P E R S P E C T I V E

MPLP: It's Not Just for Processing Anymore

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A b s t r a c t

Amid the surprising attention given to the article "More Product, Less Process,"[1] several colleagues commented that the role of appraisal was missing in our consideration of the problem of backlogs. While this was a deliberate exclusion at the time, it seems appropriate and necessary to address not only the application of MPLP to appraisal but also to other aspects of archival administration, specifically preservation, reference, electronic records, and digitization. This article, however, is an opinion piece rather than a research article, thus it lacks the level of detail present in the original article.

In approaching the connection of More Product, Less Process (MPLP) to other aspects of archival administration, I'll follow two different, though I hope compatible, tracks. The first considers the application of the arguments of MPLP to functions such as appraisal, electronic records, and digitization. The second studies the actual application of MPLP to functions such as reference and preservation. The reason for this mixed approach is purely practical: on the one hand, questions have been raised about the impact of MPLP in practice on reference activities; on the other, I believe that both the principles and specific remedies offered by the MPLP article can and should be applied to activities such as appraisal.

It may be useful to recapitulate the principles and specific remedies of MPLP, because evidence suggests that in some circles MPLP has been reduced to the dictum of not removing staples and that some repositories have substituted adherence to one set of principles (traditional processing) for another (MPLP, interpreted in this case as a one-size-fits-all approach to processing). The general

[1] Mark A. Greene and Dennis Meissner, "More Product, Less Process: Revamping Traditional Archival Processing," *American Archivist*, 68, no. 2 (Fall/Winter 2005): 208–63.

principles of MPLP derive from fundamental statements about the archival enterprise, namely that "use is the end of all archival effort";[2] that substantial backlogs of collections not only hinder use but threaten repositories by undermining confidence of both resource allocators and donors; that in making processing decisions archivists should consider—not the traditions of the past—but the mission, audience, and resources of the present; and that collections and even series should be assessed individually using the most rational, user-friendly approach.

MPLP also argues that the perfect should not be the enemy of the good, and that, indeed, we have to become comfortable that "good enough" is normally fine. The article did *not* maintain that minimal processing must become universal within a repository, arguing rather that some series and some collections could certainly justify more traditional processing approaches—as Dennis Meissner has wryly noted, "MPLP is not a processing template (your own brain is still part of the equation)."[3] The specific remedies MPLP recommends are that "minimal" (also referred to as "accessioning," "extensible," and "basic") processing should become the new baseline approach to arranging and describing series and collections. Minimal processing generally means that archivists refrain from activities such as removing metal from collections, replacing physically sound folders, photocopying or sleeving newspaper clippings, segregating or sleeving photos, creating elaborate descriptive essays, and placing intellectual arrangement above physical arrangement.

MPLP also maintains that minimal processing is a more efficient use of staff resources overall than traditional processing, even though minimal processing might shift somewhat more work onto reference staff. What the article lacks, however, is empirical evidence that reference work would not be either undermined or overwhelmed by the shift to less arrangement and description. The article also provides only limited evidence that users would accept the tradeoff of less processing of more collections rather than more processing of fewer collections. Recent evidence now supports these two contentions, and this essay presents some of that evidence.

Appraisal

After twenty-five years as an appraisal practitioner, theorist, writer, and educator, I know that appraisal plays a substantial role in creating backlogs that plague U.S. repositories. In 2004, those backlogs represented a third of the

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[2] Theodore Schellenberg, *Modern Archives: Principles and Techniques* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956), 224.

[3] Dennis Meissner, untitled paper, session #501, Society of American Archivists Annual Meeting, Austin, Texas, August 2009.

collections of two-thirds of repositories.[4] How? Most simply, it is my impression that many repositories do not do much if any appraisal when they acquire collections or record groups. As Barbara Craig notes, "It would be misleading to say that archivists have universally embraced the necessity of selective retention. Many have neither easily nor quietly accepted the role of selector."[5] Too many archivists accept whatever the donor or transferring agency wants picked up or delivered; they assume that appraisal will occur during processing. Some repositories shelve dozens or even hundreds of cubic feet of material that will be removed during processing.[6] And when processing does occur, appraisal too often occurs at the file or item level, whether it is separating duplicates or identifying other material of no long-term value.[7]

Why? I think the reasons are complex and deep-seated. It is my impression that many archivists are averse to doing appraisal at all. Frank Boles provocatively sketches this reluctance and insists that

> archivists are by and large scared silly of appraisal and most of them really don't want to do it . . . —because they think they will be criticized for making mistakes . . . . What archivists really see themselves as . . . are guardians of the past: . . . [that our mission is] . . . to receive from others their important material and then preserve and protect it . . . .[8]

The fear of making mistakes combined with the holdover conviction that archivists are custodians cause many of us to relegate appraisal to the slow, painstaking, item-level activity that it often becomes during processing.

Four of the most salient reasons for item-level appraisal, based on my experience and conversations, are the continuing commitment to encyclopedic

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[4] Greene and Meissner, "More Product, Less Process," 210–13.

[5] Barbara L. Craig, "The Acts of the Appraisers: The Context, the Plan, and the Record," *Archivaria* 34 (1992): 176.

[6] I base this impression on personal experience (it was true prior to my arrival at all four repositories I have served), and more broadly on what I learned from the attendees at the half-dozen "Fundamentals of Acquisition and Appraisal" one-day workshops I taught for the Midwest Archives Conference in the 1990s, and from the reaction I received after publishing an article suggesting that congressional papers' archivists explain to congressional offices long before the shipment of any material just what common series the repository did and did not wish to receive.

[7] Mark A. Greene, "Appraisal of Congressional Papers at the Minnesota Historical Society: A Case Study," *Archival Issues* 19, no. 1 (1994): 31–44.

[8] Frank Boles, untitled paper, Session 32, Society of American Archivists Annual Meeting, Boston, 2004. The guardian mentality Boles identifies derives from traditional archival theory, which holds that archivists are responsible for the moral and physical defense of archives, but has been reinforced, it seems, by the fact that three studies of the personality profiles of archivists in the United States, Australia, and Canada have *all* concluded that our profession is composed of more "guardian" personality types than the population as a whole. Barbara L. Craig, "Canadian Archivists: What Types of People Are They?," *Archivaria* 50 (Fall 2000): 89. See also Ann Pederson, "Understanding Ourselves and Others: Australian Archivists and Temperament," 1999, at http://www.archivists.org.au/events/conf99/pederson.html, accessed 26 January 2010, and Charles R. Schultz," Archivists: What Types of People Are They?," *Provenance* 14 (1996): 15–36.

knowledge of the collection by the archivist; fear of overlooking historically important documents; even greater concern about missing items that might be candidates for theft; and the widespread belief that archivists' responsibility entails identifying any and all documents that might be "confidential" or threaten the privacy of third parties in the collection.[9]

If we could surmount our fears and our custodial heritage, the path to doing appraisal better, in a way that will not so significantly contribute to our backlogs, is relatively simple in practice. As with processing, we must accept that the size of the modern collection is simply too great to permit the luxury of item-level, and even often file-level, appraisal. We must accept that we cannot afford to be 100 percent certain that no document that might possibly be of value to someone is discarded. As F. Gerald Ham noted fifteen years ago, "Today's information-laden world has lessened the value of any single set of records; the documents may be unique but the information is usually not."[10] We must accept that "good enough" is better than "one of these days."

It is true that broader collecting weaknesses play a significant role in adding to backlogs as well. Judith Panitch found a decade ago that only half of the Association of Research Libraries' special collections and archives have developed formal collecting policies, despite the fact that such policies have been urged for the profession for a generation at least.[11] Even more troubling to me, in a recent survey of Canadian archivists, is the large percentage (74.28%) of respondents who report using "intuition" as one approach to appraisal. While "many [respondents] indicated that they used a combination of methods suited to the needs of a situation,"[12] the survey's creator goes on to note that

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[9] These four reasons are expressed in the comments found in two sources. First are the anonymous comments section of a survey conducted in 2009 of subscribers to the Archives and Archivists discussion list by Stephanie H. Crowe and Karen Spilman (email to Mark Greene and Dennis Meissner from Karen Spilman, 18 September 2009). The survey elicited 156 responses, though the number of responses to the various questions varied significantly. Roughly 80% of respondents worked in repositories that had implemented MPLP; 44% of respondents worked in repositories with 2–5 FTE; 19% worked at repositories with 6–10 FTE. The researchers requested that I not cite the URL where the raw survey data is found, as they hope to present it publicly soon (email to Mark Greene from Stephanie Crowe, 1 October 2009). Readers interested in their survey and its data may contact them directly. The second is a draft paper written by two archivists at an Association of Research Libraries university repository (email attachment to Mark Greene, 28 April 2008; hereafter cited as "MPLP draft.") See also Jeffery S. Suchanek, untitled paper, session #501, "More Product, Less Process (MPLP) Revisited: Choosing the Right Processing Strategy for Your Repository and Collections," Society of American Archivists Annual Meeting, Austin, Texas, 2009, 3, 4–5.

