

**More Product, Less Process:
A Flexible Tool**

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Background

Mark A. Greene and Dennis Meissner published a revolutionary article in *The American Archivist* in 2005 that analyzed how archives were processing their collection (Greene and Meissner, MPLP 2005). The two authors specifically studied how it was affecting the backlogged materials in a repository and its detriments to accessibility. The result of their research and case studies was a method called “More Product, Less Process,” or MPLP.

Greene and Meissner reported that, on average, a repository’s unprocessed materials made up around one third of their total holdings. These are considered “backlogged” and are defined as materials without any cataloging records or finding aids (Greene and Meissner, MPLP 2005, 210). The two state the most collections that are unprocessed are also, usually, made inaccessible to researchers and the public. In order to reduce the amount of backlogged items, the authors discuss utilizing “minimum standards.” Additionally, to keep from materials adding to the backlog, Greene and Meissner suggest applying the MPLP method to accessioning new materials as well.

Greene and Meissner state that most collections do not need item level processing. They reveal contradictions in popular archival management publications in that they agree that collections should not be processed on the item level, but, for preservation needs, each item should be unfolded, metal paperclips should be removed, items should be repackaged with non-acidic paper, etc. They quote the MIT processing manual, “The level of preservation work you do on any collection is closely linked to the level of arrangement that you complete. For example, if you are arranging papers only to the box level, it would make no sense to recommend preservation at the folder or item level” (Greene and Meissner, MPLP 2005, 218). As they further discuss, this correlation between preservation levels and processing levels is similar to the correlation between processing levels and appraisal levels. The authors suggest that a collection’s processing level should dictate what the appraisal level will be. For example, if a collection will be processed at a series level, then the appraisal should also be performed on the series level.

Yale University

Yale University’s Manuscripts and Archives Director Christine Weideman published an article following Greene and Meissner about their backlogged materials and processing method. In it, she describes that their primary goal is to use the accessioning procedures to also process the materials they are obtaining. However, unlike Greene and Meissner’s definition of backlog, all of Yale’s unprocessed materials actually had catalog record and box-level descriptions. Weideman states that these initial accessioning notes have become the “minimum standards” and that it is acceptable for final processing (Weideman 2006, 275).

In essence, this has become their method: accessioning, as processing. Weideman defines their minimum standards as the “minimum level of arrangement and description that would meet the needs of researchers to locate specific boxes of materials” (Weideman 2006, 275). Weideman’s focus on using the accessioning point in the collection as the processing point as well has resulted positively for their institution. In fact, she goes on to mention that she even asks donors who have created the materials to help describe and arrange some of the items as it is being accessioned (Weideman 2006, 277), due to the his or her expertise on the subject. Weideman accomplishes this with great ease by creating an inventory list of materials, and then e-mailing it to the donor for further descriptive measures. Not only does this help their staff process the material, but also it shows an active engagement with the donors.

The article describes two specific collections where they processed at these defined minimum standards. The first example was in regards to organizational records for the Center for Information on America. These records were already in good condition and arranged alphabetically. Their staff needed only to fix the occasional stray folder and re-label folders when needed. They did not do any item-level rearranging, and their work did not go beyond storing the folders in record cartons and creating box inventories. Their accessioning process included the creation of catalog records and from that, they added the information to the finding aid. This accessioning also took the place of their processing and they finished with a completely usable collection that was not placed in the backlog. (Weideman 2006, 278)

Their second case involved processing the Brooks Family Papers, which came in two acquisitions. The first accession in 1998 resulted in a minimal box listing and catalog record, but remained closed to researchers due to the large amount of loose and unsorted material. The second accession was in 2004, at which time the donor expressed dissatisfaction with the institution for the poor processing and unavailability of the first wave of materials. Weideman decided to apply a method of processing that was more descriptive than box listings (in order to please the donor), but that also did not require extensive time and resources. They divided the entire collection into four series, which were then arranged, described, and preserved. They replaced damaged folders, replaced flip-top boxes, and removed acidic wrapping paper from rolls of negative film, but did very little item-level arrangement. Their result was spending around 2.5 hours per linear foot in processing. (Weideman 2006, 280-281)

Weideman’s approach has allowed her organization to create stronger descriptions, yet still keep processing at a minimum and thereby rescuing accessions from entering the backlog. Though their methods were not exactly as Greene and Meissner discussed in their MPLP article, Weideman still used the article to challenge her current processing techniques and preemptively control the growth of unprocessed materials in the collection.

The University of Montana at Missoula

The University of Montana's backlogged items consisted of materials that were not arranged or described in a finding aid, resembling Greene and Meissner's examples in their article. These items represented 25% of the entire holdings (McCrea 2006, 284). Like Weideman, librarian Donna McCrea used Greene and Meissner's ideas and research to transform her own perception of processing in order to reduce backlog and increase efficiency.

