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MPLP: What it's REALLY About and Why it Matters to Archivists, Librarians, and Researchers

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- Head of collection management at Minnesota Historical Society
- Arrangement, description, and archival management
- Developing a global standard to develop archival materials
- More Product, Less Process
 - What it's REALLY about
 - Why it matters to archivists, librarians, and researchers
- Summarize the research, findings, and recommendations
- Drill down to core elements of what's important
- What does this mean in special collections work
- Early implementations of this process
- Hypotheses
 - Increasing breadth and scale of contemporary collections
 - Too many items to catalog and not enough time
 - There is an ongoing failure in the profession to correct this in regards to the amount of work that needed to be done.
 - Failure to revise processing benchmarks to deal with problems
 - Was given a fellowship to study the U.S. Depository backlogs
 - People didn't know what to do to get materials in archival condition—description and arrangement efforts
 - What people thought they could actually do in a time vs. the reality that you can't do everything
- Methodology
 - Literature review---over 4 years of materials in their year of study
 - Repository survey (100 repositories)
 - Grant project survey (40 NHPRC grants)
 - From the past 5 years prior to their study
 - Archival arrangement and description
 - User survey in R2 repositories
 - Small group
 - Review of previous studies
- Repository Survey Respondents
 - 65% College and University archives
 - Research libraries
 - State, library, community, religion institutions fairly evenly
- Findings

- Processing benchmarks and practices are inappropriate to deal with problems posed by large contemporary collections
 - Ideal vs. necessary
 - Fixation on item level task
 - Arrangement of materials, descriptions, conservation (small treatment) measures
 - Preservation anxiety trumped user needs
 - Unproductive scale in processing work
 - User needs are going unmet
- Recommendations
 - General principles for change
 - Establish an acceptable min. level of work, and make it the benchmark
 - Each area has to have a min. level of work done per year.
 - Don't ignore other collections to just work on one area.
 - Don't assume all collections, or all collection components, will be processed at the same time
 - Archivists prefer to give refined detail to one collection and would stick to that area.
 - Then they didn't feel that they had the skills to work at such a high level in other areas, so they'd ignore them.
 - Arrangement
 - In normal or typical situations, the physical arrangement of materials in archival groups and manuscript collections should not take place below the series level
 - Not all series and collections have to be arranged at the same level.
 - Description
 - Since description represents arrangement: describe materials at a level of detail appropriate to that level of arrangement
 - Keep descriptions simple and brief
 - Level of description should vary across collections and components in a collection
 - If an item demands detail, give it to it.
 - If it doesn't, don't overdo it.
 - Conservation
 - Rely on storage area environmental controls to carry the conservation burden
 - The storage environment should protect your items from deteriorating till you get to them.
 - Don't perform conservation tasks at a lower hierarchical level than you perform arrangement and descriptions.
 - Don't work at item level all the time if it's unnecessary
 - Productivity
 - If you follow their advice, you can get through one cubic foot within 4 hours.

- Goal: Effective collection management strategies
 - User access is the most important aspect
 - We fail if we don't share our work.
 - We alienate user communities and donors.
 - We alienate our resource allocators if we don't produce results for them so they can get us more money to do our work.
 - Resource management is crucial strategy.
 - If we can't expose users to our entire collection, we are failing.
 - Given the resources we have plus the expected ones, how do we get all the collections taken care of?
 - Archivists didn't see themselves as managers of resources or programs.
 - More like prisoners of a craft. Too focused on tiny details instead of big picture.
 - We adjust our labor input into each individual collection so we can move forward as a whole to process all materials.
- Understanding our behavior
 - We contradict our own assumptions by our actions.
 - Keep working at item level and not the whole collection---removing duplicates, metal fasteners, photocopying newsprint, sleeving photos.
- People estimate that they move through very slow through materials.
- Lessons learned
 - What do users expect?
 - **Access**
 - Even if this means they have to spend more personal time searching through items as long as they can access them
 - Online discovery tools
 - Our energy should be directed towards this goal.
 - Effective finding aids
 - For researchers
 - Essentials of *effective* arrangement work?
 - Respect des fonds
 - Original order
 - Series level, respect integrity and contextual meaning of collection
 - Series-level arrangement
 - Preservation activates that are truly necessary?
 - Protect from light, atmospheric pollution, heat
- A better model
 - Make user access the driving force behind our programs ASAP.
 - Have sustainable process that will preserve our materials while quickly arranging them.
 - Identify materials that need the greatest effort or serve largest research community, or benefit the greatest.
 - Establish min. level of work that MUST be met.

