

**PACSCL/CLIR Hidden Collections Processing Project, 2009-2012**  
**Suggested Guidelines for Determining if a Collection is Suitable for Minimal Processing**

Not all collections are suitable for minimal processing. As each collection is unique, processing and the decision to employ minimal processing should be made on a collection-by-collection basis. With both the benefits of minimal processing and the implications minimal processing will have on a collection's use and accessibility in mind, archivists should examine each collection before making a decision. This document provides basic guidelines to assist archivists in making educated decisions regarding the appropriateness of minimally processing collections, but there are no defined rules for making that determination. Instead, archivists must take into account how easy the records are to scan for content and context and how much work must be done to make the collection usable for researchers. Above all, archivists must be aware of their own expectations for the final product and determine if those expectations can be achieved with minimal processing.

During the PACSCL/CLIR Hidden Collections Processing Project, project staff determined that, if both quick processing and thorough description are desired, few collections will be determined good candidates for minimal processing. In fact, the project staff found that collections that can be arranged efficiently often cannot be described efficiently and vice versa. For example, a collection of clearly identified 18<sup>th</sup> century volumes of correspondence may be arranged quickly, however, hundreds of pages of handwritten letters are impossible to adequately describe in a minimal processing imposed timeframe. Likewise, a collection of unorganized materials, regardless of age or type of collection, may not be arranged quickly, but because material has to be sorted to provide order, description is generally more robust.

Collections that should *never* be minimally processed are those that are frequently used *and* that have existing item level arrangement or description (usually in the form of antiquated discovery tools such as calendars or card catalogs). During processing, a collection is usually provided a new arrangement scheme, rendering existing discovery tools useless. A minimal processing timeline prevents processors from recapturing all the details provided in the original discovery tool, resulting in a collection that may actually be LESS accessible than before processing.

The PACSCL/CLIR "Hidden Collection" Project staff recommends that processing take place only after a collection is surveyed and a processing plan created. The survey will answer most of the following questions, which will help determine if a collection should be minimally processed and how much time should be allotted to ensure that sufficient processing and a usable finding aid is achieved.

**Question 1: What is the product you are hoping to obtain?**

If it is expected that the minimally processed collection will look and feel like a traditionally processed collection with no paper clips, staples or rubber bands; all items unfolded; and all items arranged within acid free folders; then minimal processing is NOT the desired method. However, acceptable levels of "minimal" can be established to suit the needs of both staff and researchers. The decision to remove papers clips, but leave staples in place; unfold items within a folder, but not arrange them; or to re-house the entirety of the collection in acid free folders, are all examples of ways in which minimal processing can be adapted to suit a variety of user

needs. When budgets allow, the PACSCL/CLIR Hidden Collections Processing Project staff recommends that processors *do* re-folder material, which helps ensure that retrieval for and return after reference is efficient.

Most importantly, an understanding of the reality of minimal processing is required. Researchers and staff must accept that the level of arrangement and description achieved during traditional processing cannot be achieved when processors are working at twice the speed (or possibly faster). If providing access to archival material is the primary goal, repositories without extensive resources and staff who rely on minimal processing can process collections and create highly successful finding aids in reasonable amounts of time.

### **Question 2. What is the type of collection?**

Minimal processing, introduced as *More Product, Less Process* by Greene & Meissner, was designed for 20<sup>th</sup> century corporate or institutional records. During the PACSCL/CLIR “Hidden Collections” Processing Project, processors successfully processed collections of all types (artificial, institutional/corporate, personal and family papers) and ages (from the 17th to 21st centuries) to a minimal level.

Corporate/institutional records are generally the easiest to process, as are artificial collections, *if* they have been collected and arranged systematically. Personal papers usually take more time than institutional/corporate or well-ordered artificial collections, but not as long as family papers, which are, typically, the most difficult to minimally process.

Based upon project findings, the PACSCL/CLIR Hidden Collections Processing Project staff believes that a base line set of processing times, with additional time incorporated to account for age and existing order, will allow processors to effectively arrange and describe collections within the confines of minimal processing. Although the following set of baseline processing times has not been tested, project staff recommends:

- 3 hours per linear foot for artificial collections or institutional/corporate records
- 4 hours per linear foot for personal papers
- 6 hours per linear foot for family papers

For handwritten/manuscript material (usually older papers), consider adding one hour per linear foot. For collections that are extremely well organized, tack on another hour per linear foot to give processors time to read materials and provide more thorough description. For collections that are lacking any order, tack another one hour per linear foot for additional time required for arrangement. Generally speaking, processors will still process the collections in less time than if they were traditionally processing the collection.

### **Question 3. Are there multiple creators of the collection? If yes, are their papers easily distinguishable?**

Multiple creators are usually an issue in family papers where there are many contributors. Due to family names repeating across generations, it can be difficult to distinguish one creator from another. Generally, the project staff does not consider family paper collections to be ideal candidates for minimal processing, but there are always exceptions. During the survey process,

try to identify the different creators. If this cannot be accomplished in less than an hour or two, the collection probably should not be minimally processed.

**Question 4. Does the collection have any sort of original or existing order?**

If the collection has logical and obvious original or existing order, minimal processing will help make the collection quickly accessible, even if there is a need to read materials more fully for content or provide preservation or conservation work in the future. Based on project experience, original/existing order makes arrangement easy, but often makes describing the collection more difficult.

If the collection does not have any discernable original order, it still may be an acceptable collection for minimal processing. Sometimes imposing order is easier than understanding an order that has been imposed without documentation.

**Question 5. Is the collection in folders that are reasonably well labeled?**

If the collection is stably housed in well-labeled folders, it is probably a good candidate for minimal processing. If, upon further examination, it is determined that there is no logical reason for the combination of materials within the folders, then reconsider.

If the collection is not in folders, it does not mean that it cannot work for minimal processing. If related materials can be easily identified, the collection may work very well.

**Question 6. How much of the collection is handwritten versus typed? If it is handwritten, is the handwriting legible?**

Handwritten material is more difficult to scan for content, even if it is legible, resulting in challenges for both arrangement and description. A collection with a lot of handwritten material *may* be very quick to arrange, particularly if it is bound in volumes, but will be more difficult to describe in a timely manner. Collections with a lot of handwritten material do not have to be old; in fact, the project team observed that modern handwriting is often less tidy than that of the 17th to 19th centuries. If it is not easy to determine who created the materials, to whom the materials were addressed or who received the materials, and it is difficult to discern what type of records are present, the collection should not be minimally processed. If most of the collection is legible and only a few documents require more time, then the collection still may be a good candidate for minimal processing.

**Question 7: Based upon the survey/processing plan, how much work needs to be done to make the collection truly accessible to the type of researchers the collection is most likely to attract?**

To answer this question, knowledge of researcher needs is imperative. What parts of the collection are likely to be of greatest value? How are researchers most likely to use the collection? If item level cataloging is necessary to satisfy researcher needs, minimal processing is not a good option. If it is believed that researchers will find the material via an on-line finding aid with either series or folder level description, minimal processing will provide quick access, even if further processing will be required later.