[10] F. Gerald Ham, *Selecting and Appraising Archives and Manuscripts* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1993), 72.

[11] Judith Panitch, *Special Collections in ARL Libraries: Results of the 1998 Survey Sponsored by the ARL Research Collections Committee* (Washington, D.C.: Association of Research Libraries, 2001), 79, at http://www.arl.org/rtl/speccoll/spcollres/, accessed 26 January 2010; Linda J. Henry, "Collecting Policies of Special Subject Repositories, *American Archivist* 43 (Winter 1980): 57–63.

[12] Barbara L. Craig, "Doing Archival Appraisal in Canada. Results from a Postal Survey of Practitioners' Experience, Practices, and Opinions," *Archivaria* 64 (2007): 21.

what does standout is the strong showing of intuition as a valuable approach to appraisal. Many respondents took time to write about their experience with methods, and the comments about intuition were frequent. One respondent's comment captured the spirit of many: ". . . you do not start with this [intuition], [*sic*] but gain it after years of hands-on appraisal. After years you will 'intuitively' know if the records fill gaps in your institution's holdings, if they are the type of records your users consult, if they have evidential or informational value, etc."[13]

She also finds that

Respondents employed a number of guides to direct their appraisals and to structure their assessments. Over three quarters cited the importance of their repository's mandate (78.7%), with the majority using a current appraisal policy (60.7%), acquisition plan or target (55.1%), and lists of criteria of value or uses (52.8%).[14]

Canadian archivists were just about evenly divided on the question asking whether their institution had a formal strategy for doing appraisal with just under half (46.8%) responding positively that their institution had such a strategy (or strategies in some cases) and just over 45 percent (45.3%) responding that none currently existed.[15] She concludes that "There appears to be a real need for more concrete guidance for appraisal activities from the profession in the form of standards of practice, and from institutions, in the form of clear policies and related procedures."[16] The lack of guidance from institutions, especially, probably helps explain the extent of reliance on intuition. Coupled with an inherent "collector/preserver" mentality, recognizing archivists' reliance on gut feelings assists in understanding a tendency toward bringing into the loading dock or onto the holding shelves far more cubic feet than necessary, more material that may then be reviewed item by item.

This study reinforces an important step in the right direction, adopting appraisal methods that, in essence, define certain appraisal decisions in advance. Rather than seeing every collection offered or record group proposed for transfer, the archives should know in advance what sorts of collections/record groups it seeks and decline to spend time with others. Acquisition decisions should be based not on a case-by-case basis, but on well-planned policies that approach the documentation universe broadly. We should seek documentation that builds upon itself, collections and record groups that interrelate, and description

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[13] Craig, "Doing Archival Appraisal in Canada," 27.

[14] Craig, "Doing Archival Appraisal in Canada," 20.

[15] Craig, "Doing Archival Appraisal in Canada," 20.

[16] Craig, "Doing Archival Appraisal in Canada," 27.

approaches that help to make these interrelationships clearer to our users. As Terry Cook said many years ago in describing macro-appraisal, an inspection of records is the last thing that should happen during an appraisal; the first is a thoughtful assessment of the activities of the records creator against the repository's acquisition priorities.[17] Those priorities can be identified at the level of the creator and, in the case of high-priority creators, by series.[18] Both steps reduce the amount of time spent appraising, but only on the premise that the goal is not to ensure every "interesting" document is identified and preserved.

In practice, therefore, appraisal shifts from the processing table to the home/office of origin or the loading dock. Although this essay focuses on paper collections, the approach is true if the material in question is digital.[19] Series or files that do not document the significant activities of the creator are not packed in the first place, or if they arrive on the dock, are separated there. Appraisal at the home/office of origin introduces yet another, sometimes paralyzing, fear— that judging some material unworthy in front of the donor or transferring unit will offend them. In my decades of experience doing field appraisal, I rarely faced this problem. If a question arose, however, I explained my reasoning for the negative appraisal, and if the accepted material encompassed, as it usually did, the portions of the material that the donor considered most important, the donor was satisfied.

Doing appraisal on site enforces a certain degree of speed. One cannot usually spend several days camped out in someone's house, or disrupt an office for a week while carefully examining the contents of every folder in every file cabinet. Appraisal decisions must be made more quickly, by glancing at the contents of sample files, scanning file folders, assessing series, and asking relevant questions of the creator or office manager. And it is easier to see relationships in the context of creation, ensuring that meaningful aggregations are identified, selected, and packed in a useful arrangement reflecting functions and order as created, rather than trying to figure out these relationships on the loading dock or on the shelves later.[20] If it is not possible to do appraisal on site, the same

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[17] Terry Cook, "Mind Over Matter: Toward a New Theory of Archival Appraisal," in *The Archival Imagination: Essays in Honour of Hugh Taylor,* ed. Barbara L. Craig (Ottawa: Association of Canadian Archivists, 1992), 53.

[18] For appraisal by creator, see Mark A. Greene and Todd J. Daniels-Howell, "Documentation with 'an Attitude': A Pragmatist's Guide to the Selection and Acquisition of Modern Business Records," in *Records of American Business,* ed. James M. O'Toole (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1997), 161–229; for appraisal of series within a high-priority set of records creators, see Greene, "Appraisal of Congressional Papers," 31–44.

[19] For example, see Lucie Paquet, "Appraisal, Acquisition, and Control of Personal Electronic Records: From Myth to Reality," *Archives and Manuscripts* (November 2000): 71–91.

[20] This was recognized by Frederic Miller, *Arranging and Describing Archives and Manuscripts* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1990), 33: "On-site work is especially crucial for manuscripts since . . . the people on site are a prime source of information about the records."

process should be applied on the loading dock when the collection arrives, and the questions asked by email, phone, or letter prior to the collection's arrival. Regardless of where the activity takes place, it does not entail a hunt for items and it should not encompass "weeding"—weeding is for gardeners, not archivists.

As with the processing aspects of MPLP, this approach to appraisal is recommended as the norm, but not as the only appropriate method. A very few collections warrant more intensive appraisal, even perhaps during processing. Such an approach to appraisal would not only reduce the growth of a backlog, it could also permit the processors (even if this is the same archivist who conducted the appraisal) to spend more time on arrangement and description or other important archival functions. I think that the overall time spent on the collection may be reduced. At the Minnesota Historical Society in the 1990s, when I was curator of manuscripts acquisition, informal comparisons made with Dennis Meissner, the head of manuscripts processing, suggested that MPLP-type appraisal takes less time than appraisal during processing. Adding the savings gained by applying minimal processing creates an opportunity to get a lot more done in the same period of time—or to use the time saved to address other responsibilities.

It should be apparent, then, that MPLP appraisal reflects many of the general principles found in the original MPLP article, namely that in making functional decisions archivists should consider—not the traditions of the past— but the mission, audience, and resources of the present; that collections and even series should be assessed individually using the most rational, user-friendly approach. MPLP appraisal, similar to MPLP processing, reflects an attempt to balance increasingly limited resources with the growing quantities of potential documentation, to keep user needs first but donor and resource allocator opinions a close second, and to finally become what we need to be as archival professionals—selectors rather than collectors.[21]

Preservation[22]

MPLP itself paid a great deal of attention to preservation. Still, I emphasize that preservation, in its most important and effective application, takes place at a level referred to as "holdings maintenance," which means the efforts under-taken to maintain the totality of a repository's holdings, rather than efforts taken to preserve or conserve individual items or even small sets of items. Regulating temperature, humidity, light, and particulates as closely and as evenly as possible

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[21] See Frank Boles, *Selecting and Appraising Archives and Manuscripts* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2005), 7.

[22] I have been responsible for archives holdings maintenance at three institutions, during a period of twelve years, though I am not formally educated as a preservation administrator.

creates a stable and secure storage environment. By analogy to the original MPLP article, archivists should only devote conservation and restoration measures to exceptional cases and make such determinations on an aggregate (rather than an item-level) basis. For example, the American Heritage Center (AHC) appointed a small task force to assess the quantity and condition of all known color photographs, color negatives and slides, black-and-white negatives, and motion picture film in its holdings, as the basis for a future preservation grant.

