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Janet Hauck

Whitworth University, [jhauck@whitworth.edu](mailto:jhauck@whitworth.edu)

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# How to Get More “Product” While Doing Less “Process”

JANET HAUCK, University Archivist, Whitworth University

Four years ago, I was like most of us in the archives world—I had a backlog of wonderful collections that sat unused and unprocessed in the basement. Like most of us, I had every intention of getting these collections processed and into the hands of researchers just as soon as time allowed. But unlike most of us, I was able to accomplish this by applying the “MPLP” method and cutting my processing time by more than three-fourths. Mark Greene and Dennis Meissner’s landmark “More Product, Less Process” method has rocked the field of archival processing for the past several years. I have been privileged to be involved from the start.

## In the Beginning

A generous grant from the National Historical Publications and Records Commission in October 2004 set the stage for the Northwest Archives Processing Initiative consortium to become a test-bed for the method. Greene and Meissner were hired as consultants and I took up my duties as consortium director. Eight institutions from Oregon, Washington, and Alaska received training in the MPLP method and from July 2005 to June 2007 we used it to process a total of 80 collections comprising 1,120 linear feet. As the project neared completion, people kept asking me repeatedly: What is MPLP, anyway? How does it work in practicality? How can I implement it in my archives?

Here are the answers to your questions.

## What Is it, Anyway?

Simply stated, the MPLP method applies the least number of necessary processing steps when readying an unprocessed collection for use by researchers. If the number of steps for arrangement, preservation, and description are reduced, the application will naturally reduce the amount of processing time. In an article for the Fall/Winter 2005 issue of the *American Archivist*, Greene and Meissner spoke to the situation: “Processing backlogs continues to be a problem for archivists, and yet the problem is exacerbated by many of the traditional approaches to processing collections that archivists continue to practice.”<sup>1</sup>

As they began their research, the authors posed an “either/or” question, which you may also find helpful to pose. Would your researchers:

- Prefer to use archival collections that are *fully* arranged, described, preserved, and inventoried, even if it means waiting *longer* to access them? Or,
- Prefer to use archival collections that are *minimally* arranged, described, preserved, and inventoried, if it means waiting a *shorter* time to access them?

In order to find the answer, Greene and Meissner surveyed an initial group of 48 researchers, mainly faculty members and graduate students. They found:

- Most would *accept generally lesser levels of organization* in processed collections;
- Most would like to see *basic descriptions* for all collections in a repository, *whether collections were processed or not*; and,
- Not surprisingly, most would like the materials *described online*.

## Practically Speaking

At the same time, Greene and Meissner conducted a survey of archivists to determine traditional processing practices. These included:

- Removal of metal paperclips and staples;
- Re-folding items in acid-free folders;
- Mending torn documents;
- Photocopying newspaper clippings;
- Creating inventories at the collection level;
- Interleaving scrapbooks with acid-free tissue;
- Rearranging documents into series; and
- Sleeving photographs.

The above is a laundry list of the practices my archives was using at the time. Yet now the authors were writing about “the scope of the problem and its impact both on processing costs and on access to collections.” What’s more, they were issuing “a call for archivists to rethink the way they process collections,” [and challenging] “many of the assumptions archivists make about the importance of preservation activities in processing, and the arrangement and description activities necessary to allow researchers to access collections effectively.”<sup>2</sup>

Greene and Meissner were about to make a proposal that would affect archival processing in a huge way. They were advocating a new, non-traditional method that would reduce the long-held processing figure of 15 hours per linear foot to a mere 4 hours! They based their proposal on a couple of basic assumptions:

- Most archival facilities today are climate controlled;
- The date range of a collection determines the depth of processing; and
- The origin of a collection also determines the depth of processing.

The first assumption, the necessity of controlling the climate in which archival collections are stored, is widely accepted. NISO standard TR01-1995 states that a repository with a temperature of 70 degrees Fahrenheit and a relative humidity of 50 percent, with fluctuations of plus or minus 5 degrees, meets the desired storage conditions for most manuscript

collections. This environment allows for preservation of materials, as well as acceptable working conditions for staff.