In McCrea's example, her backlog included very minute descriptions, such as creator name, date of accession, and size of collection. Due to this minimal accession information, Weideman's approach could not be effectively duplicated. Instead, McCrea created her own minimum processing methods by splitting the backlog into priority levels based on the following criteria: "1) a potential for negative impact on donor relations if the collection remained unprocessed; 2) if processed, the collection could attract monetary donors or "friends" to the library, ... 3) if processed, the collection could attract materials of similar scope; or 4) the only way to understand the potential demand for research was [to make] the collection available" (McCrea 2006, 286). Their minimum processing method began by ignoring fasteners and paperclips, refolding, photocopying clippings, and separating photographs. McCrea changed the arrangement practices at the University and began utilizing electronic finding aids in order to rely on keyword searchability, rather than physically moving the folders around.

McCrea has several concerns about her new processing methods. Since they were no longer looking at individual items or folder contents, physical space may have been wasted due to duplicates and messy, loose papers. Additionally, due to not looking at every item, there may be restricted materials in boxes that are made accessible to the public. The increased amount of reference time is also a concern for McCrea, as they no longer labeled each item with its box and folder number. Since each item does not have an identifying location, losing material between collections and boxes became another concern; however, by not permitting researchers to work within multiple boxes at one time, this is prevented. McCrea states that she is also concerned about preservation issues, since they stopped examining each item. However, McCrea believes that the collections would have been in worse condition unprocessed (McCrea 2006, 287).

The Kenneth Burke Papers

In the *Journal of Archival Organization*, the Pennsylvania State University Special Collections makes a case against Greene and Meissner's MPLP methods. Their collection The Kenneth Burke Papers needed item-level indexing in order to provide cross-referencing between two accessions for their patrons' ease of use. Though their general approach has been to appraise and process at the series level,

Jeannette Mercer Sabre (Processing and reference Staff) and Susan Hamburger (Manuscripts Cataloging Librarian) found that the Kenneth Burke Papers needed a finer granularity of description.

This collection consists of two accessions, Burke-1 and Burke-2, which document the life and career of author Kenneth Burke. Burke-1 was introduced in 1974, while Burke-2 was acquired in 2005. Burke-2 is more than double the size of the first acquisition and includes original letters from several notable people (Sabre and Hamburger 2008, 27). This correspondence is the main reason for the item-level indexing and processing.

After conducting a meeting to assess patrons' needs for the Burke Papers, they found that the most two frequent reference requests were to obtain correspondence by year and letters by correspondent (Sabre and Hamburger 2008, 29). The Library decided to focus on item-level indexing to allow for ease of use and research. Additional considerations were made in debating whether or not to physically integrate the two accessions. The decision to not integrate resulted from the difficulty on researchers to determine which Burke materials they had already seen and to maintain original order, for both time efficiency and to avoid complicating reference retrieval.

Burke-1's original order was strong and did not need any further arrangement, as materials had been filed chronologically, therein alphabetically by correspondent, and within each correspondent's file, chronologically. This arrangement already accommodated researchers' needs to both access by year and by correspondent. However, Burke-2's original order was not as neat or comprehensive.

Burke-2 had several different files that corresponded with the same person, though the individual may have had different name variations, such as nicknames, or maiden names, if a married woman. Additionally, when one or more boxes were full alphabetically, Burke would begin again in another box at the beginning. Burke also kept special files that corresponded with specific trips that circumvented any other filing method (Sabre and Hamburger 2008, 31-33). Sabre and Hamburger rearranged the entire accession chronologically, then by correspondent, then within that, chronologically, to mimic Burke-1. However, the difference between the accessions came in the indexing.

The Burke-2 index was extremely descriptive in order to provide the most access to letters on an item level. The staff created cross-referenced index entries between series (photographs, letters, and literary works) as well as between correspondents within the letters. This cross-referencing and item-level titles and descriptions resulted in a fairly large index. However, Sabre and Hamburger state that this has saved time spent on reference activities and researching locations (Sabre and Hamburger 2008, 44). Additionally, by rearranging the materials by

item and creating a comprehensive index, they were able to maintain Burke's original order in the first accession throughout the second accession.

The overall response to their new accession was very positive and the researchers were able to successfully obtain their requested materials quickly and with ease. Greene and Meissner state that they believe too much time is wasted in creating detailed, multilayered, descriptive finding aids (Greene and Meissner, MPLP 2005, 215). However, Sabre and Hamburger utilized item-level processing, and item-level indexing, with little difficulty and time. Additionally, they were able to identify and arrange according to what their patrons requested, while preserving Burke's intellectual original order.

Other Opinions

Similar to Sabre and Hamburger's article, a letter to the editor in *The American Archivist* by Andrew Mangravite discusses the improbability of applying Greene and Meissner's MPLP method to personal papers. Mangravite states that institutional record collections that already have box lists, MARC records, and overall comprehensive order, are great candidates for minimum processing. However, personal papers cannot be "adequately dealt with by mere box lists" (Mangravite 2006, 13). He suggests that a box described simply as "Correspondence Files" can effectively bury important information and content, including the proverbial "smoking gun."

