folders are retained when possible, and access to unprocessed or partially processed materials is a matter of policy. Item-level arrangement and description are confined to very small collections and preservation tasks are limited. My

[2] "Notes from Spring MARAC Meeting: MPLP, Friend or Foe?," *ArchivesNext*, 6 May 2008, at http://www.archivesnext.com/?m=200805&paged=2, , followed by comments at http://www.archivesnext.com/?p=146#comments, both accessed 25 January 2009.

[3] Jennifer Marshall, "The Impact of Minimum-Standards Processing on Archival Practice: An Early Assessment," paper presented at the 2008 Annual Meeting of the Society of American Archivists in San Francisco.

[4] Greene and Meissner, "More Product, Less Process," 240.

[5] The Archives and Manuscripts Unit in the Department of Special and Area Studies Collections has a staff of three faculty-level professionals and one paraprofessional. It is responsible for the university archives and manuscripts related to the history of Florida, Cuba, and Haiti as well as the literary manuscripts of several prominent Florida novelists. Other department members work occasionally with manuscripts as well. Total holdings come to a little over 8,400 linear feet of processed collections and 4,800 linear feet of unprocessed materials. The vast majority of the unprocessed records consist of congressional collections.

first impression of MPLP was that it did not accurately reflect the practices of institutional archives that I knew, but that it fairly accurately characterized a number of manuscript repositories still mired in "old school" practices. Furthermore, I thought the survey methodologies left something to be desired. Time and a closer examination of the data behind MPLP have only intensified my initial reaction. My primary concern, though, is not that MPLP misrepresents the processing practices of the average archives or even the average manuscript repository, but rather that the practices condemned by Greene and Meissner are just part of a much larger problem. To focus on poor processing practices as the sole or even primary cause of the backlog will not solve the problem and may distract us from the larger unresolved issues. In essence, MPLP is fighting the wrong fight.

The authors present MPLP as a "revolution," to use their term, and, in the years since its publication, it seems to have provoked one. But MPLP offers few specifics as to how the revolution will be achieved. Because they find the arbitrary and dogmatic implementation of existing procedures partially to blame for our bad processing habits, the authors wisely reject the creation of new prescriptions that would be just as arbitrarily invoked as the old ones. Instead, the authors offer a general goal of 400 cubic feet per processor per year as a reasonable metric to determine success. Consequently, MPLP may result in an even greater variety of descriptive and preservation practices than already exists. It is unclear whether the authors find this an acceptable outcome of their manifesto, but one repository that recently employed MPLP practices came to the radical conclusion that "finding aids are a luxury" and almost abandoned their creation.[6] Hopefully, this view represents the fringes of the MPLP revolution. Still, it may be time to ask some basic questions about the premises of MPLP before we venture further along the revolutionary road.

The merits of Greene and Meissner's arguments depend upon a number of untested assumptions. Three suppositions integral to their thesis are noteworthy here. First, the authors assume that their survey of processing practices conducted online in 2003 and 2004 represents an accurate cross section of archival institutions and that the practices evidenced in their study are consistent with the profession as a whole. Second, the authors assume that a meaningful processing metric is both feasible and desirable, and that we can save great cost and time if we drastically change our practices to achieve that metric. Finally, the authors assume that the backlog problem is almost exclusively a processing problem. When we examine each assumption critically, it becomes apparent that the problem of the backlog is not as simple as the authors suggest.

[6] Marshall, "The Impact of Minimum-Standards Processing on Archival Practice."

The Survey: "Where's the Beef?"

Buttressing the MPLP study is a "methodology with five legs." The first leg is a thorough and excellent review of the theoretical and practical literature on arrangement, description, preservation, and metrics. A survey of NHPRC processing grants from the five years prior to their study follows the review; third comes a small study of archives users at two large repositories; fourth, an examination of processing studies done in the last ten years; and, fifth and most significantly, their own survey of processing practices. The authors sent their survey to members of the Manuscript Repositories and Description sections of the Society of American Archivists. Ninety-nine repositories responded. The authors describe this as the "beefier leg" of their study.[7]

Any survey of SAA members must consider the inherent biases of SAA membership. Academic archivists represent about 43% of the society's members while government archivists account for only 21.5%. Accurate statistics for the profession as a whole are difficult to come by, but the A*Census indicates that 36% of those who work with historical records are employed in academia and 32% in government.[8] The underrepresentation of government archivists in SAA membership is even more pronounced than the overrepresentation of academic archivists, and we can infer that other biases in SAA membership probably exist.