- Make all our materials discoverable for users.
 - Don't do greater level of detail work till later when you know if it's in demand.
- Embrace flexibility: don't assume that all collections need the same level of detail.
- Embrace ambiguity: stop pretending that you know what will be important in the future.
 - User needs and interests
 - Access and description needs
 - See every collection as a potential work in progress
 - Let future events decide on what needs to be done to particular collections
- Don't allow preservation anxieties trump user needs so we backlog
- Establish good risk management models.
 - Risk is unavoidable
 - Risk is amendable to being managed
 - Assess, mitigate, budget for, respond to
 - Seek novel approaches to do things.
- What MPLP is not
 - Your go-to manual for arrangement, description, and conservation specifics
 - A set of absolute upper limits
 - For work to be done
 - Inflexible
 - Absolutist
 - One set of practices can't be used in all circumstances
 - Simplistic
 - You can't tell others what to do.
 - What works for you and your staff may not apply to others.
- What MPLP is
 - Support, advice
 - Stern advice about resource management
 - Prioritizing goals
 - Achieving high-level program objectives
 - Maximizing ROI (return on investment)
 - Practical approaches (substantial, not ideal conditions)
 - We'll never have enough money
 - Making use the prime object: what do users want
- What users want
 - Access to collections triumphs everything else
 - Access to what:
 - Online finding aids
 - For all types of collections by common discovery and access tools.
 - Standardize!
 - Digitalized collections

- Don't need to make digital libraries or make pretty websites: just get it online
 - Opening the blinds, and throwing away the cookie cutters
 - Transparency about holdings
 - Openness to archives
 - Institutional practice being limited only to resources
- What does this mean for special collections?
 - Broad approach to leveraging our collective ability to provide access to research collections
 - Standard model of research aids so people only have to learn a research method once and it will work across the board.
 - Extensible to deal with novel problem spaces
 - Brevity in resource description is positive benefit in network environment
 - Keywords! Google friendly!
 - Economic approaches driving innovations in practice:
 - Description, archival approaches to other sorts of collections, digitalization
- Early implementers
 - University of Montana---Missoula
 - Donna McCrea donna.mccrea@umonta.edu
 - No physical work within file folders
 - Uniform collection-level descriptive access
 - No weeding below series level for backlogs
 - No notable user problems over two years
 - 2 hours per linear feet
 - American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming
 - NHPRC grant funded 1 processing archivist for 2 years
 - 700 collection-level MARC records added to OPAC
 - 175% performance to budget
 - 265 EAD finding aids for larger collections
 - 132% performance to budget
 - Significant increase in discovery and use
 - Public service impact:
 - Positive outcome
 - Reorganize staff to work more at reference desk to answer the questions of users
 - Follow-on on demand
 - If you request a collection, it will move up the ladder to be dealt with in greater detail because it is in demand
 - Yale University---Manuscripts & Archives
 - Christine Weideman Christine.weideman@yale.edu
 - Minimal but adequate processing at point of accessioning

- Offer to share processing with users---they taught users how to process the materials if they wanted to use it.
 - Texas Christian University Archives
 - Michael Strom m.strom@tcu.edu
 - Jim Wright Congressional Papers (huge!)
 - Minimal processing on most series, reserving intensive work for others
 - Restricted appraisals to high-level documents
 - Proved effective with getting things done much quicker before the Jim Wright collection was seized for their lack of progress.
 - University of Alaska—Fairbanks
 - Anne Foster ffalf@uaf.edu
 - Series level processing of extensive photographs
 - Lets use drive more intensive processing
 - Involves donor in processing continuum
 - Solicits \$\$ donations after processing from the donor
 - University of Wisconsin---Oshkosh
 - Joshua Ranger ranger@uwosh.edu
 - Series level processing of digitized collections
 - High-speed bi-tonal scanning of photocopied collection materials
 - No greater context information for an item
 - Very successful program
 - Library of Congress—Prints and Photos
 - Helena Zinkham hzin@loc.gov
 - Minimal processing
 - Put scans on the web and let mark it up
- Minnesota Historical Society
 - Walter Mondale Papers
 - NEH “We the People” project
 - High productivity + high-value products
 - 1500 cubic feet
 - 2 year project for them
- Rethink photographs to be just images within a unit
- Rethinking items as *collections*
 - Photographs (albums and loose images as well)
 - Sheet music
 - Bound publications
 - Maps
 - Oral histories
 - Audio and moving pictures
 - Use PDFs as the most inexpensive way to bundle objects and keep them within their context.

- “The best time to plant a tree is twenty years ago. The next best time is now.” ~African proverb