But because holdings maintenance is the crucial first step, we must focus attention on improving the storage conditions of our collections. We must advocate for our repository with our resource allocators for better (not perfect) climate controls. Some of the time freed by minimal processing, for example, can be channeled into such advocacy. Certainly, advocacy doesn't guarantee a complete, new HVAC system, particularly where there was none before, but it might succeed in acquiring one (or a few) datalogger(s) to document temperature and humidity fluctuations to support more strongly the argument for better controls or air conditioning to help stabilize temperatures during the summer or dehumidifiers to assist in reducing moisture.

Too many conversations on archivists' discussion lists exhibit a tendency, unfortunately, to assume that such improvements, particularly if they will cost our parent institution money, cannot be achieved. Enough repositories, small and large, however, have made enough improvements to dispel such pessimism. It is also worth noting that our parent institutions committed resources to establishing archives in the first place. While economic and other circumstances were different whenever that creation took place, it is appropriate to ask whether this generation of archivists can succeed in garnering a fraction of the commitment our predecessors did. We need more confidence in our ability to change things, in our abilities to project and convince with professionalism, rather than to accept defeat and (in too many cases) simply complain about the poor conditions and lack of support. Optimism and professionalism can accomplish significant things.

R e f e r e n c e [23]

In general terms, as applied primarily to textual collections, MPLP shifts a certain burden from processing to reference, because description is more likely to be at the collection and series level than the file-unit level. At a minimum, this decision requires staff to retrieve more boxes to ensure satisfying the research

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[23] I was a reference archivist and a lone arranger for a college archives, on a regular desk shift for a major state historical society, and a reference supervisor (and desk shift worker) for a museum's public research archives/library. Currently, I have responsibility for a four-and-a-half-member professional reference staff, though without desk shift responsibility.

needs of a patron. The MPLP argument is that this added retrieval effort is smaller in impact on the overall resources of a repository than the traditional requirement to rename, refolder, or organize folders within series, much less arrange items within file units, for every collection, in advance of any retrieval for reference. Furthermore, MPLP argues that evidence of research use of collections should be an important criterion in applying more detailed processing.

There has for decades been this type of trade-off between processing resources and reference resources. After all, few repositories in the past half-century continued calendaring due to the massive size of collections and backlogs; what MPLP proposes is that this trade-off be extended somewhat further and that more time spent on description (rather than on arrangement and refoldering) will partly compensate for the lack of specificity regarding folders.[24] If a reference archivist can point a researcher to a box (or to several boxes) and report that "the bulk of the John Doe correspondence in this collection is found in these boxes," most researchers will be pleased—particularly if the alternative is to have even that level of information hidden because the collection resides in a backlog.

It is certainly true, however, that tension exists in MPLP between the admonition to serve patrons and the suggestion of series- or box-level processing; this is a variant on the longstanding tension between reference archivists facilitating research (and educating users) versus providing specific information from the collections or record groups.[25] Suggesting that the goal is to serve the most researchers in the best way possible given limited resources can mitigate the tension. This is the utilitarian approach on which MPLP rests, and, more broadly, on which reference activities at all repositories—whether serving internal or external researchers—should be grounded.

We now have some empirical evidence of researchers' own view of this proposition. AHC reference archivist Shannon Bowen circulated a survey to a wide range of researchers in 2008, soliciting their opinions on the tradeoffs suggested by MPLP (see Appendix A). The survey was sent to a number of institutions and online discussion networks. Yale University, University of Alaska-Fairbanks, Minnesota Historical Society, Oregon State University, University of Montana, and Arizona State University received an electronic copy of the survey for hard copy distribution, the link to the online survey, and the code for including the online survey on a website. In addition, some of the Northwest Archives Processing Initiative II institutions received the electronic copy, the link, and the code for the survey: Alaska State Library, Eastern Washington State

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[24] Particularly attentive readers will note that this is a slight modification of the original MPLP's inclination that we should describe to the same level we arrange and preserve; as I consider this issue further, it seems to me that extended description can, in some instances, be warranted to facilitate access to less organized material. I agree that a list of file titles in e-form can be searched and ordered virtually.

[25] Mary Jo Pugh, *Providing Reference Services for Archives and Manuscripts* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2005), 25–26, 103–4.

Historical Society, Lane Community College, Pacific Lutheran University, Whitman College, Whitworth University, and the Center for Pacific Northwest Studies at Western Washington University.

A link to the survey was also sent out to the Reference, Access, and Outreach (RAO) section of the Society of American Archivists for discussion and potential posting on additional institutional websites. A link to the survey was posted on the home page of the American Heritage Center. The survey was sent to a number of H-Net lists,[26] to a National Council for Social Studies discussion network, and, subsequent to deployment, was posted on numerous blogs, including ArchivesNext, the blog of the American Historical Association (AHA), and the blog of the *Chronicle of Higher Education.*

Six-hundred responses to the survey were received. Table 1 shows that most respondents were university faculty and graduate students.

Surprisingly to me, respondents indicated that the resource they use most (by far) to find collections is the online catalog record, followed at a distant second by collection inventories (the survey made no distinction between online and in-house inventories), then referrals by reference archivists (see Table 2).

As seen in Tables 3 and 4, 50% reported they were denied access to unprocessed collections, but 63% said they had used unprocessed collections.

When asked to rank a list of archival activities in order of importance to them, a large margin ranked first "Putting more resources into creating basic descriptions for all collections, even though some of those collections may never have more detailed inventories written for them." The next two selections, which rated very closely, were "Putting more resources into the creation of

Table 1. Status of Respondents

2. Status

		Response Total	Response Percent
University faculty		166	30%
Graduate student		108	20%
K–12 teacher		31	6%
University staff		29	5%
Writer		23	4%
General public		13	2%
Business		11	2%
Undergraduate student		7	1%
K–12 student		2	0%
Other, please specify		160	29%
	Total Respondents	**550**	
	(skipped this question)	50	

[26] The H-Net lists were h-environment, h-public, h-rural, h-afresearch, h-fedhist, h-histbibl, h-histgeog, h-histmajor, h-urban, h-history-and-theory, h-high-s, h-historyday, h-ideas, h-local, h-oeh, h-scholar, h-teach, h-tah, h-tlh, h-ahc, and h-amstdy.

Table 2. Most Useful Resources when Conducting Primary Source Research in Rank Order

6. Resource utility ranking; 1 is high, 5 is low.

	Ranking Average
Online catalog records	2.64
Collection inventories	3.43
Reference archivists	3.84
Digitized collection material	4.06
Web searches	4.08
Bibliographies	5.18
Topical collection guides	5.36
Card catalogs	6.51
Total Respondents	**494**
(skipped this question)	106

Table 3. Access Denied to Unprocessed Collections?

11. Access denial

	Response Total	Response Percent
Yes	247	50%
No	194	40%
I don't know.	50	10%
Total Respondents	**491**	
(skipped this question)	109	

Table 4. Conducted Research in an "Unprocessed" Collection?

12. Unprocessed collection research

	Response Total	Response Percent
Yes	308	63%
No	152	31%
I don't know.	32	7%
Total Respondents	**492**	
(skipped this question)	108	

detailed collection inventories on the web, even if it means slowing the pace at which collections are made available for research" and "Putting more resources into creating basic collection inventories that lack introductory information and organization of the collection's contents if it means that collections will be made available more rapidly" (see Table 5).

To the statement "I would be happy with less detail in collection inventories if it meant that more collections would be available for researchers," 28% responded neutrally, while 52% responded affirmatively and 20% negatively. To the statement "I would be happy with less organization of archival collections if it meant that more collections would be available for researchers," 30%

responded neutrally, 43% affirmatively, and 26% negatively. Finally, to the statement "I am confident in my ability to find material relevant to my research in archival collections, even when the collections I am using are not well-organized," 23% were neutral, 53% affirmative, and 24% negative.[27] While not every researcher approves of MPLP's tradeoffs, most do (with a full third having essentially no opinion) (see Tables 6–10).

Table 5. Researcher Ranking for Processing Priorities

1 is high, 5 is low.

14. Archival priorities ranking	Ranking Average
Putting more resources into creating basic descriptions for all collections, even though some of those collections may never have more detailed inventories written for them.	2.29
Putting more resources into the creation of detailed collection inventories on the web, even if it means slowing the pace at which collections are made available for research.	3.12
Putting more resources into creating basic collection inventories that lack introductory information and organization of the collection's contents if it means that collections will be made available more rapidly.	3.25
Putting more resources into digitizing collection material and putting it on the web, even if it means that fewer collections will be available for research.	3.48
Putting more resources into acquiring new collections, even if it means slowing the pace at which collections are made available for research.	4.27
Putting more resources into re-foldering and re-boxing collection material, pulling staples, and photocopying high-acid papers, even it means slowing the pace at which collections are made available for research.	5.1
Putting more resources into pulling duplicates and ancillary printed material from collections, so that the valuable material is easier to find, even if it means slowing the pace at which collections are made available for research.	6.01
Total Respondents	**452**
(skipped this question)	148

Table 6. Detail versus Availability

15. I would be happy with less detail in collection inventories if it meant that more collections would be available for researchers.