Further, Greene and Meissner confined their survey to only two sections in SAA, and it yielded a response that was even less representative of the profession than the society's overall membership. Sixty-four of the 99 respondents to the Greene-Meissner survey are identified as "C & U archives." Only 5 were state archives or state historical societies, while religious archives and "independent research libraries" account for 7 each. Six are identified as local government repositories and historical societies. There are also 7 "others." No business archives are represented in the Greene-Meissner survey.[9]

A random sample of the two sections (n=60) for the year 2000 indicates that approximately 47% of the members worked in academic institutions and 16% worked in government.[10] As would be expected, a random sample of the Manuscripts Section alone (n=30) showed a much higher bias toward academic

[7] Greene and Meissner, "More Product, Less Process," 228. The authors state that there were 100 respondents, but they fail to notice that two of the survey responses are almost identical and were obviously from the same repository. The raw data for the survey can be found at http://ahc.uwyo.edu/nhprcresearch/, accessed 25 January 2009. Unless otherwise indicated, all references to survey data came from the table provided at that site.

[8] Victoria Irons Walch, "A*Census," *American Archivist* 69 (Fall/Winter 2006): 337, figures 3.2.1 and 3.2.2.

[9] Greene and Meissner, "More Product, Less Process," 210. The 7% response for "independent research libraries" is an accurate response rate for those two sections and another indication of how SAA's membership does not mirror the profession. It is hard to imagine that "independent research libraries" constitute .7% of the profession much less 7%.

[10] The samples were derived from SAA's *2000–2001 Directory of Individual and Institutional Members.*

institutions (57%.) It would seem, then, that their survey drew far more heavily from the Manuscripts Section than from the Description Section, but even then their survey is skewed disproportionately toward academia. What happened? Are academic libraries more likely to respond to a survey on processing or are government archives less likely to do so? It would seem a little of both, which itself may be telling. It may indicate that processing issues are of greater concern in academia than elsewhere in the profession. Regardless, the potential for inherent response biases cannot be ignored when responses are voluntary, as in the Greene-Meissner survey. In retrospect, given the purpose of the survey, it would have made more sense to pinpoint specific institutions and ask for participation.

Also problematic is the term "C & U archives." It is not clear to what extent institutional academic archives are represented in the Greene-Meissner survey. But the answers given to many of the survey questions as well as the pool from which the survey was derived suggest that the typical respondent was more likely to be a manuscripts archivist at the University of X than its university archivist.[11] What is startling about the Greene-Meissner survey is the almost total absence of institutional archives. In short, the Greene-Meissner survey has severe biases overlooked by the authors, and it does not adequately represent the membership of SAA, much less the profession as a whole. At best, the survey is a snapshot of the processing practices of manuscript units at American colleges and universities.

But, the degree to which the Greene-Meissner survey accurately describes any activity in the profession is also called into question because the questionnaire has significant problems. The survey is an ambitious attempt, too ambitious, to arrive at an understanding of the processing norms of American archives. The questionnaire has 104 questions and requires a considerable amount of time to answer. Survey experts consider fifteen minutes the ideal time to complete a survey; thirty minutes the maximum.[12] The Greene-Meissner survey probably exceeds the maximum time. A survey of this scope is likely to produce a high degree of "survey fatigue," a phenomenon common in marketing surveys that results in poor responses and omissions.[13] More problematic, though, are specific questions and batteries of questions that appear in the questionnaire.

[11] Hybrid responses that include data from both manuscript units and university archives in the same institutions are probably present as well. As with so much in the survey, it is difficult to know.

[12] Louis M. Rhea and Richard A. Parker, *Designing and Conducting Survey Research: A Comprehensive Guide* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1992), 54.

[13] ZapSurvey, *Top 7 Tips for Effective Online Surveys*, at http://www.zapsurvey.com/Tips.aspx, accessed 26 January 2009. Tip #1 is "Avoid Survey Fatigue—Keep the size of your online survey to a minimum." It goes on to state: "With survey fatigue, even the most well intentioned respondents can find themselves getting tired answering page after page of questions. When this happens, they tend to put less thought into their answers or in the worse case randomly answering questions or skipping questions altogether."

The core of the survey are the 60 questions related to specific processing practices. Survey participants were asked how often they removed paper clips, weeded duplicates, refoldered and reboxed collections, and so forth, and they were given five possible choices: *never, seldom, sometimes, usually,* and *always,* scaled 1–5 accordingly.

The scale used in this type of questionnaire must be logical and consistent within a continuum.[14] Since *never* and *always* are defined as 0% and 100%, the remaining three choices cover 1% to 99% of practice frequency. These three choices should form a logical continuum, but it is hard to argue that they do. The words are imprecise and mean different things to different people. Consequently, it is difficult to say where the three choices fall between 1% and 99%. One person might say that *seldom* means less than 10% of the time, and another, 30%. *Usually* could mean anything from 50% of the time to 99%. Of the three, *sometimes* is probably the least precise and difficult to place on a scale.

