

## Description: Innovative Practices for Archives and Special Collections

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Physical and intellectual control over archival holdings and access to those holdings largely depend upon the availability and quality of archival description. *Description: Innovative Practices for Archives and Special Collections*, the first volume in this Rowman and Littlefield series edited by Kate Theimer, presents brilliant, out-of-the-box case studies from a diverse range of institutions. Theimer has authored and edited titles on topics such as Web 2.0, advocacy, and user services, among others. She is also the force behind the blog *ArchivesNext*. Other books in this four-volume series explore innovative methods in outreach, reference and access, and management. The series is put together with a broad spectrum of readers in mind and designed to present transferrable ideas and strategies (p. viii). Judging from this first book in the series, Theimer achieves this goal.

Case studies summarize each of eleven institutions' issues and goals specific to description and access, description of planning stage(s), implementation, results, lessons learned, and concluding thoughts. This consistent, clear structure combined with analyses of descriptive practices give this volume a guidelines-like quality.

In her chapter "The Hive": Crowdsourcing the Description of Collections," Zoë D'Arcy of the National Archives of Australia, places collaboration between researchers and archivists front and center. The author examines the benefits and risks associated with crowdsourcing descriptive metadata by volunteers who transcribe metadata from digitized accession records. She illuminates strategies that made this project a success: the element of competition, introduction of earned points, and award badges and prizes for copious and the most accurate descriptions. D'Arcy explores the psychology behind motivating engagement and dedication to crowdsourcing projects.

Evyn Kropf asks in "Collaboration in Cataloging: Sourcing Knowledge from Near and Far for a Challenging Collection" why crowdsourcing might fail. While the University of Michigan (U-M) met its objective to catalog its Islamic manuscripts, contrary to the project's initial expectations, external crowdsourcing proved not to be an effective strategy for this project. Kropf faults "... trying to source a wide range of descriptive elements for a large number of manuscripts ..." (p. 110), such as overreliance on academic listservs as outreach tools and lack of

incentives. At the same time, sourcing U-M students and faculty was “wildly successful” (p. 109), because it offered on-site experience and hands-on training in a faculty member’s field. Kropf provides examples of innovative uses of available tools; for example, Kropf modified the Ancient, Medieval, Renaissance, and Early Modern Manuscripts cataloging schema to enrich bibliographic description.

“Where There’s a Will There’s a Way: Using LibGuides to Rescue Paper Ephemera from the Bibliographic Underbrush” by Sharon Farnel, Robert Cole, Robert Desmarais, Spencer Holizki, and Jeff Papineau of the University of Alberta underscores the unique challenges of describing archival materials using traditional bibliographic description. The authors discuss the intricacies of providing access to “nontraditional” library items (p. 117)—printed and handwritten ephemera and small archival collections—using a “nontraditional” archival tool (LibGuides). The authors considered several tools and standards, such as MODS descriptions, HTML-encoded finding aid, and Archivists’ Toolkit. They painstakingly explain the logic behind choosing LibGuides and provide a thorough list of advantages and disadvantages for each option.

James Gerencser’s case study, “Opening the Black File Cabinets: Describing Single Items for Discovery and Access,” explores finding a “nontraditional” solution to legacy accessions and descriptions of ephemera at Dickinson College. This case study presents an example of creative flexibility and a can-do spirit, combined with careful attention to researchers’ needs and quality of metadata. This project used blog posts as a primary discovery, access, and description mechanism for digitized ephemera, created by undergraduates by entering descriptive information from old card catalogs or subject guides. The Drupal blog interface they used, however, made it difficult to create robust metadata. Gerencser is very open about the informality of the project as an “experiment,” the potential unsustainability of certain assumptions, and some of the drawbacks of this otherwise successful project.

Of all the case studies, I had difficulty finding the innovative element in the Amherst College chapter, “You Got Your Archives in My Cataloging: A Collaborative Standards-Based Approach to Creating Item-Level Metadata for Digitized Archival Materials.” Kelcy Shepherd and Kate Gerrity describe the development of guidelines and workflows for creating item-level metadata for digitized archival collections and stress the importance of good communication and teamwork. While I agree that collaborative workflows are a key element of contemporary archival practice, their idea of reliance on colleagues may not work in every situation. It would have been interesting to read about their solution to identifying appropriate access points by metadata creators in cases where descriptive metadata is lacking. Instead, they state that it’s “acceptable and far more efficient to rely on the archives staff to answer questions as they arose . . . sometimes several times a day, even when [staff] were not directly

involved in the digitization projects" (pp. 78–80). I'm not convinced these "workflows" are efficient for all parties involved due to interruptions they cause. "Best practices" documentation and training seem like more effective solutions. It's also unclear whether this case study was ready for publication when it was selected. Shepherd and Gerrity confirm my suspicion when they write, "[i]t can be easy to focus on all of the things we have yet to do and forget to celebrate how far we've come" (p. 83). Surrounded by truly innovative case studies, this celebration seemed premature.

Assessment of holdings and making hidden collections accessible are the subjects of Matthew B. Gorham and Chela Scott Weber's excellent case study, "Creating Access and Establishing Control: Conducting a Comprehensive Survey to Reveal a Hidden Repository." They describe Brooklyn Historical Society's survey to establish physical and intellectual control over its archival holdings. This detailed chapter can serve as a guideline for any large-scale assessment and backlog elimination project. The authors provide examples of effective team-building strategies, establishing processing metrics, choosing descriptive standards, and project management practices. I find especially interesting their discussion about finding the balance between minimal processing on the one hand and creating robust, useful descriptions on the other.