	1 Strongly Disagree	2	3	4	5 Strongly Agree	Response Total	Response Average
Level of Agreement	5.83% (27)	14.04% (65)	27.65% (128)	35.21% (163)	17.28% (80)	463	3.44
					Total Respondents	**463**	
					(skipped this question)	137	

[27] Crowe and Spilman, Archives and Archivists Survey, asked the question, "Since your repository's implementation of MPLP, do you feel that your researchers' ability to access your collections has:" and 69% of respondents answered "increased slightly" or "increased significantly."

Table 7. Organization versus Availability

20. I would be happy with less organization of archival collections if it meant that more collections would be available for researchers.

	1 Strongly Disagree	2	3 Neutral	4	5 Strongly Agree	Response Total	Response Average
Level of agreement	6.09% (28)	20% (92)	30.43% (140)	30.43% (140)	13.04% (60)	460	3.24
					Total Respondents		**460**
					(skipped this question)		140

Table 8. Confidence in Ability to Find Relevant Material

21. I am confident in my ability to find material relevant to my research in archival collections, even when the collections I am using are not well-organized.

	1 Strongly Disagree	2	3 Neutral	4	5 Strongly Agree	Response Total	Response Average
Level of agreement	5.9% (27)	17.69% (81)	22.93% (105)	36.46% (167)	17.03% (78)	458	3.41
					Total Respondents		**458**
					(skipped this question)		142

Table 9. Preservation versus Availability

22. Limiting the removal of metal fasteners, photocopying of high acid papers, sleeving of photographs, and re-foldering of collection material would be acceptable to me if it meant that more collections would be available to researchers.

	1 Strongly Disagree	2	3 Neutral	4	5 Strongly Agree	Response Total	Response Average
Level of agreement	7.63% (35)	15.25% (70)	25.05% (115)	29.19% (134)	22.88% (105)	459	3.44
					Total Respondents		**459**
					(skipped this question)		141

Table 10. Effect of Rehousing on Researcher Perception of Repository

23. When I encounter collections at an archives that are not neatly filed in new boxes, I doubt that archives' commitment to its collections.

	1 Strongly Disagree	2	3 Neutral	4	5 Strongly Agree	Response Total	Response Average
Level of agreement	31.74% (146)	27.83% (128)	21.3% (98)	13.26% (61)	5.87% (27)	460	2.34
					Total Respondents		**460**
					(skipped this question)		140

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A very different approach to assessing user reactions to the results of MPLP processing was conducted by Tiah Edmundson-Morten at the Oregon State University Archives. She began her career as a processor for a grant to apply minimal processing, but at OSU she was hired as a reference archivist. She wanted to know just how the patrons who used her collections, on-site and off, reacted to various levels of sample descriptions. She approached her study with firm assumptions:

> I started the project with several assumptions and was *certain* they would all be confirmed. In fact, I included this sentence in my original abstract: "this project will address the difficulties that arise with reference services, with the assumption that minimal level processing suggestions will make reference services much more difficult and result in a decreased satisfaction rate for users." Specifically, I thought saving staff time in the processing phase meant spending more time on reference services, that general container lists are never helpful for off-site users and can be frustrating for both users as well as reference staff; and that, if the profession is indeed moving in a general way toward series level description, good, standardized descriptive practices are essential for providing access to the items and information in our collections. My working hypothesis was that the future of reference services was doomed without robust finding aids full of meticulous details.

What she encountered instead was much more complex and nuanced, with researchers enunciating mixed and contradictory reactions to the samples. But in the end she arrived at a conclusion very different from her starting hypotheses:

> I never imagined that, as I championed the user and the need to really listen to our users, that they would say anything other than " me more, I want the details, anything less and I can tell you failed as an archivist." As I reread the [original MPLP] *American Archivist* article last week, with real work experience as a Reference Archivist and after actually talking to the users, I had to admit things had changed for me. Greene and Meissner are right, MPLP effectively shifts our notion of what a finding aid is. But maybe we, and I definitely need to include myself here, need to remind ourselves what a finding aid is—a descriptive surrogate for the materials themselves—and remind ourselves that we can't do it all and we'll never be able to find it all. In practice, this would mean that "to keep pace with accessions and avoid adding to our backlog, for all new collections at the OSU Archives, we are only preparing collection level descriptions. We've also picked unprocessed collections, mainly those that have little to no online information, and are working to prepare collection level descriptions for those as well.[28]

At the American Heritage Center, we too carry MPLP processing to its logical conclusion of creating collection-level catalog records for all collections, even

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[28] Tiah Edmundson-Morten, "Does Minimal Processing Mean Minimal Reference? A Study of Northwest Digital Archives Users," paper presented in Session 307, "Reference Service and Minimal Processing: Challenges and Opportunities," Society of American Archivists Annual Meeting, Chicago, 30 August 2007, at http://temarchivalmusings.blogspot.com/2007/09/saa-2007-session-307.html, accessed 28 February 2010. My thanks to Matt Gorzalski, "Minimal Processing: Its Context and Influence in the Archival Community," *Journal of Archival Organization* 6, no. 3 (2008), fn 26, for bringing this paper to my attention.

unprocessed ones. By making these catalog records available both on our OPAC and through WorldCat, we hoped to determine whether higher-level description for all collections served researchers as well or better than granular descriptions of a few collections.[29] Our survey suggests a strong affirmative, and, in addition, we began to receive long-distance inquiries from researchers about cataloged-but-unprocessed collections that, while they did not by any means require item- or even folder-level description, did require more than collection-level description to sustain the reference archivists' ability to reasonably respond.

Consultation among the AHC reference archivists, the manager of processing, the accessioning manager, and myself resulted in a "quick and dirty" approach to addressing this MPLP-caused strain on reference service. We concluded together that to respond adequately to most of the problem requests we needed a minimum of box-level description, and folder-level where practical. "Practical" would be defined by the size of the collection and whether the collection had a preponderance of effective folder labels. Reference staff or their undergraduate student pages would inventory (not arrange or describe) collections up to 2 cubic feet;[30] larger collections would receive box-level description or folder lists by an undergraduate student working under the supervision of the accessioning manager.

Such work would be undertaken on a first-come, first-served basis, with patrons being informed of roughly how long it would be before we could provide a response to their queries.[31] Moreover, the collections thus identified

[29] One reviewer of a draft of this paper demanded: "From a workflow issue, how can a repository catalog unprocessed collections if the certainties of date span, extent of collection, and possibly even title will change after processing thus requiring the cataloger to go back and update both the local OPAC as well as WorldCat records? That also assumes that someone in the archives remembers to tell the cataloger to update the records; and how much time does the cataloger spend on updating old records rather than creating new ones?" The answer is simply that updating catalog records is not labor intensive enough to be an issue, at least when the demands for revision come at a slow to moderate pace, as they certainly do for us; for such revisions to come as a deluge would be to suppose that all of a sudden most of our collections would be accessed in a short period, and there is no archives of which I am aware where this is ever true. Indeed, the one study to attempt to analyze such use patterns concluded that in the test repository 20% of collections accounted for 80% of use (William J. Jackson, "The 80/20 Archives: A Study of Use and Its Implications" *Archival Issues* 22, no. 2 (1997): 133–46). Even more to the point, perhaps, is a comment by an unofficial reviewer, "that I've completely adopted an understanding of description as an iterative process, that the idea of the idealized pristine finding aid or catalog record that will never be revised is just darned silly. Perhaps it's been my experience living through EAD recon and watching what were once perfectly good catalog cards refashioned into new formats and compiled in new ways, but I think it's simple hubris to think that even the most carefully constructed records will all exist in amber in perpetuity" (email to author, 1 December 2008). For a scholarly take on both the lack of authenticity of static description and the increasing necessity of malleable descriptive practices, see Heather MacNeil, "Picking Our Text: Archival Description, Authenticity, and the Archivist as Editor," *American Archivist* 68 (Fall/Winter 2005): 264–78.

[30] How are the reference archivists handling this? Providing this level of information for a small collection generally takes about the same amount of time as answering a reference request in the first place, and, because demand has been steady but low, it has not had a substantial impact on workload.