The questions, too, are often ambiguous or subject to interpretation. It seems odd that the question about removing paper clips also included staples, since many repositories never remove staples but usually remove paper clips. The question about photocopying is similarly imprecise, listing in one question such varied formats as newsprint, carbons, thermal faxes, and thermal photocopies. At the University of Florida, we seldom copy the first, never the second, and, on those rare occasions when we find them, we usually do copy the third and fourth. The authors also chastise us for separating photographs, assuming this to be a preservation decision only, when, in fact, we often do it for access purposes.

The imprecise nature of the questions and responses did not prevent the authors from boldly and precisely interpreting their data. For example, we are told that "barely half of us make our descriptive work accessible through OPACS and Web-mounted documents."[15] It is unclear, however, how the authors came up with the precise number of 51%. It seems to be based on the number of people who responded *usually* or *always* to the questions about marking up finding aids in EAD or HTML (29 and 22, respectively). But, the authors fail to note the lower response rates for those questions (n=92), and the percentage total should be 55% if they simply added the numbers.[16] This explanation, however, does not take into account those who responded *sometimes* to both questions even though it is likely that some of them may be submitting over 50%

[14] Rhea and Parker, *Designing and Conducting Survey Research*, 77.

[15] Greene and Meissner, "More Product, Less Process," 230.

[16] Since most respondents answered both questions, it is not clear how to add the numbers. The questionnaire implied that they should answer the HTML question "in lieu of EAD." However, 16 responded *always* to EAD markup and still answered the HTML question. Two responded *always* to both questions.

of their documents to the Web.[17] Greene and Meissner also fail to note that the percentage of repositories that respond *usually* or *always* increases substantially with repository size. Seventy-two percent of repositories listing holdings over 4,000 linear feet *usually* or *always* submit their finding aids to the Web; the *never* and *seldom* responses are clustered among the smaller archives. Finally, it should be noted that the authors did not ask about other forms of Web submissions, such as portable document format (PDF), which make up a significant portion of the finding aids online. When all of the omissions and errors are accounted for, it is clear that far more than "barely half" are making their finding aids available on the Web.

The authors also emphasize two questions related to processing rates, specifically questions pertaining to "large 20th century archival collections." They asked how many cubic feet should a "professional-level archivist with processing as his/her sole/primary responsibility" be able to process in a year, and how many hours it would take the same person to process one cubic foot of records. Greene and Meissner failed to define what constitutes a large archival collection or sole/primary responsibility. As with the scaled responses, these phrases mean different things to different people. The questions were also the 93rd and 94th in the survey, and survey fatigue undoubtedly came into play. To increase the respondents' misery, the questions also required thought and a little arithmetic. A third of the survey respondents opted not to answer the questions.[18] It is not surprising, then, that responses to the questions produced data that was either heavily skewed or difficult to interpret.

The questions elicited a wide range of responses, from 20 to 750 feet per year and from 2 to 250 hours per cubic foot. Some of the responses, such as 160 and 250 hours per foot, are nonsensical. Hourly rates often fail to correspond to yearly rates in any meaningful manner. For example, two of the two-hour responses are paired with low annual rates indicating that the respondents did not understand the questions, were tired, or are bad at math. Seven responses of 50 cubic feet or less per year suggest a lack of understanding of what constitutes "large 20th century archival collections."

Greene and Meissner are convinced that the average archival repository sets processing expectations far too low, and they use the responses to these two questions to prove their point. It is far from clear that the data support their argument. Although they note both a mean average of 14.8 and a modal average of 8

[17] On page 230 of "More Product, Less Process: Revamping Traditional Archival Processing," Greene and Meissner state: "Significantly, 29% sometimes, usually or always mark up finding-aids in EAD, while 22% resort to HTML instead of EAD." However, the chart on page 260 and the raw data on their website indicate that 38 of 89, or 43%, answered *sometimes, usually,* or *always* on the EAD question and 31 of 86, or 36%, answered the same on the HTML question.

[18] Only 66 of the 99 responded to the question on yearly rates and 70 to the question on hourly rates. All things considered, the third that opted out probably made the wisest choice.

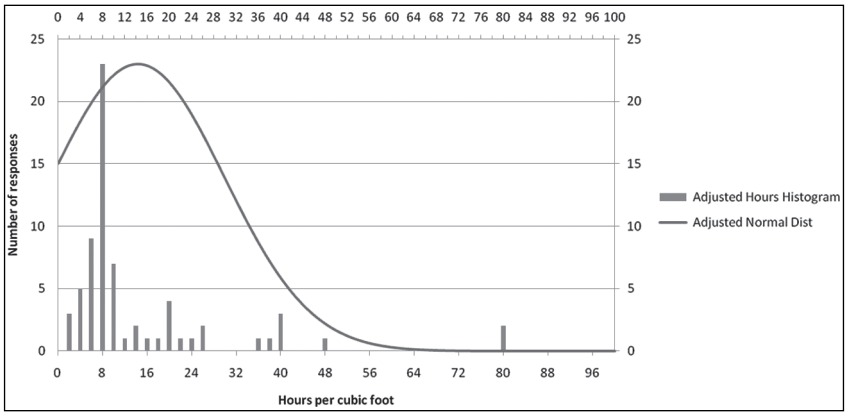

FIGURE 1. Distribution curve and histogram for responses to hours per cubic foot question. Two artifacts (160 and 250 hours per cubic foot) were removed. When the graph is adjusted accordingly, the responses of 80 hours per cubic foot also appear as artifacts.

