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The Smithsonian Institution Archives collects and maintains the official records of the Smithsonian, and the papers of associated individuals and organizations. Our collection of permanent records consists of almost 35,000 cubic feet, most of which is located in off-site commercial storage, and we often receive over 1,000 cubic feet of new accessions in a single year.

MPLP is a term that is almost never used in the Smithsonian Institution Archives unless we're specifically referring to the Greene-Meissner article. That's because MPLP was just a new term for something we were already doing and had been doing for a while. By 1997, we were beginning to realize that we would never be able to fully process everything that we were accessioning. Somewhat haphazardly, we began creating guidance for housing and descriptive levels that were "good enough." With this, we also began placing more emphasis on processing at the time of accession, a step up from the basic inventories that were generally created as temporary finding aids until the records could be fully processed. We were now working with the understanding that collections may or may not be fully processed in the future and should therefore be processed to an adequate level at the time of accession.

At the time it was assumed that many collections would still eventually be fully processed and "good enough" was a shifting target. Our concept, policies, and procedures for minimal processing are constantly being refined, based both upon our experience and changes in the environment in which we work. For instance, we no longer have any staff dedicated to processing collections. More detailed levels of processing are generally only performed in connection with a major event or when extensive preservation is necessary to prevent loss and often require grant funds. At the same time, the volume of records being accessioned into the archives is also increasing as more Smithsonian offices begin taking advantage of our services. We now have the same number of staff accessioning more institutional records while also providing what will most likely be the only processing those records will ever receive. Minimal processing is no longer an option, it's the norm.

That's right, we do not decide to do minimal processing. That decision has already been made for us. The only decision we make is when a higher level of processing is warranted.

So what is minimal processing in our archives? Our simplest explanation is based upon the fact that the vast majority of our collections are maintained in off-site commercial storage: The collection must be made safe to travel and described well enough to allow a researcher to

identify individual boxes of interest. More specifically, all materials must be in meaningfully-labeled folders in acid-free boxes and described at both the collection- and folder-level. We also remove large attachments (paper clips and larger), insert spacers, and generally "neaten" up the materials. Procedures for audiovisual materials and electronic records differ, but "good enough" is still the ultimate goal.

The archivist accessioning the collection has the freedom to make a judgment call about additional processing measures. If the folders are worn or particularly acidic, the archivist may opt to replace them. If the collection is mostly arranged, the archivist may opt to finish the arrangement. If the collection is small and unfoldered, the archivist may opt to do an item-level description. The archivists are not required to consult with anyone about these decisions, but they are discouraged from turning every accession into an elaborate processing project. Their performance plans require that 60% of their accessions, including processing, be complete within one month of their receipt at the archives.

Additionally, we track several types of information in our collections management system that help us identify collections that truly need a higher level of processing than what could reasonably be given at the time. Using numeric and alphabetic values, we note the level of description, the adequacy of the housing, the extent of existing damage to the records, the potential of future deterioration of the records, and the perceived value of the collection. A matrix helps us to determine when a higher level of processing than what could be reasonably given at the time of accession is truly necessary. These collections may include materials with extensive damage, unusual materials for which appropriate specialized housing was not available, or large quantities of loose, unidentified materials that require an extensive amount of research to attempt to folder and describe.

From 2005-2009, the Archives moved out of both its on-site and local off-site storage and prepared most of our collections to be sent to our off-site commercial storage. We decided to apply the minimal processing that we had been performing on new accessions to the collections we were moving. We quickly discovered that "fully processed" had never been a rigidly-defined term and many collections that had been designated as fully processed did not even meet our standards for minimal processing. Processing work was performed by almost every staff member, from reference archivists to historians to conservators, as well as interns under the supervision of the 5 archivists who were responsible for minimally processing the new collections. For the first time, a set of instructions and guidelines for minimally processing collections was written. Over the course of 5 years, staff and interns minimally processed 10,910 cubic feet of records in 10,569 hours. That's an average of about 58 minutes per cubic foot.

Today, 88.5% of our collections are processed at a level we deem satisfactory and 83.5% of our collections have online finding aids with descriptions at the folder- or item-level. That's a total of almost 3600 finding aids online. In addition, since 2000 when we really began minimally processing all new accessions, our average number of reference inquiries has risen from around 2500 per year to approximately 6700 per year. That's an increase of over 250% in

our reference inquiries since we began making minimal information about more of our collections available.

What were the keys to successfully implementing minimal processing?

1)   Although we do collect personal papers and the records of professional societies, the majority of our collection is institutional records which tend to be more straightforward than most personal papers. Staff and researchers know what to expect and what not to expect. The benefit of a more detailed finding aid to the researcher often does not justify the amount of work put into creating the more detailed finding aid.

2)   Minimal processing began with the archivists responsible for accessioning new collections rather than the processing archivists. The level of work associated with minimal processing is more closely associated with the basic housing and descriptive work performed by the accessioning archivist and is therefore less alien process. Archivists who have been responsible for fully processing collections may buy into the new process more easily once they have seen how it works and how it is received by researchers.

3)   Archivists are given the freedom to make decisions about levels of processing as long as they meet the minimum levels. This helps with morale. They are less likely to feel as if they are performing a disservice to the researchers, but their performance plans help ensure that the majority of collections are being accessioned and processed in a timely manner. Using minimal processing to decrease backlog more quickly can also help with morale.

4)   Most of our finding aids are online and searchable via Google and several Smithsonian-based search engines. This allows researchers to search across all of our finding aids and identify related materials that are physically and intellectually separated. Although this does not serve as a true substitute for traditionally arranged collections, it is adequate for many researchers.

5)   Finally, we do not decide when to implement minimal processing. We decide when to go beyond minimal processing. Changing the question that is asked can change the culture of your institution. Initially, there may be staff who have trouble doing less than full processing and other who will do too little, but as long as minimal processing is the expectation rather than the exception, staff will eventually come to understand and be comfortable with the level of detail that is expected of them.