[31] To date, we have been able to provide such box-level information in less than a month for all but the largest (100+-cubic-foot) collections. Are some researchers frustrated by this wait? Yes, though none have figuratively foamed at the mouth. We do explain to them that this delay must be balanced against the fact that they would never have known of the collection had we not taken this "shortcut."

would be moved up to the front of the processing queue based on researcher interest. I met with a member of the reference staff every two weeks, as part of an ongoing assessment of the grant that supported the original MPLP cataloging. To date, this low-cost, less-than-perfect approach has worked well enough to allow the reference staff to provide adequate service to long-distance researchers interested in unprocessed collections.[32] The bonus, of course, is that the researchers would never have known to even inquire about the collections if we had not taken an MPLP approach in the first place.

Some readers might object in principle to reference archivists having to shoulder some of the work of processors, when the reference staff surely has enough work to do already. To this there are at least two responses. First, the reference archivists in our repository would rather pitch in this way than have (as we once did) a huge backlog of uncataloged (much less, unprocessed) collections inaccessible to users. If serving users is the *sine qua non* of archives administration, as I have elsewhere argued it is, then this "sacrifice" makes perfect sense. Second, reference staff undertaking certain processing tasks should be no less unsettling than the much more commonly accepted situation of processing staff taking regular reference shifts.[33] Both practices help archivists to better comprehend the larger enterprise of which they are a part, as well as to more sympathetically relate to their colleagues in another department.[34]

Christine Weideman notes another effective way to support reference through the application of minimal processing by working actively to have donors provide both biographical information and box (even folder) lists when collections are transferred to the repository. This ensures a basic level of description prior to any work by the processing staff, thus significantly supporting reference activities. At the AHC, we have had some success with this approach, especially when working with congressional offices and nonprofit organizations;

[32] Again, we now have some empirical data to demonstrate that AHC reference archivists were not, as one reviewer suggested, bullied into accepting MPLP by being "outnumbered and outranked" in meetings. In an unpublished survey of reference archivists for the Society of American Archivists' Reference, Access, and Outreach section, (August 2008, in preparation for publication), Shannon Bowen, Jackie Dean, and Joanne Archer demonstrate that a wide range of reference archivists accept MPLP tradeoffs in roughly the same proportion as users do. For example, when asked to rank the importance of a variety of possible archival practices, far and away the highest-ranked activity was "Putting more resources into creating basic descriptions for all collections, even though some of those collections may never have more detailed inventories written for them." While the survey indicates 256 total respondents, only about 70 individuals responded to most questions. Some data from the survey is available online at http://www.archivists.org/saagroups/rao/MPLPTF_survey_report.pdf, accessed 30 November 2009. In addition, Crowe and Spilman, Archives and Archivists Survey, asked the question, "Since your repository's implementation of MPLP, do you feel that your ability to assist researchers with their ≈inquiries has:" and 58% responded that it had increased slightly or significantly.

[33] See for example, Pugh, *Providing Reference Services*, 250–51. At the AHC, processors take regular reference shifts, a practice I learned at the Minnesota Historical Society. In my prior work at the Bentley Historical Library, processing archivists were assigned reference shifts to cover absences and Saturdays.

[34] In this same vein, the AHC also assigns every archivist—reference, processing, accessioning, digitization, etc.—responsibilities for collection development, donor relations, and appraisal. But that is a separate article.

however, some individual donors are willing to assist in this way as well. It is, at the very least, worth broaching with donors.[35]

If we look at further ways in which reference activities can take advantage of MPLP principles, we can consider methods for achieving more bang for the buck and making better use of limited resources to better serve a larger number or variety of patrons. One example is the creation of online tutorials to assist users in approaching archival research.[36] While there are a handful of successful examples, repositories have not yet widely adopted this tack, nor has their use and effectiveness been studied. Yet, it may prove effective whether the researchers are in-house or external, and it may be especially so in helping to mitigate the disjunction of reference expertise from researcher work in the online environment.

"Determining a search strategy for approaching archival materials and providing the context for understanding them remain important reference services"[37] perhaps, but it is an illusion to believe that a live, interactive connection will be made online with a reference archivist to provide such services. Online tutorials, however, may make it more practical for reference staffs to "work with" an ever-growing clientele, as repositories continue to democratize their access in both the analog and digital worlds. We must be prepared to give up some of the one-on-one reference interaction just as we must give up more detailed processing—so that we can serve more users more expeditiously.

Finally, for now, reference staff in the MPLP environment must be leaders in developing processes and encouraging users to contribute to our knowledge about collections. "[T]his new order requires that [archivists] also organize processes that invite participation in the archival commons, shared mutually by archivists and by archival users."[38] While this could also be seen as a task for processing departments, reference archivists are the professionals most concerned with interacting with our users. "Web-based annotations are a means by which group members create and share commentary about documents."[39] We must embrace the idea of welcoming

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[35] Christine Weideman, "Accessioning as Processing," *American Archivist* 69, no. 2 (Winter 2006): 281–82.

[36] See for example, Yale University Department of Archives and Manuscripts, at http://www.library.yale.edu/mssa/tutorial/tutorial.htm; University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, at http://www.lib.unc.edu/instruct/manuscripts/index.html; the Library and Archives of Canada, at http://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/04/0416_e.html, and the online Columbia River Basin Ethnic History Archive (CRBEHA), a project of Washington State University Vancouver, the Idaho State Historical Society, Oregon Historical Society, Washington State Historical Society, and Washington State University Pullman, at http://www.vancouver.wsu.edu/crbeha/tutorial.htm. All accessed 30 November 2009.

[37] Pugh, *Providing Reference Services*, 4.

[38] Max J. Evans, "Archives of the People, by the People, for the People," *American Archivist* 70 (Fall/Winter 2007): 397.

[39] Michelle Light and Tom Hyry, "Colophons and Annotations: New Directions for the Finding Aid," *American Archivist* 65 (Fall/Winter 2002): 226. See also Jessica Sedgwick, "Let Me Tell You about My Grandpa: A Content Analysis of User Annotations to Online Archival Collections," SAA Annual Meeting, Austin, 13 August, 2009, slides available at http://www.archivists.org/conference/austin2009/docs/session104-sedgwick.ppt. As I write this article, a task force at AHC is studying potential Web 2.0 applications for our repository and will be making recommendations to the director shortly.

annotations to our finding aids from our users, to provide additional information that even our "traditional" processing may not capture and that more definitively MPLP arrangement and description will not provide.

Electronic Records[40]

The vast literature on electronic records seems to confuse archivists more than assist them, not least because so much focuses on theory and definition, rather than on method and practice. Given the extensive literature, it might be unseemly to address this issue in two paragraphs, but it appears (deceptively?) simple. Why, in practice, should appraisal and description of electronic records be—or need to be—any different from that applied to analog material? Certainly, one school of archival thought views electronic records as representing a new paradigm for which traditional archival theory and methods do not hold. Some argue that traditional processing approaches cannot be applied to electronic records.[41] But others disagree, and because little within the realm of electronic records can be considered settled, it makes sense to explore all possibilities.

Even at first glance, the organization of most computer files into digital series and folders suggests exactly the same approach recommended for paper material. The American Heritage Center is taking this approach to appraisal for a significant set of mostly word-processing and email documents created by a congressional office. And a study underway in Great Britain, also focused on the papers of elected officials, has determined that high-level description—solely at the collection level—may be necessary as a matter of practicality when it comes to massive quantities of born-digital files.[42] A recent master's thesis also concludes that

> The ideas of processing collections at a less precise level and limiting description of archival collections to only what is necessary can be transferred from analog collections directly to electronic records. Electronic records are far more fragile than their paper based counterparts, and leaving them un-processed while an archivist creates a long and eloquent description endangers the record.[43]

[40] I am not an electronic records archivist. Most of my experience and inclinations come from administering a large university archives and manuscripts repository beginning to struggle with acquiring, preserving, and describing various forms of born-digital material. However, for what it may be worth, I was among the first archivists to appraise and acquire websites. Mark A. Greene, "Floods, Flashsite, and Fond Delusions: Archiving the Web," *Spectra, the Journal of the Museum Computer Network* 25, no. 3 (Spring 1998): 10–14.

[41] For example, see Timothy Pyatt, "Acquisitions: Assessment, Scheduling, and Transfer of Public Affairs Records," paper presented at New Skills for a Digital Era, Washington, D.C., 31 May–2 June 2006, 1, available online at http://rpm.lib.az.us/NewSkills/CaseStudies/3_Pyatt.pdf, accessed 30 November 2009.