for hours per foot, they fail to grasp the significance of this disparity. Instead, they stress the larger figure of 14.8 hours because it supports their argument that archivists have low expectations. However, the distribution curve for the hourly rate data has a distinct positive skew (see Figure 1), therefore, the median, which is also 8, would be the appropriate statistic to represent the central tendency for this question, not the mean of 14.8.

The same statistical carelessness is evident with the annual averages. The authors state an average of 152 cubic feet per year, but the numbers on their website indicate that the mean average for the group is actually 211 cubic feet per year.[19] Although less scary than 14.8 hours per foot and 152 cubic feet per year, 8 hours per foot and 211 feet per year are still disturbing numbers and should be a cause for concern if accurate. The question, though, is accurate for whom?

The lack of institutional diversity in the survey makes it difficult to meaningfully analyze the processing habits of the profession as whole. That the 5 state archives/historical societies in the survey average a much higher annual processing rate expectation (300 cubic feet) than the average for the entire group should indicate to the authors the need for a broader sample. But, if diversity is a problem for the group as a whole, relevancy may be a larger problem for many of the repositories that responded to the survey. For many, the yearly rate for a "professional-level archivist with processing as his/her sole/primary responsibility" is purely a theoretical concept. Twenty-two repositories listed yearly total processing averages for their repositories that were lower than their processing

[19] Greene and Meissner do not explain how they arrived at their averages. The median for that group is 200 and the mode 100.

expectations for a single individual. Forty-seven repositories reported holdings under 5,000 feet, and 30 had annual acquisition rates below 100 feet. Given MPLP's emphasis on large, modern collections, the inclusion of so many smaller repositories undermines the utility of the data as well as the authors' arguments.

It should be clear from this brief review that the Greene-Meissner survey is not an adequate framework for the authors' harsh assessment of the profession. It should also be evident that the authors' analysis of the data is subject to reinterpretation, if not correction. In short, the survey was poorly conceived and poorly executed, and the authors' data analysis leaves much to be desired. Furthermore, Greene and Meissner did not analyze other interesting and useful data in the survey; data that indicate alternative explanations for the backlog problem.

Metrics and Paper Clips: The Economy of the Processing Room

The impact of archival theory and practice on manuscript repositories in the late twentieth century was both dramatic and pervasive. Driven by the need to manage increasingly large collections, manuscript repositories shifted from a culture that prized meticulous description and preservation to one that emphasized collective action. Still, there are limitations to what archival methodology can achieve in the diverse and different world of manuscript processing. As much as we strive to maximize efficiency, the types of records routinely accessioned by a typical manuscript repository make it difficult to achieve a metric even for "large 20th century archival collections." More than institutional archives, manuscript repositories take in a variety of collections, each different in content, size, organization, and condition. Nor is the average manuscript repository staffed to assign one person exclusively to processing, much less processing only the "large 20th century archival collections." According to the Greene-Meissner survey, the mean average number of professional full-time-equivalents (FTE) assigned to processing is 1.6. For institutions in the survey with holdings of more than 5,000 linear feet, 25 employ two or fewer FTEs, while only 14 employ more than two FTEs. Staffing patterns for paraprofessionals are worse: 27 institutions report less than one FTE, and 12 report two FTEs or more. In other words, even many of the larger repositories do not have sufficient processing staff to specialize in "large 20th century archival collections."

For the few that do, how many of their professional staff members can actually devote the time necessary to achieve a 400-cubic-foot-per-year processing goal? To do so, an archivist would have to commit 1,600 hours per year to nothing but processing. Greene and Meissner calculate 230 work days or 1,840 work hours in the year. To achieve the MPLP metric, an archivist would

have to devote 7 of 8 working hours solely to processing. For a paraprofessional with few distractions, 1,600 processing hours would be barely achievable. However, for a faculty-level professional at a major university, 10% to 20% of his or her time is already assigned to professional service, faculty governance, and scholarship. That leaves less than 1,600 hours under ideal circumstances. The ideal circumstances do not include answering emails, being called to the reference desk, dealing with donors, and a host of other professional duties.