Farris Wahbeh, project archivist for the Meyer M. Schapiro Papers at Columbia University's Rare Book and Manuscript Library, maintains a frequently updated blog titled *On Archiving Schapiro*. On March 9, 2009, he addresses MPLP and voices several concerns. In particular, he asks, if MPLP is applied both to backlogged materials and to ongoing accessions, is there an end to minimum processing or is this the future of archival description and arrangement (Wahbeh 2009)? He asserts that MPLP should be only one of several tools in an archivist's toolbox and discretion and judgment should be used on a collection-by-collection basis. He refutes that MPLP can be the only effective type of methodology in processing. Wahbeh discusses that the Schapiro project follows a "tiered approach that confronts backlog with a much more nuanced look into which collections can resonate and promote scholarship" (Wahbeh 2009).

Greene and Meissner repeatedly imply that item-level processing is an antiquated approach, which "archivists have almost entirely abandoned" (Greene and Meissner, MPLP 2005, 215). However, there is a current call for detailed processing, as evident by a grant provided by the National Archives and Records Administration. NARA published a grant that seeks proposal for "detailed processing and preservation of collections of national significance. The collections also should have high research demand or substantial preservation challenges"

(NARA n.d.). NARA expected to make up to 7 grants, totaling \$700,000 of funding, to continue the work of item-level processing and preservation.

A Need for Flexibility

Greene and Meissner make an excellent argument that processing needs to be revamped, considering the substantial amount of backlogged materials throughout the world's repositories. Their More Product, Less Process methodology introduces the idea of minimum standards instead of the traditional, heavy descriptions and preservation in order to get archival institutions back on track. The cases at Yale and University of Montana give insight on how MPLP can be molded to fit any organization.

Christine Weideman used the principle of MPLP at Yale, but added more descriptions when needed in order to satisfy her donors. Though she heavily arranged several different series, she reports that they did little item-level arrangement, preservation, or re-housing. She writes that her experiences "proved the importance of flexibility in thinking about arrangement and description today, a point that Greene and Meissner emphasize" (Weideman 2006, 281). methods.

Donna McCrea states that she "incorporated many of [Greene and Meissner's] suggestions into daily practice at [her] archives with much success. More importantly, perhaps, is that during that same period, inspired largely by their article and my own experiences, [she] underwent a transformation in [her] thinking about what constitutes both backlog and processing practice" (McCrea 2006, 285). She goes on to write that she now makes decisions about the level of processing work on a collection-by-collection, and even a series-by-series basis, to determine whether to invest time and resources into a heavily descriptive arrangement (McCrea 2006, 289). By emphasizing the overall message from Greene and Meissner, she was able to process 464 linear feet of backlogged materials within one year (McCrea 2006, 290).

In response to Mangravite's letter to the editor, Greene and Meissner repeat that archivists should allow room for flexibility by asserting that they "believe that we add value most effectively and efficiently by managing our whole enterprise so that we make all of our collection materials available at some fundamental level to all researchers, and then providing additional resources to the small minority of collections whose value will be significantly enhanced by doing so" (Greene and Meissner, Letter 2006). The two authors spend a significant time in their MPLP article discussing that there are the two goals all archivists should share: maintaining control of the collections and making them available for use. They state, "If we are going to effectively serve our users, we must adopt a much more flexible conception of what it means to 'process' a collection" (Greene and Meissner, MPLP 2005, 233).

Conclusion

Farris Wahbeh writes, “When [Greene and Meissner] assert that ‘good processing is done with a shovel, not with tweezers,’ one should ask: why not at the same time?” Green and Meissner created a wonderful tool for archivists and librarians to reduce their growing backlog of materials. However, it is important to note that there is no fix-all that can be applied to every institution and every collection. As noted in *The Kenneth Burke Papers*, some situations require item-level work, especially those that are an accession to an existing collection. The cases at Yale and Montana also show how the MPLP approach can be altered to fit the current needs of the organization, donors, and users.

The main goals of an archivist are to create and manage an accessible collection and to meet the needs of the patron. Greene and Meissner state that archivists generally become obsessed with “our pride in craft” and that it becomes an obstacle in attaining those goals (Greene and Meissner, MPLP 2005, 233). The MPLP approach focuses on applying minimum processing standards to a collection in order to make it accessible to patrons quickly. Though it may be applicable to most collections on some level, there is a strong need for flexibility. Different collections may require different interpretations of More Product, Less Process in order to best meet their institution’s reference and quality expectations. Wahbeh states, “Proper planning by conducting collections surveys, assessing institutional missions, and understanding user expectations” should be what drives the decisions behind processing (Wahbeh 2009).

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