[42] Janette Martin and Susan Thomas, "Using the Papers of Contemporary British Politicians as a Testbed for the Preservation of Digital Personal Archives," *Journal of the Society of Archivists* 27 (April 2006): 49.

[43] Gregory P. Johnson, "Quality or Quantity: Can Archivists Apply Minimal Processing to Electronic Records?," master's paper, April 2007, at http://etd.ils.unc.edu/dspace/bitstream/1901/413/1/gregjohnson.pdf, accessed 30 November 2009.

Series- or collection-level metadata might be coupled with the ability to search individual files, possibly providing the best of both worlds (simplified context and detailed content).[44] This approach may not always be the best, but perhaps we should presume to start any consideration of appraisal and description of electronic records with it and have to defend a more granular approach. At the very least, this is an area ripe for small test projects.

D i g i t i z a t i o n [45]

One of the earliest objections raised against MPLP was that it ran directly counter to the growing need to identify individual items for digitization. This objection is generally unsustainable on two counts. The first is the fallacy that we really need to predefine and describe items during processing to facilitate their digitization. This is wrong for the same reason that believing individual calendaring of documents is essential to support researchers is wrong—it is simply not that difficult to find items if the description of series or files is done well, and if the user (whether archivist or researcher) understands something about the provenance and order (if any) of the collection or record group.[46] To take an example from the realm of visual materials, it is not necessary to have cataloged every photograph in a vertical file or record group to find one good one of Henry Ford with Walt Disney. All that's necessary is a file unit labeled Ford and Disney, or even a series labeled Ford with VIPs; while the latter will take some minutes to discover the "perfect" image, it is far less time than would have been required to process every item.

The second count on which the objection that MPLP hinders digitization is false is the assumption that digitization must—or even should—be focused on individual items. Instead, it can be argued that this focus on item-level digitization is a signal failing of many of our Web-based projects. In particular, the individual metadata we lavish on our Web-accessible photographs prevents us from 1) making much headway in digitizing any significant portion of our visual collections; and 2) tackling the digitization of our textual collections except for a few "gems" within our holdings. But as one pioneering archivist has noted, "We cannot avoid tackling our paper based collections because they are too hard, too big, too expensive to

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[44] I am indebted to Tom Hyry, Beinecke Library, Yale University, for this observation. He goes on to say that "we need to maximize the opportunities provided by the medium rather than just obsess about their difficulties. This probably requires letting go of some cherished ideas of provenance and context-based systems at times."

[45] Having overseen, retooled, and expanded the digitization program at the Henry Ford Museum and Greenfield Village for two years (including hiring the institution's first digitization archivist), I came to the AHC, which already had a robust digitization program. That program has itself evolved over the past six years, and the AHC has recently begun MPLP-like digitization projects.

[46] Does the fact that not all researchers understand anything about provenance and order destroy this argument? Not unless it also destroys the conceptual basis of all anglophone arrangement and description for over a hundred years, provenance and original order.

touch."[47] Why do we avoid them? Because we have been inculcated with the belief that we must provide item-level metadata, which is exorbitantly expensive, for collections of any size. But must we approach digitization in such a manner?

Nothing prevents us from organizing and describing digitized (or born-digital) material at the file or even the series level, except our own fascination with individual documents.[48] Repositories as varied as the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh and the Smithsonian Archives of American Art provide file-level metadata to speed provision of digitized material to researchers, and given the demand by our researchers for more and more digitized material, why would we not want to adopt such a useful and usable shortcut?[49] "If we can do this much," one archivist wrote, "and without a vast infusion of funds, good . . . . Is it perfect? No, but remember, the perfect is sometimes the enemy of the good."[50] Folder or series metadata can be placed in standard image and document delivery systems such as Luna and Fedora, and/or shortcut even further by linking folders of material to their place in online finding aids; the latter provides the most and best context for the material.[51]

Instead of dismissing researchers who want to see more of our collections on the Web, we must acknowledge that these expectations will be an increasing reality. As MPLP would argue, "Every dollar spent to make [online] collections perfect is a dollar we're not spending to get another collection online and to a larger potential audience."[52] Rather than falling prey to the supposed dichotomy between "Googlization" (ultramass digitization) and "boutique" digitization (most of what we are currently doing—unique items on a very small scale), we should be planted on a middle ground: digitizing larger quantities of unique material. Let's consider giving our users what they want.

[47] Joshua Ranger, "More Bytes, Less Bite: Cutting Corners in Digitization," unpublished paper presented at the fall 2006 Midwest Archives Conference symposium, Omaha, Nebraska, at http://www.midwestarchives.org/2006_Fall/presentations/Ranger%20Omahapresentationranger.doc, accessed 30 November 2009.

[48] Ricky Erway and Jennifer Schaffner, *Shifting Gears: Gearing Up to Get Into the Flow* (OCLC 2007), 6: "Stop obsessing about items. Everything that is digitized does not need to be painstakingly described. Archival control distinguishes organic collections from description of distinct books and museum objects. Let's embrace that collection management strategy as well as the standards and practices of managing collections and hierarchies, not necessarily items." See www.oclc.org/programs/publications/reports/2007-02.pdf, accessed 26 January 2010.

[49] Archives of American Art, at http://www.aaa.si.edu/collectionsonline/, accessed 21 November 2009. Also see a thoughtful assessment of a mass digitization project, "Extending the Reach of Southern Sources Proceeding to Large-Scale Digitization of Manuscript Collections," final grant report prepared by the Southern Historical Collection University Library, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, for the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, June 2009, at http://www.lib.unc.edu/mss/archivalmassdigitization/, accessed 26 January 2010

[50] Max J. Evans, "The Archival Time Machine: A Closet Engineer Looks at Our Profession," *NEA Newsletter* 31, no. 1 (January 2004), 8.

[51] Evans, "Archives of the People, by the People, for the People," 391–93.

[52] Ranger, "More Bytes, Less Bite."

P r i v a c y C o n c e r n s

The concern about implementation of MPLP during processing, and by extension during appraisal, reference, and even digitization, that is most persistently and even angrily expressed (one repository director referred to MPLP as "criminal" because of it) regards privacy and confidentiality, particularly of third parties, in manuscript collections.[53] This concern is not new to MPLP, and I can limn only the outlines (such a discussion could easily take up a whole article). The archival community has been wrestling with its responsibility for and response to collection material that might affect third-party privacy or confidentiality for decades.[54] Some archivists have taken the broad statement about third-party rights in the SAA *Code of Ethics* (revised in 2005):

> Archivists may place restrictions on access for the protection of privacy or confidentiality of information in the records. Archivists protect the privacy rights of donors and individuals or groups who are the subject of records . . . [55]

to mean an ethical duty to broadly impose restrictions on collections beyond any that the donor might have specified.

This worry over protecting privacy has grown, to my mind, to nearly absurd lengths in recent years. The authoritative SAA manual on reference goes to the extreme, saying that

> Privacy protects not only good reputation, but also any personal information that individuals want to keep from being known. Some people do not care if their age is known; others feel considerable interest in keeping such information to themselves, perhaps with good reason because they have witnessed or experienced age discrimination. . . . The concept of confidentiality . . . refers

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[53] Such concerns are expressed in Crowe and Spilman, Archives and Archivists Survey, "MPLP draft," and in much milder form in Bowen et al., unpublished survey. (Bowen's reference archivist respondents rated concerns about "privacy" and about "sensitive documents" approximately in the middle of their ranking of nine "issues" regarding MPLP.) In addition, one of the external reviewers of this article stated, "The author neglects to address a major issue associated with discussions of reference with lightly processed collections: confidentiality. There is a concern that light processing can result in either 1) inappropriate disclosure of materials, or 2) much more work at the time of access to ensure that the information is not disclosed. This topic is probably worthy of at least some discussion."

[54] See, for some salient examples, Robert Rosenthal, "Who Will Be Responsible for Private Papers of Public Officials?," *The Scholar's Right to Know Versus the Individual's Right to Privacy: Proceedings of the First Rockefeller Archive Center Conference, December 5, 1975* (New York: Rockefeller Archive Center, 1976); K. E. Garay, "Access and Copyright in Literary Collections," *Archivaria* 18 (Summer 1984); Raymond H. Geselbracht, "The Origins of Restrictions on Access to Personal Papers at the Library of Congress and the National Archives," *American Archivist* 49, no. 2 (Spring 1986): 143–52; Sara S. Hodson, "Private Lives: Confidentiality in Manuscripts Collections," *RBML* 6, no. 2 (1991): 108–18; Mark A. Greene, "Moderation in Everything, Access in Nothing?: Opinions about Access Restrictions on Private Papers," *Archival Issues* 18, no. 1 (1993): 31–41; Marybeth Gaudette, "Playing Fair with the Right to Privacy," *Archival Issues* 28, no. 1 (2003–2004): 21–34; Sara S. Hodson, "In Secret Kept, In Silence Sealed: Privacy in the Papers of Authors and Celebrities," *American Archivist* 67, no. 2 (Fall/Winter 2004): 194–211.