Nor do Greene and Meissner present a convincing case for why their particular metric—4 hours per cubic foot—is more accurate or relevant than the six studies cited in their article that calculate rates higher. Those six metrics range in time from 6.9 to 40 hours per foot.[20] Instead, they focus on two studies, one on university records and another on congressional papers, neither of which is characteristic of the collections received at typical manuscript repositories.[21] If all collections resembled administrative records freshly accessioned from the university provost's office, 4 hours per foot would be the proverbial piece of cake. But, given the diversity of materials and the dearth of specialized staff, presenting a standard metric to resource allocators for processing large manuscript collections is both unwise and unnecessary.

Regardless of whether a standard metric is desirable, there is much to commend in Greene and Meissner's arguments concerning basic preservation tasks. In this respect, they follow other contrarians in the profession who bemoan the absurdities of much of what we do to preserve our collections.[22] No doubt considerable time and money are spent on mundane procedures that have little impact on the long-term preservation of the materials. Old habits die hard, but die they should. Still, it seems highly unlikely that MPLP will result in the processing paradigm shift that the authors envision. That scenario assumes that thousands of FTEs currently employed in the removal of paper clips, newspaper clippings, and the like can be converted to something more useful.

The problem with the MPLP scenario is simple. At most institutions, people at the bottom of the archival workforce hierarchy perform the labor-intensive preservation tasks. At academic repositories, student assistants, many on federal work-study assistance and making near minimum wage, are routinely employed. At local historical societies, unpaid volunteers often do the work. Furthermore, these same people perform labor-intensive descriptive tasks such as typing up file title lists. In short, there is not much flexibility in the archival labor force. The unskilled FTE saved when we stop removing paper clips will not convert to even a fraction of the professional or paraprofessional FTEs needed to bolster

[20] Greene and Meissner, "More Product, Less Process," 222–27.

[21] Greene and Meissner, "More Product, Less Process," 252–54.

[22] Most famous of which is probably James O'Toole's "On the Idea of Permanence," *American Archivist* 52, no. 1 (Winter 1989): 11–25, which stirred a much-needed debate.

descriptive programs and reference services. The authors imagine elasticity in the archival workforce similar to that found on an automobile assembly line, and, at times, their vision for the profession seems to resemble the archival equivalent of a McDonald's. In reality, though, the typical manuscript library is more like a medieval guild than a modern fast-food restaurant.

Of course, staffing patterns differ from institution to institution. The difficulty of computing costs for processing at different manuscript repositories becomes apparent when we examine Christine Weideman's description of how Yale University handled a 16-linear-foot collection using MPLP techniques. According to Weideman, processing the collection entailed the services of four professionals, one support staff member, and a student assistant, and, together, they were able to finish the collection at a rate of twenty minutes per foot or slightly over three days.[23] Once one leaps the difficult mental hurdle that Yale employs more people to process a single small collection than the University of Florida employs in its entire manuscript unit, then the enormous difficulties of comparing the costs at the two disparate institutions must be tackled. At the University of Florida, one professional archivist and one student assistant would be assigned to a collection of the size and complexity Weideman describes. With general instructions from the archivist, student assistants do most of the nitty-gritty work. These instructions must be as generic and unambiguous as possible, which may mean that all paper clips are removed, not just the ones causing problems; that all photographs are handled individually, not just the valuable photographs; and that all newspaper clippings are separated, not just the ones from obscure newspapers that no longer exist and were never microfilmed. Institutions that rely heavily on student labor will inevitably take far longer to process collections, but it cannot be assumed that the processing costs will be higher than those of an institution where the work is done by a professional or paraprofessional in a shorter period of time.

On the opposite end of the labor spectrum, Greene and Meissner seem to assume that everyone enjoys the level of technical support provided at the American Heritage Center and the Minnesota Historical Society. In perhaps the most revealing comment in MPLP, the authors discuss the impact of EAD implementation on archival staff. They argue that EAD implementation should not seriously impact processing rates because the costs associated with implementation are "front-end" and require no significant ongoing expense. Furthermore, the initial costs, which they admit are formidable, are "administrative" in nature and impact the "*repository*" (emphasis in original) not the processing staff.[24] This is undoubtedly true at libraries where technical activity is absorbed outside the archives and manuscript unit. But, for most, the "front-end" is not separate from the "back-end"; we are the alpha and the omega. Everything

[23] Christine Weideman, "Accessioning as Processing," *American Archivist* (Fall/Winter 2006): 277–79.

[24] Greene and Meissner, "More Product, Less Process," 250.

and anything associated with archives and manuscripts, from the front-end of acquisitions to the back-end of reference and everything in between, including administration, is handled internally. In fact, a recent study lists lack of IT support at the institutional level as one of three barriers to EAD implementation.[25] The addition of any new procedure comes at the expense of an old procedure, most often processing.