The second assumption is a practical one. If the dates of a collection range from the 19th or early- to mid 20th century, several generalizations can be made. First of all, the fasteners (paper clips, staples, etc.) will not be stainless steel, will most likely be rusted, and will need to be removed. Second, the folders will not be acid-free, may be brittle, and will need to be replaced. On the other hand, if the materials originated in the 1980s or later, the fasteners *will* be stainless steel and *won't* need to be removed. In addition, the folders *will* be acid-free and may remain in the collection.

The origin of a collection raises another practical matter. If the collection has come to the archives from a business, an institutional office, or even from a very organized individual, there may already be a logical order imposed. As the collection is processed this order might be maintained and merely inventoried at the series or box level. Again, the more recently the materials were created, the more likelihood that their original order is still intact and logical. There would be no reason to inventory at the folder level, much less the item level.

Greene and Meissner, based on the above assumptions, proposed that in order to save time and resources while processing collections, archivists should:

- Remove *only* rusted paper clips or staples;
- Re-folder *only* if original folders are brittle or damaged;
- Rearrange documents into series *only* in large or complex collections; and
- Create inventories at the box level *only*.

### How Can You Implement MPLP in Your Archives?

These new recommendations were, and are still, revolutionary. Back in 2005 when the consortium was beginning its grant project, our members raised some valid concerns. How could each archives implement MPLP in its own unique institution? How could we allow for the fact that each archives functioned differently on a day-to-day basis? In other words, how could each of us implement MPLP successfully?

Because of these concerns, Greene and Meissner were led to make a definitive statement. They claimed that a "middle way" could be found for any processing project by ensuring that *at least half of the processing steps* were done "adequately" rather than traditionally. For instance, description of a photograph collection could be done at the item level, if desired. Or if legal documents were being processed, arrangement at the item level might be needed, so that sensitive material could be separated. The table at right was developed for the consortium and is available for anyone to use.

We have adopted our own "middle way" in our archives. We've stopped removing every staple and paper clip. We've started creating box-level inventories. In the reading room, we present the researcher with only one box of material at a time. This prevents folders from being re-inserted into the wrong box and helps maintain order within the collection as

<b>More Product, Less Process: Answer to the Request for a "Middle Way"</b>		
<b>Processing Steps</b>	<b>Traditional</b>	<b>Adequate</b>
<b>Arrangement</b>		
Un-foldered material into folders	Yes	Yes
Folders into series	Yes	Maybe, if size/complexity of collection warrants
Folders within series	Yes	No
Items within folders	Yes	No
<b>Description</b>		
Collection/Record Group	Yes	Yes
Series	Yes	Maybe, if size/complexity of collection warrant
Folders	Yes	May list, not describe
Items	May list or describe	No
<b>Preservation</b>		
Re-folder	Yes	Only if original folders brittle or damaged
Remove fasteners	Yes	No
Segregate and/or photocopy clippings, carbons, onionskins	Yes	No
Segregate and/or sleeve photos	Yes	No
Encapsulate or mend torn documents	Yes	No
Interleave scrapbooks and photo albums	Yes	No
<b>Metrics</b>		
Hours per cubic foot	15	4

This table is provided courtesy of Mark Greene and Dennis Meissner, 2005.

a whole. But we still re-folder, re-label, and re-box everything in acid-free enclosures. Why? Because part of our mission is to instruct undergraduates in the use of archival materials, and we strive to instill a "respect for the material." This takes a bit more time, but our average processing rate is still quite acceptable. In fact, I am proud to say that even with the application of "middle way" steps, the consortium figure during the grant period was only 2.8 hours per linear foot (on average)!

### The Choice Is Yours

Is MPLP for you? Could you resist the urge to remove every staple and paper clip as you process a collection? Could you leave original folders in the collection and not re-arrange materials? Could you find a "middle way" of processing that saves time in one area while spending it where needed in another? The ultimate decision, according to the MPLP approach, will be made when you determine ways you can adapt your processing practices to your own archives and your own researchers. Good luck! ❖

<sup>1</sup> Mark Greene and Dennis Meissner, "More Product, Less Process: Revamping Traditional Archival Processing," *American Archivist* 68:2 (2005), 208-64.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.