[55] Society of American Archivists *Code of Ethics*, 2005, at http://www.archivists.org/governance/handbook/app_ethics.asp, accessed 26 January 2010.

first to private communications. Confidential communication between two people is restricted to them alone, and unauthorized inquiry into the content of the communication is forbidden. . . . Communications resulting from . . . friendship, may not be protected by law, but archivists may need to recognize and protect the confidentiality implied in them.[56]

By this definition, virtually every document not created by the donor of a collection is a potential ethical problem if made accessible to researchers.

Trudy Huskamp Peterson, a recognized expert on archival legal issues, identified "medical, sexual, and psychiatric information, information regarding birth legitimacy, economic information . . . , information on religious affiliation, and information developed or imparted during a client relationship . . ." as private and in need of restriction.[57] Religious affiliation? In the twenty-first century? To find such information would require reading every sentence in every piece of correspondence in a collection. On the archivists' discussion list over the past five years we have seen individuals express concerns over making even property records and traffic tickets accessible to researchers.[58] The concern is not solely an ethical one, however; there is an equally strong fear that overlooking certain material will place a repository at significant risk for lawsuits by individuals whose privacy has been breached. Critics of MPLP maintain that abjuring detailed evaluation of collections ensures that private and confidential (and for congressional collections, federally classified[59]) documents will not be identified and will therefore be accessible to researchers. To quote the SAA man-

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[56] Pugh, *Providing Reference Services*, 152–53. The same words were included in her 1992 version of the manual, with the same title, 56–57.

[57] Trudy Huskamp Peterson, "Privacy and Freedom of Information," *Janus* 2 (1992): 36–37.

[58] See, respectively, Brittany Bennett, "Privacy and the Removal of Property Docs," 22 August 2007; Ronald Drees, "Privacy," 25 October 2007, Archives and Archivists List. While we are more than willing to impose restrictions on material when no restrictions are warranted, we are, amazingly, often unwilling to properly educate ourselves to ensure we do place restrictions when they *are* mandated by law. Anyone who monitors the Archives and Archivists discussion list will be aware of the many times when incorrect answers were offered to questions of copyright restrictions, only to be corrected, thankfully, by the ever-vigilant Peter Hirtle of Cornell. (See, just as one example, thread "Digital Copyright" begun 23 January 2007 at 11:56:00 by Michael Simonson, the especially incorrect reply supplied at the same day at 14:52:00 by Dean DeBolt, and Peter Hirtle's correction at 18:13:00.) List readers will also know of occasions when other federal statutes were misapplied. For example, a question about whether student theses were subject to the Federal Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) was answered "no," when in fact the opposite is true. In that instance, no one contradicted the incorrect information, so legally required restrictions will not be imposed by many archivists. It must be said that ignorance on this matter can almost be considered willful, given that just three years previously, SAA published a "reader" including a chapter that addressed FERPA and its coverage explicitly. See thread begun as "Undergraduate/senior theses," 24 January 2008 at 09:32:00, by James Stimpert, who asked whether senior theses had the same presumption of public accessibility as master's theses and dissertations, and affirmative—incorrect—responses the same day at 09:52:00, by Dean DeBolt, at 10:01:00 by Laura Edgar, and at 10:15:00 by Glen Taul; Christine Weideman and Mark A. Greene, "The Buckley Stops Here: The Ambiguity and Archival Implications of the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act," in *Privacy and Confidentiality Perspectives*, ed. Menzi Behrnd-Klodt and Peter Wosh (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2005), 173–90. See most recently Menzi Behrnd-Klodt, *Navigating Legal Issues in Archives* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2008), especially chapters 10–15.

[59] See, for example, the thread begun by Herb Hartsook on the SAA Congressional Papers Roundtable discussion list, 19 September 2007, "Greene-Meissner More Product-Less Process."

ual on the law: "Donors have been known to be cavalier about the release of information in their papers, particularly information relating to persons other than themselves. If the donor does not specifically protect the privacy rights of persons named in the donated materials, the archives should to avoid potential lawsuits."[60]

Other archivists, myself certainly included, believe that the ethics statement must be interpreted narrowly, to encompass only select categories of private records universally acknowledged to warrant extraordinary protection—for example, medical, legal, and social work case files, federally classified documents, and (only relatively recently) Social Security numbers. Sue Holbert's 1977 SAA manual on reference and access warns archivists "that the burden of justifying a denial of access would fall on the repository" and suggests that we are more likely to get in trouble by restricting collections donors wanted open than vice versa. The manual accepts that invasion of privacy may be an issue with case files reflecting confidential relationships (e.g., lawyer-client) and that a repository should restrict such files if the donor does not, but it concludes that "the right to information is as valid as the right to privacy" and overall urges greater openness of records rather than greater restriction.[61] Recent work by one of the profession's few attorneys supports the proposition that the more archivists claim the responsibility for protecting third-party privacy the more likely they are to be held legally accountable for doing so.[62] In another context, she soundly remarked, "archivists can't protect everyone from everything and shouldn't even try."[63]

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[60] Gary M. Peterson and Trudy Huskamp Peterson, *Archives and Manuscripts: Law* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1985), 61. Sandra Hinchey and Sigrid McCausland, "Access and Reference Services," in *Keeping Archives*, ed. Ann Pederson (Sydney: Australian Society of Archivists, 1987), 190–91 also maintain that archives "may also have to restrict access to records they have received which contain . . . personal information about a person other than the depositor," and that "personal details about a living individual should not be released to researchers unless the individual's permission has been obtained," but they do not give particulars about what "personal information" or "personal details" encompasses.

[61] Sue Holbert, *Archives and Manuscripts: Reference and Access* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1977), 5–6.

[62] Menzi L. Behrnd-Klodt, "The Tort Right of Privacy: What It Means for Archivists . . . and for Third Parties," in *Privacy and Confidentiality Perspectives*, 53–60 (particularly 58–60). Dennis Meissner has correctly stated that "*Zero risk is not an acceptable real-world model*. [We] need to significantly elevate our risk tolerance as archivists. We are not responsible for ideal outcomes; we are only responsible for reasonable processes" (emphasis in original), untitled paper, session #501, Society of American Archivists Annual Meeting, Austin, Texas. August 2009.

[63] Menzi L. Behrnd-Klodt, email to author, 1 September 2009. She further advises, "To date, no statutes or case law have created a legal category or tort of "archival malpractice," where an archivist could be held responsible for violating accepted archival standards and norms. So part of me thinks that we are, as a profession, fretting a little too much. Yes, we can be liable for negligence and certainly for intentional or willful behavior, but archivists who choose to assume affirmative duties above and beyond the accepted archival practices and norms and who later fail in any of those duties, indeed may be setting themselves up for claims that they did not live up to their own standards, to their legal detriment." Quotations here and following used by permission of the author. Additional evidence is provided by a former head of reference at a well-known ARL repository in the Midwest, who related that the university's general counsel gave "the same opinion: that we leave ourselves more open to lawsuits by attempting to restrict some unrestricted records, than by staying away from this practice. Once we begin restricting, we leave ourselves open to the charge that we have attempted to be protective but have failed in specific instances" (email to author, 6 March 2010).

If there is a legal reason for not attempting to protect the privacy of third parties, there is even more of an ethical one. Archivists attempting to judge what is private or confidential will always risk imposing their own sensibilities onto collection material, and "To take on those responsibilities risks treading into frightening territory—imposing the archivist's judgment . . . [is too akin to] censorship, selective access, and mind-reading."[64] Even with the best will in the world, no archivist can accurately judge the sensibilities of the third parties presumably being "protected." One major repository director related to me his decision to impose restrictions on correspondence that revealed an adoption; in this day and age when so many adopted children seek to find their birth parents (and vice versa), why should we assume any of the affected parties would want the information withheld? I have had discussions with members of the GLBT community, some of whom believe strongly that it is wrong to restrict evidence of homosexuality as if it were still a taboo, while others are equally adamant that making such material accessible risks "outing" individuals who wish to remain closeted. How is it that the archivist is supposed to decide between the two perspectives; shouldn't the donor, rather, assume that burden? And even when we know third parties are upset about information in collections, do we restrict the material even though it reveals only such mundane (and public) facts as a divorce or suicide?[65] When we "remember that it is the researcher/writer/publisher of the materials who creates and may be liable for claims of copyright infringement, invasion of privacy, etc., not the archivist or archives which houses the documents,"[66] is it not equally reasonable to assume that it is the donor—not the archivist—who properly makes the ethical judgment of whether to protect or make accessible the material?