If Greene and Meissner overestimate the cost savings of their approach, some of their detractors argue they also underestimate the downside of MPLP implementation. Concerns have been raised about the possible release of sensitive information if archivists fail to give adequate attention to the content of materials at the folder and box levels. Privacy issues take on greater importance as we process records of increasingly recent origin. Contemporary collections routinely document the lives of the currently living and, unlike the dead, they can take us to court or to task for accidentally disclosing injurious or embarrassing information. These concerns are often germane to certain types of records and revolve around arguments best left to lawyers. In general, though, they seem to constitute a weak argument for slowing the pace of arrangement and description.

But, at times, privacy issues can be reasonably anticipated and in such cases archivists have an ethical if not legal requirement to prevent the unnecessary disclosure of sensitive information. A case in point is the ubiquitous use, until recently, of Social Security numbers as both student and staff identification numbers at colleges and universities. Included among the tens of thousands of numbers found in the University of Florida Archives were those of former Florida football coach Steve Spurrier and current basketball coach Billy Donovan.

Questions have also been raised about the potential impact of MPLP on reference services. If we produce finding aids with less information for researchers, are we simply transferring costs from the processing room to the reference desk? Weideman, an MPLP supporter, concedes that this might happen, but argues that more of the burden of answering reference requests needs to be placed on researchers.[26] Similarly, Greene and Meissner emphasize the need for quicker access to records and downplay the consequences to either staff or researchers of preparing less detailed finding aids. The researchers they describe are professionals hungry for fresh materials and undeterred by a little dirt on their records. Perhaps, but professional historians also love to chat up the

[25] Sonia Yaco, "It's Complicated: Barriers to EAD Implementation," *American Archivist* 71 (Fall/Winter 2008): 471–72.

[26] Weideman, "Accessioning as Processing," 282. This tendency among MPLP supporters to pass more of the research responsibility to the researchers seems to contradict the user-centered spirit of MPLP. It is also an idea that sounds better in theory than in practice, as most library administrators will cut public services only as a last resort.

archivist who processed the collection. The institutional- and collection-based knowledge that processing archivists possess forms an integral part of the user-archivist relationship. Paradoxically, implementation of Greene and Meissner's so-called user-centered approach to processing jeopardizes that relationship.

The public service repercussions of MPLP will also be different for different types of collections. Some collections possess an inherent structure that makes access largely intuitive; others do not. The type of repository where one works may also color one's response to MPLP. As one business archivist points out, the principal users of corporate records tend to be the archivists themselves.[27] A similar phenomenon occurs in college and university archives where the archivist is often called upon to play the role of university historian. It makes little sense to short shrift the researcher if the researcher is the archivist.

Space is also a consideration, and for many repositories, a major concern. It may not be a good reason for spending hours removing duplicate and extraneous materials, but we cannot ignore the problems behind the reason. A 5% to 10% increase in total volume would have a dramatic impact on institutions with inadequate storage. Ironically, minimal processing also increases costs for containers because more containers are needed.[28] Finally, even though Greene and Meissner disparage the argument, and even though many of us agree with them, the aesthetic considerations for much of what we do cannot be completely dismissed. There is something to be said for craftsmanship and the psychological effects of bringing clean and ordered collections to a patron's table.

Every meaningful action we take has a cost/benefit ratio, but we often neglect to do the analysis initially or re-examine actions that have become routine. Greene and Meissner ask us to carefully analyze why we do certain things in the processing room, and for that they deserve credit. As a result of MPLP, more than a few repositories have rethought how they manage larger collections and made great strides in reducing or eliminating their backlogs. But, if Greene and Meissner perceive more madness than method, others see method behind the madness. In short, the MPLP approach to processing incurs costs as well as benefits, and the costs are not negligible.

The Grand Assumption

Underlying MPLP is what might be referred to as the Grand Assumption, namely, that the backlog problem is almost exclusively a processing problem. Greene and Meissner identify what they perceive as the principal contradiction in

[27] "Notes from Spring MARAC," comment from Paul, 9 May 2008.

[28] Greene and Meissner's answer to this problem is to reuse the original boxes whenever possible. It is doubtful that many repositories will find this acceptable. In addition to aesthetic issues, many repositories have been compelled to move collections into high-density storage facilities that require specific types of containers.

our professional culture—the collection-centered tendencies of the profession versus the needs of our users. They also offer a resolution—spend less time with individual collections and make them available as quickly as possible thereby making our users and resource allocators happy and simultaneously clearing the backlog. They recognize other contradictions that impact the backlog problem but consign them to a lower status. It is time to examine those other contradictions and ask ourselves if problems in the processing room are, in fact, the chief culprit.

