PACSCL/CLIR Hidden Collections Project

42 Heads Are Better Than One:
PACSCL's Approach to a Cross Repository Processing Program

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The PACSCL Hidden Collections Processing Project
In 2008, The Philadelphia Area Consortium of Special Collections Libraries, PACSCL, for short, received generous funding from the Council on Library and Information Resources' "Cataloging Hidden Special Collections and Archives" initiative. This money funded a collaborative processing project involving 23 Philadelphia area archival repositories, including 6 museums, 7 universities, 3 historical societies, 4 private institutions and 3 public institutions. The primary goal of the project was to help eliminate processing backlog and expose hidden collections. To this end, a centralized project team processed and created EAD-encoded finding aids for 123 collections, and converted an additional 83 legacy finding aids to EAD. The centralized team included 2 full-time professional archivists, several teams of part-time student processors, and 1 part-time student cataloger.

Experimentation in Archives
We processed nearly 4000 linear feet in two years. In order to achieve that processing goal, we experimented in a few ways.

We tested the limits of minimal processing as introduced by Mark Greene and Dennis Meissner in their 2005 article, "More Product, Less Process," or MPLP. Though MPLP was recommended for business records created after 1950, we tested its effectiveness on collections of all types, dating from the 17th to the 20th centuries. MPLP recommends an average of 4 hours per linear foot, but our goal was an average of 2 hours per linear foot.

Treating each collection as a unique case, we combined the philosophies of Greene and Meissner with those presented in Robert Cox's 2010 article, "Maximal Processing." We found the right mix of time saving strategy, without jeopardizing the arrangement and description necessary to make each collection adequately accessible in the time we could devote to it. Though we tried, we rarely attained that 2-hour goal, but we did average around 3 hours per linear foot. We feel, on the whole, that minimal processing served the collections well, and is not just for 20th century business records any more!

We used the Archivist's Toolkit to catalog the collections and relied on teams of student processors, hired and trained by the project, to complete a majority of the processing work.

To train the students, the project manager, Holly Mengel, and I developed a 3-day training program called "Archival Boot Camp." Boot camp included both classroom and hands-on instruction in the art and philosophy of minimal processing, DACS description rules, and the use of the Archivists Toolkit.

PACSCL Finding Aid Site
With significant support from the University of Pennsylvania Libraries, the project developed an online EAD repository, where finding aids from all participating institutions will be made available, and cross repository searching is possible. The site offers 3 types of searching capabilities -- there is keyword and facetted searching, and you can also browse collections by individual repository.

SLIDE - This is what the home page of the site looks like. With continued growth, we hope the site will become a primary access point for research in Philadelphia.

42 heads are better than 1
As I already stated, we worked in and with 23 archival repositories. When you take 23 repository representatives, add in 2 full-time project staff members, 16 part-time student processors and 1 part-time cataloger you get 42 stake-holders, potential for a strong product, and endless opportunity for collaborative action!

[SLIDE]
A project such as this one; however, requires significant organization, and centralized planning and management is necessary for success.

The benefits of a project team
The project staff managed day to day work since the project's official start in July 2009.

Holly Mengel, the project manager, and I developed the processing program, and teams of students processors, employed and trained by Holly and me, processed the collections. The processing program was approved and improved upon by the standards committee and other representatives from participating repositories, but Holly and I made sure that processing goals were met and that standards were upheld. To ensure a standardized product across collections and institutions, and to guide our student processors, we produced processing plans for every collection, wrote processing and Archivist Toolkit manuals, and, as I said a moment ago, created "Archival Boot Camp."

We employed a rigorous editing process for finding aids, and are getting ready to complete major authority work to ensure the use of standardized authorities across institutions and to strengthen the faceted search option on the finding aids site.

Then there are the students. They may be novice processors, but they are stake-holders and thoughtful collaborators all the same -- some of our best improvements stemmed from their ideas. For example, several students helped Holly and me refine our process for collecting data on processing times and preservation issues.

Committee work: shared knowledge, shared experience
Prior to the start of the project, several committees made up of repository representatives were formed. The Standards Committee determined that the project team would use AT, create EAD finding aids, and employ minimal processing strategies and DACS description rules. The standards committee also approved our training program.

The Oversite Committee helped us deal with unforeseen challenges on an as-needed basis.

The Technical Committee was comprised of archivists with either an interest in or special knowledge of computers and the Archivists Toolkit. Because technology was a constant challenge, this committee was by far the most active, assisting with all issues related to the installation and use of Archivists Toolkit, and the creation of repository Web folders, which are necessary for EAD harvesting and participation in the shared finding aid site. Thanks to this committee, we learned a lot about the strengths and weaknesses of Archivists Toolkit and how to effectively deal with them.

One of the most valuable developments to come from this committee was the Excel spreadsheet embedded with xml code. This template allowed us to complete data entry when Archivist Toolkit was unavailable, for various technological issues, and enabled multiple people to complete data entry for a single collection at the same time -- a feature not available in Archivist Toolkit. Because code was embedded in the spreadsheet, collection data was easy to import directly into the database, and the spreadsheet frequently saved us from losing valuable time due to technological issues.

The reality of large-scale collaboration
Direct involvement of repository representatives varied significantly. Once the project was underway, repository staff helped supervise student processors, coordinated on-site tech support, as necessary, and provided feedback. To facilitate continued collaborative thought, Holly and I met with repository representatives from time to time. We solicited feedback on specific processing decisions, to improve communication between the project staff and the repositories, and to improve our methodology and final product.

PACSCL-wide benefit
While collaborative contribution varied, there has been significant community-wide benefit.

In Philadelphia there are now more than 200 collections open and available for research, and almost 4000 linear feet of backlog eliminated. Individually, each participating repository got at least 7 hidden collections processed and several legacy finding aids converted to EAD,

The finding aid site is a fantastic resource for repositories and researchers -- It is a new venue for repositories to showcase

collections, and one that they can continue to add to
beyond the life of the project.

Researchers now have the capability to compare repositories' archival holdings in detail in one online catalog.

Beyond PACSCL
We have developed a new work-flow that, if employed by repositories, will hopefully continue to minimize processing backlog going forward, as well as a training program designed to help get the most out of student workers. Our methodology and traingin program are described on our project website and are available to anyone interested in adopting any of our resource saving strategies.

We have learned SO MUCH about the pros and cons of "MPLP" processing and the use of Archivists Toolkit. We established new guidelines for selecting appropriate candidates of all types and ages that would be served well by MPLP.

In our project blog, we have been open and honest about our experiences, highlighting successes and failures, so that the archival community in Philadelphia and beyond can benefit from our experiment.

Seek partnerships everywhere!
As I have already said, we have worked in many different types of archival repositories, including museums, universities and historical societies. While each repository was a unique experience, with different types of collections, expectations, technological concerns, rules of conduct and budget constraints, they all had something in common -- lots of hidden collections on their shelves and a desire to make them accessible for research! With this in mind, if you haven't already, I encourage you to look for collaborative opportunities both inside and outside of your own institution.

Thank you.