Finally, while legal and ethical reasons undermine the legitimacy of archivists trying to protect privacy and confidentiality, there is an incontrovertible practical reason as well. To be certain an archivist has identified every item of sensitive material in a collection, the archivist will have to appraise or process that collection to the item level. This is untenable in the twenty-first century given the size and quantity of collections. Rather, we must do our best to identify such material with the help

[64] Behrnd-Klodt, email to author.

[65] At the Minnesota Historical Society, we received a donation of nineteenth- to mid-twentieth-century family diaries and correspondence from a gentleman who was a descendant of the creators and recipients. While the family included one "black sheep," he was fully cognizant of the contents of all the letters, and felt that, after all this time they posed no embarrassment to his family. Several months after the donation, the donor's cousin, who was directly descended from one of the letter *writers* in the collection, came to see me, furious that her cousin had donated this "sensitive" material without her consent. Here was a third-party claiming harm to her privacy and sensitivities. She did not want all this material made public, and in fact asked us to give it to her. We refused, politely, and refused as well her request to have the material restricted.

[66] Behrnd-Klodt, email to author.

of the donor at the front end (for example, by developing "FAQ sheets describing potentially sensitive or legally compromising categories of materials . . . [and] clear statements about processing levels to be applied"[67]), and limit detailed assessments to sections of collections most likely to contain any of the narrow range of materials now clearly protected by law on the back end. We can educate researchers about their obligations and risks.[68] This is the best we can do and all we must do.

> . . . we may not find each of these items if we don't scan collections item by item, but the risk needs to be balanced appropriately by knowing donors and understanding collections so that likely sensitive, restricted, or valuable materials can be located in advance. This needs to be balanced against the needs of researchers and our resources. Processing materials as we once did (item by item) won't necessarily eliminate all possible problems and will only cause the backlog of unprocessed materials and cranky researchers to grow. When balancing researchers' quest for increased access, the size of contemporary collections, and our shrinking . . . pool of resources, MP-LP can be a good solution.[69]

MPLP can indeed be a good solution, applied sensibly and sensitively. Some series or folders, as the original article said many times over, may require more detailed work. But even when applying more detailed processing, we should be aware not only of the limitations of our processes but also of the limitations of our risk.

Conclusion

While MPLP focused exclusively on processing, its premises can be applied to other aspects of archival administration. Even beyond appraisal, electronic records, conservation, reference, and digitization, the most basic arguments of MPLP can affect the way archivists do their jobs. The goal is to work smarter, not harder; to do things "well enough" rather than "the best way possible" to accomplish more with less (or the same) resources. These are not bad lessons for a wide range of activities, from writing press releases publicizing one's repository to contributing service to one's professional organizations. Sometimes the illusion of perfection tempts our profession, but it is not at all clear that our institutions or society want or need us to be perfect. It is possible they want and need us to be efficient, looking at the forest rather than the trees, and flexible enough to deal with admitted problems in new ways.

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[67] Meissner, untitled paper, session #501, Society of American Archivists Annual Meeting, Austin, Texas, August 2009.

[68] See, for example, the University of North Carolina, Southern Historical Collections, Sensitive Materials Statement, at http://www.lib.unc.edu/mss/pspol/faq.html, accessed 26 January 2010.

[69] Menzi L. Behrnd-Klodt, email to author.

Appendix A

Minimal Processing User Satisfaction Survey

As part of a larger project generously funded by NHPRC, the American Heritage Center (AHC) is seeking to gauge user satisfaction with new processing techniques being implemented at AHC and across the country. Your participation in this survey will help us to determine the effectiveness of those techniques from the patron's perspective and in a very real way will affect how they are applied in the future. Participation is entirely voluntary, and no information related to your identity will be recorded. Thank you very much for your consideration.

Please answer the following questions.

1. From what institution did you hear about this survey?
2. Please indicate the status that best describes you.

    _____k–12 student _____undergraduate student _____graduate student
    _____university faculty _____business _____general public
    _____university staff _____teacher _____writer
    _____other:_____

3. How many times have you used any archives for research?

    _____1–3 times _____4–6 times _____7–9 times _____10 times or more

4. In how many archives have you conducted research?

    _____1 _____2–5 _____6–10 _____11 or more

5. Please indicate how you have used your research in archives. Check all that apply.

    _____school project _____thesis/dissertation _____scholarly publication
    _____popular publication _____commercial work for hire _____exhibit
    _____documentary _____family history _____personal interest
    _____other:_____

6. Please rank, in order of importance, the resources that are most useful to you when conducting primary source research.

    _____online catalog records _____card catalogs _____collection inventories
    _____reference archivists _____topical collection guides
    _____web searches _____bibliographies
    _____digitized collection material

7. Have you ever had difficulty interpreting a catalog record or a collection inventory?

    _____yes _____no

8. What kinds of collection inventories have you used? Please check all that apply.

_____item lists _____folder lists _____box lists _____series descriptions _____collection-level descriptions _____I don't know.

9. Which types of collection inventories have you found most useful? Please check all that apply.

_____item lists _____folder lists _____box lists _____series descriptions _____collection-level descriptions _____I don't know.

10. Why?

11. Have you ever been denied access to a collection because it was not "processed"?

_____yes   _____no   _____I don't know.

12. Have you ever conducted research in an "unprocessed" collection?

_____yes   _____no   _____I don't know.

13. Which is more important when conducting archival research: detailed organization of collection contents or detailed description of collection contents?

_____detailed organization _____detailed description
_____Both are equally important. _____Neither is very important.
_____I don't know.

14. Please rank the following archival priorities, with "1" being most important:

_____Putting more resources into digitizing collection material and putting it on the web, even if it means that fewer collections will be available for research.

_____Putting more resources into creating basic descriptions for all collections, even though some of those collections may never have more detailed inventories written for them.

_____Putting more resources into acquiring new collections, even if it means slowing the pace at which collections are made available for research.

_____Putting more resources into re-foldering and re-boxing collection material, pulling staples, and photocopying high-acid papers, even if it means slowing the pace at which collections are made available for research.

_____Putting more resources into the creation of detailed collection inventories on the web, even if it means slowing the pace at which collections are made available for research.

_____Putting more resources into creating basic collection inventories that lack introductory information and organization of the collection's contents if it means that collections will be made available more rapidly.

_____Putting more resources into pulling duplicates and ancillary printed material from collections, so that the valuable material is easier to find, even if it means slowing the pace at which collections are made available for research.

Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements.

15. I would be happy with less detail in collection inventories if it meant that more collections would be available for researchers.

    Strongly Disagree   1   2   3   4   5   Strongly Agree

16. I depend on the information in collection inventories to identify material relevant to my research.

    Strongly Disagree   1   2   3   4   5   Strongly Agree

17. I depend on online catalog records to identify material relevant to my research.

    Strongly Disagree   1   2   3   4   5   Strongly Agree

18. I depend on published citations to identify material relevant to my research.

    Strongly Disagree   1   2   3   4   5   Strongly Agree

19. I am confident that an archivist can help me find all of the material relevant to my research in a given archival collection.

    Strongly Disagree   1   2   3   4   5   Strongly Agree

20. I would be happy with less organization of archival collections if it meant that more collections would be available for researchers.

    Strongly Disagree   1   2   3   4   5   Strongly Agree

21. I am confident in my ability to find material relevant to my research in archival collections, even when the collections I am using are not well-organized.

    Strongly Disagree   1   2   3   4   5   Strongly Agree

22. Limiting the removal of metal fasteners, photocopying of high acid papers, sleeving of photographs, and re-foldering of collection material would be acceptable to me if it meant that more collections would be available to researchers.

    Strongly Disagree   1   2   3   4   5   Strongly Agree

23. When I encounter collections at an archives that are not neatly filed in new boxes, I doubt that archives' commitment to its collections.

    Strongly Disagree   1   2   3   4   5   Strongly Agree

24. An archivist will most likely be able to find any item that I cannot locate within an archival collection.

    Strongly Disagree   1   2   3   4   5   Strongly Agree

Please take a moment to answer the following question.

25. At what repository have you had the most useful and positive experience? Why?

26. Additional comments:

Please return this survey to Shannon Bowen at
mailto://sebowen@uwyo.edu/
or
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American Heritage Center
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