Greene and Meissner acknowledge earlier studies on backlogs centered "on improving the rigor and application of appraisal theory," but they also note the "frequent and sometimes fierce" debate that appraisal theory invokes.[29] In a footnote, they lament the absence of a summary on appraisal literature before passing on to their review of the literature on arrangement and description, preservation, and metrics. Lack of consensus on appraisal issues, they suggest, makes it difficult to achieve any meaningful progress in that area. However, consensus among theorists exists in the other areas even if practitioners often ignore it. Thus, Greene and Meissner reason, we would be better off eliminating a problem for which there is agreement rather than focusing on contentious issues that cannot be immediately resolved.

MPLP proponents have recently given more emphasis to acquisition and appraisal issues. In the eyes of some, minimal processing is as much an appraisal decision used for collections that do not warrant fuller treatment as it is a decision to temporarily forego more extensive processing. Dan Santamaria, for example, states, "If there is an MPLP approach, I would describe it as first providing access to the entirety of your holdings, then making decisions . . . about which collections need more detailed processing or description." He then adds, "Processing priorities and even processing decisions about individual collections are simply a form of appraisal, of assigning value to collections and portions of collections."[30] Santamaria's description of the MPLP approach is far more nuanced than Greene and Meissner's final exhortation to just "get on with it."

Appraisal has to be seen as more than a generic estimation of the relative value of an entire collection. Appraisal is core to what we do, and it happens every day in myriad ways. Seen in this light, even the decision to remove or not remove a paper clip is an appraisal statement. The decision should not be influenced by a perceived need to attain an arbitrary processing metric any more than it should be decided by a nonexistent universal processing or preservation

[29] Greene and Meissner, "More Product, Less Process," 213. Much of the "frequent and sometimes fierce" appraisal debate has been fought on the intellectual terrain of context and content. This debate has less relevance to American manuscript repositories where content normally prevails over context and context has more to do with the historical context of the records than the context of how the records were created and how they were originally used.

[30] Dan Santamaria, guest blog, at *ArchivesNext*, 21 August 2009. See also comments to Santamaria's blog by Bill Landis, at http://www.archivesnext.com/?p=332#more-332, accessed 24 January 2010.

standard. Rather, each decision is a professional assessment of how a particular collection should be handled based on any number of criteria.

Manuscript repositories also need to rethink their passive approaches to collection acquisition. Institutional archivists have decades of experience with appraising records in the field and preselecting and even preprocessing materials before they are accessioned. Manuscript archivists have only recently applied similar ideas. Weideman makes a convincing case for including donors in the appraisal and arrangement and description of their papers before they are accessioned and demonstrates how that was effectively done at Yale.[31] Tremendous strides have also been made with congressional papers. Both houses of Congress now have retention guides, and both produce records management manuals for their members. Representatives and senators often employ archivists to preprocess their collections before they are delivered to the final destinations. This is a far cry from the manner in which congressional collections were previously managed.

If we lack consensus on appraisal, we also lack hard data on the totality of the national backlog. We have no clear idea of its size, how it got there, the rate at which it accrued, or what is in it. Most everything we know is anecdotal and largely confined to our own holdings. What Greene and Meissner failed to contemplate in 2005 was the possibility that the backlog is, in itself, an appraisal decision. We often send records to the backlog because other collections have a higher priority. As the records sit in the backlog, they acquire what Leonard Rapport describes as a "patina of permanence."[32] Much of the backlog will be reappraised later, if it was properly appraised to begin with, and may end up in the recycling bin rather than the processing room.[33]

We cannot properly assess the national impact of appraisal and acquisition problems until we have a better idea of what is in the national backlog. However, even institutions that have embraced the minimal processing ideas of MPLP are concerned that we may be ignoring appraisal issues. Implementation of MPLP may obfuscate those issues and become a way of justifying overly ambitious acquisition policies. One MPLP implementer states that minimal processing could become "a way to justify having brought in more collections than many

[31] Weideman, "Accessioning as Processing," 276–77.

[32] Leonard Rapport, "No Grandfather Clause: Reappraising Accessioned Records," in *A Modern Archives Reader: Basic Readings on Archival Theory and Practice*, ed. Maygene F. Daniels and Timothy Walch (Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, 2004), 82.

[33] Matt Gorzalski, "Minimal Processing: Its Context and Influence in the Archival Community," *Journal of Archival Organization* 6, no. 3 (2008): 188, cites a reappraisal program at the State Archives of Michigan that resulted in the elimination of 58% of that repository's backlog. To their credit, Greene and Meissner have long been champions of reappraisal and deaccessioning. Mark Greene, "I've Deaccessioned and Lived to Tell About It: Confessions of an Unrepentant Reappraiser," *Archival Issues* 30, no. 1 (2006). Their successful deaccessioning programs were the topic of a 2008 SAA session entitled "Trash or Treasure? Experiences with Deaccessioning and the Implications of Digitization" and were instrumental in the creation of SAA's Deaccessioning and Reappraisal Development and Review Team.

institutions should have." In the words of another archivist, "Not every collection in the backlog deserves processing—even minimally."[34]