Eira Tansey explores several innovative approaches to making collections discoverable in "Step by Step, Stage by Stage: Creating a Diverse Backlog of Legacy Finding Aids Online." This case study examines the migration of legacy finding aids to online formats at Tulane University. Tansey's assessment of existing descriptive apparatus found a significant lack of online description in finding aids and MARC records. The carefully planned project that followed involved implementing Archon, working with a vendor, and engaging students in archival description as a public service opportunity. This chapter presents one of the most complicated cases in the volume, and Tansey describes the logistics and workflows with precision and clarity, including the benefits and drawbacks of the approach, including the benefit of using additional resources, the challenges of limitations posed by vendor contracts, and tips for working with vendors (p. 66). While using services of a vendor may not be feasible for many, this case serves as a useful model.

Jackie Dean and Meg Tuomala of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill present a convincing case for adapting the principles of analog records arrangement and description to born-digital records in "Business as Usual: Integrating Born-Digital Materials into Regular Workflows." The authors emphasize similar approaches to both analog and digital records, but they recognize the importance of being cognizant of differences between those records when arranging and describing hybrid collections. They affirm that archivists should approach records within collections holistically, not as separate groups of formats. This basic idea, consistent with the principle of format-neutral archival

arrangement and description, has been practiced for analog records, and this case study encourages archivists to follow that same logic when describing born-digital records within hybrid collections.

Kristjana Kristinsdóttir takes the idea of engagement with creators of records in archival description to the next level in her chapter, "A Long Road: Creating Policies and Procedures for Mandatory Arrangement and Description by Records Creators." Kristinsdóttir discusses the National Archives of Iceland's efforts to convey to each government institution the mandatory responsibility of arranging and describing its own records. The archivists at the National Archives worked tirelessly to help creators understand their role as a responsibility, not merely as a courtesy or prerogative. Kristinsdóttir diligently describes the evolution of guidelines and mandatory archival training that the National Archives of Iceland currently provides for government institutions. This case study has the unique benefit of decades of perspective.

Two case studies discuss creative use of emerging contextual descriptive standards. In "More Than a <biogHist> Note: Early Experiences with Implementing EAC-CPF," Erin Faulder, Veronica Martzahl, and Eliot Wilczek of Tufts University present an excellent case for using the Encoded Archival Context for Corporate Bodies, Persons, and Families (EAC-CPF) standard in the Biography/History element. The authors explore separating descriptions of creators from descriptions of collections to emphasize meaningful functional and relational associations between creators of records and archival collections, crediting the Australian series system as their inspiration.<sup>1</sup> Separate descriptions of creators in EAC-CPF records resulted in better representation of complex functional relationships between creators and records across digital archival holdings. Institutions considering implementing the EAC-CPF standard may find this thoughtful piece particularly useful.

Likewise, Clare Paterson of the University of Glasgow explores descriptive methodology that goes beyond conventional hierarchical descriptive practice in "Describing Records, People, Organizations, and Functions: The Empowering the User Project's Flexible Archival Catalog." This approach involves creating separate descriptions of functions and activities associated with archival records and records creators at the series level based on "Developing Archival Context Standards for Functions in the Higher Education Sector,"<sup>2</sup> which rejects the "monohierarchical representation of the context of an archive . . . through fonds-based arrangement and description" (p. 134). The grant-funded project involved contextual description of the House of Fraser Archives. Archivists separately described multiple contexts in which records were created, used, or "interacted" with in any way, followed by linking these multiple contextual descriptions. Among the benefits of this approach, Paterson underscores equal representation of multiple contexts of creation and use of records, scalability, and the creation of additional descriptive components at any point.

These collected case studies demonstrate the ability to effectively transform challenges into opportunities for archival description. Readers will discover excellent models of creative and practical thinking in this well-assembled volume. The authors' honest accounts of sometimes erroneous assumptions and resulting adjustments are of primary value, particularly in the detailed analyses of why certain strategies failed.

*Description* demonstrates the place for innovation in every aspect of archival description, from adapting new systems, standards, and workflows, to establishing new relationships and breaking century-old psychological barriers. The variety of approaches certainly works for the volume. The pieces are not quite equal in their quality, as select chapters seem to be descriptions of works in progress rather than analyses of completed projects. Nevertheless, readers will benefit from every case study.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Adrian Cunningham, Laura Millar, and Barbara Reed, "Peter J. Scott and the Australian 'Series' System: Its Origins, Features, Rationale, Impact and Continuing Relevance" (session presented at the International Congress on Archives, Brisbane Australia, 2012), <http://ica2012.ica.org/files/pdf/Full%20papers%20upload/ica12Final00414.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> See "Developing Archival Context Standards for Function in the Higher Education: Final Report," [http://www.gashe.ac.uk/news/final\\_report.pdf](http://www.gashe.ac.uk/news/final_report.pdf).

## When We Are No More: How Digital Memory Is Shaping Our Future

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**I**n *When We Are No More: How Digital Memory Is Shaping Our Future*, historian Abby Smith Rumsey provides a thoughtful and accessible exploration of a range of issues facing the future of public and collective memory. Rumsey's experience as a historian combined with a decade of experience working on digital preservation at the Library of Congress uniquely qualify her to make substantive contributions on issues in this area. No doubt, many archivists and librarians first learned about issues surrounding digital preservation from Rumsey when she worked for the Council on Library and Information Resources (CLIR) two