Regardless of whether the collections in the backlog deserve to be retained, it is far from clear that America's manuscript repositories have the wherewithal to manage them. Like the majority of repositories cited in the Greene-Meissner survey, the University of Florida does not have a "professional-level archivist with processing as his/her sole/primary responsibility" who can devote 1,600 hours a year to processing. Instead, responsibility for processing is disbursed among six people who engage in descriptive work at some level, in some cases only a few tenths of an FTE. A decision to assign any of the permanent staff to one of the larger collections in the backlog has multiple ripple effects, not only in the area of arrangement and description, but also in reference and donor relations.[35]

If the Greene-Meissner survey indicates anything about the difficulties facing America's archives, it indicates that we have a staffing problem. Of the institutions that participated in the survey, only 28% employed two or more professional or paraprofessional FTEs in processing tasks. Only half of those with holdings over 10,000 linear feet did so. Manuscript repositories at colleges and universities also have staffing issues peculiar to academia. While there are numerous exceptions, the curatorial model still holds sway at many special collections libraries. Although the professional archivist has displaced the traditional manuscript curator at most institutions, contemporary academic manuscript archivists still operate much as their predecessors did. Tenure and promotion requirements as well as perceived collection needs militate against change. If, as Greene and Meissner argue, we tend to focus on our collections rather than our users, it is because we were often hired with the specific task of maintaining those collections. Even the university archivist is, all too often, just another collection curator. Academic repositories also tend to be top heavy with far too many faculty-level librarians/archivists supervising far too few paraprofessional staff. Again, the Greene-Meissner survey reflects this problem. Paired with the 1.6 FTEs for professional processors in the survey are only 0.85 FTE paraprofessional processors. This ratio is not conducive to rapid and efficient processing of large, modern collections.

If the modern manuscript repository is to successfully manage America's large, noninstitutional archival collections, and it is by no means clear that it should, it won't do so by shifting fragments of FTEs from preservation to processing. In fact, the A*Census states that academic repositories spend less time on preservation (7.1%) than on outreach, advocacy, and promotion (7.4%),

[34] Marshall, "The Impact of Minimum-Standards Processing on Archival Practice." A similar statement appears in the previously cited blog "Notes from Spring MARAC Meeting": "Using MPLP as a justification, some archives might choose to acquire and minimally process collections that they might previously have not accepted. Is MPLP allowing archives to be more acquisitive than they should be?"

[35] Historically speaking, the University of Florida's "large 20th century archival collections" have been processed when external funding has been acquired.

another indication that significant cost savings in preservation are more apparent than real. But, across the profession, we should explore the hypothesis that the biggest drain on our resources is the dramatic increase in reference requests brought about largely by Internet access to our finding aids. As with the backlog, no hard data exist on this phenomenon. Yet, few in the profession would deny that we are spending far more time with patrons, both remote and onsite, than we did in the past. The A*Census shows that for the profession as a whole we spend 17.6% of our effort in arrangement and description and 19.9% in reference and access.[36]

Conclusion: Whither the American Manuscript Repository?

The acquisition of large archival collections at special collections departments at American universities in the late twentieth century is a largely unexamined cultural phenomenon. In the lifetimes of many *American Archivist* readers, the practices and collection policies of the typical manuscript repository shifted dramatically. Fueled by a need to document previously neglected segments of the population, as well as a desire to fulfill a largely self-imposed mandate to collect the nation's large archival collections, the volume of records acquired by academic libraries increased with each passing year. But whether every library truly understood the consequences of its actions is far from clear. Many libraries were unable to resist the siren call of donors and began to acquire collections that quickly exceeded their management capacities. Wiser institutions foresaw the problem and restricted their collecting. Most, though, took the Scarlett O'Hara approach and decided to deal with the backlog problem tomorrow. By the turn of the millennium, even the better-staffed repositories faced seemingly unassailable backlogs. It seemed clear that a problem existed, and the backlog became the subject of national conferences as well as monthly staff meetings.

The academic manuscript repository's preoccupation with minutiae such as paper clips and newspaper clippings is merely symptomatic of a much larger problem. For the academic library to erase its backlog of historical records, it must do more than streamline its processing procedures. It will have to reverse the current two-to-one ratio of faculty to paraprofessionals and give more attention to the nuts and bolts of processing. It will also have to reduce the personalized reference service to which our researchers are accustomed, limit bibliographic instruction, spend less time doing exhibits, and cut down on outreach activities and fund-raising. When confronted with these necessities, many will instead opt to restrict their acquisitions to levels they can adequately manage. Ultimately, the best solution to the backlog problem is not creating one in the first place. Starting a revolution in the processing room is not the ultimate answer. Many of us have already fought that fight, and the backlog is still winning.

[36] Walch, A*Census, 369.