

Comments for RBMS Spring Pre-Conference 2009

Charlottesville, VA

Unhidden Collections and the People Who Love Them: What We Know about Use and Users on both Sides of the Reference Desk

Introduction

In 2003, an Association of Research Libraries task force issued a challenge to special collections across the country to make their backlogs accessible to the public. In the archival community, this call was answered formally by Mark Greene and Dennis Meissner in their seminal work, "More Product, Less Process: Revamping Traditional Archival Processing." In their article, Greene and Meissner echo many of the task force's recommendations, namely that institutions develop formal criteria to guide archival arrangement and description choices that take into account the impact of those decisions on institutional resources, that repositories adhere as much as possible to national standards regarding descriptive schema, and that workflows be modified to accommodate collections in various states of processing. Greene and Meissner agreed with the task force that use and users should drive descriptive practice, rather than some abstract ideal. They also agreed that it was preferable for repositories to achieve some uniform baseline of description across their holdings instead of comprehensive description for a few collections and a complete absence of description for many.

Mark Greene, eager to test the tenets he espoused in MPLP systematically, began directing their implementation at the University of Wyoming- American Heritage Center in 2005. What follows are summaries of results of three studies associated with this work: one looking at the impact of one MPLP technique on public services, another directed at understanding users' views; and third in which members of the Reference, Access, and Outreach section of the Society of American Archivists were queried about their opinions of MPLP and its impacts on public services.

Unprocessed, Cataloged Collection Study

In April 2005, the American Heritage Center began to review its unprocessed collection backlog as part of a generous NHPRC grant. 1,932 collections were cataloged, combined with other holdings, or queued for deaccession review. In the absence of a finding aid, the collection-level records generated during this project were created from a survey of collection materials, provenance records, and reliable secondary sources. These records were then made available via OCLC and on the University Libraries OPAC. They were considered finding aids, and once they were available online, the collections they described were counted as "processed" and no longer part of the AHC's backlog.

Overall, catalog records were created for 537 collections, with a total volume of almost 7,100 cubic feet. 41% of these collections were found to be one cubic foot or smaller in volume. While only 14% of the collections cataloged were 20 cubic feet or larger, these collections accounted for 79% of the AHC's total "unprocessed" collection volume. The largest collection cataloged in this project had a volume of just under 780 feet. The significance of these volume statistics is that once the catalog records were publicly available, the collections they described were designated as open to public use. Obviously, the reference department was concerned about how it would provide access to large collections whose only finding aid was a brief collection-level record.

So, in order to gauge the impact of this practice, the reference department began to keep statistics on the number of times that collections described in this way were requested by patrons. Between October 2006 and July 2007, we received 27 requests for 13 collections. The mean volume of the collections requested was 50.3 cubic feet, and 78% of the queries came from off-site researchers. Of the 22% of requests that originated with on-site researchers, many came from patrons who were first-year undergraduates assigned from a large, Wyoming history survey class.

In response to this, the AHC initiated a couple of new workflows to create “quick and dirty” content lists and to queue collections for expedited processing. Student employees in the reference department created content lists for unprocessed, cataloged collections smaller than 2 cubic feet. The accessioning unit queued requests for collections 2 cubic feet and larger. Subsequently, these requests for larger collections were forwarded to arrangement and description. Lastly, the AHC began to provide a form to patrons who were unsatisfied with the arrangement and/or description of any collection, so that the processing department could make more informed decisions about which collections needed more attention.

NHPRC User Survey

In late 2007, Mark Greene asked me to conduct a user survey similar in content to the one that he and Dennis Meissner created for their MPLP article, but my experience at the AHC led me to ask a number of additional questions.

Among them were:

-Is the impact of MPLP on public services predicated on a certain total collection size?

-Is the impact of MPLP on public services predicated on an institution having a strong online presence?

-Do patrons expect reference archivists to bridge the descriptive gap between the products of basic processing and their information needs?

-What really constitutes access to archival collections anyway?

In February 2008, a user survey was rolled out that included a number of questions aimed at gauging users' general opinions of MPLP, along with others aimed at answering some of my questions about what patrons expected from reference archivists in the wake of these changes in practice. The level of response was completely unexpected. 600 responses were received. The survey was sent to a number of H-net discussion networks, but it was also featured on blogs associated with the American Historical Association and the Chronicle of Higher Education, and on the blog, ArchivesNext. I would also hasten to point out that many of the H-net lists to which the survey was sent were targeted at K-12 teachers. In addition, the survey was posted to a National Council for Social Studies discussion network. Our goal was to get a response pool that reflected the diversity of modern archives users.

By a narrow margin, "university faculty" was the most common user status reported, with 30.3% of responses. "Other" was the second most commonly reported status (29.2%), with archivists and historians figuring prominently as sub-categories. After "Other," "Graduate Student" was the next most often

chosen status, with 19.7% of responses. K-12 educators accounted for only 6% of responses.

The participants in the survey reported a relatively high level of experience with archives. 83% of respondents reported having used archives ten or more times. A large majority of survey participants reported having conducted research in two or more repositories. Furthermore, respondents showed a high level of sophistication in terms of understanding how various kinds of finding aids articulate with one another. When given the opportunity to rank the utility of item lists, folder lists, box lists, series descriptions, and collection-level abstracts, they rated folder lists as most useful, but many participants acknowledged that the utility of different kinds of finding aids depended on the size of the collection, the relative heterogeneity of the material in it, its arrangement, and the nature of the research being conducted.

Participants were also asked to rank the relative importance of a variety of access tools. By a wide margin, online catalog records were ranked as the most useful resource. Collection inventories ranked second. **An interesting note, especially for the purposes of our discussion today: reference archivists ranked third, ahead of digitized collection material and web searches.**

There were additional enlightening findings. Most survey participants indicated that they were fairly confident in their ability to find relevant material in collections, even if those collections were not well-organized. When asked to rate their agreement with the statement “I am confident that an archivist can help me find all of the material relevant to my research in a given archival collection,” the mean rating was 3.1 out of 5. Respondents gave the statement “An archivist will most likely be able to find any item that I cannot locate within an archival collection” an average agreement rating of 2.8 out of 5. While most respondents reflected a basic understanding of the trade-offs involved in making more collections available online and on site, they indicated a suspicion of the term “minimal processing,” and their responses suggest that many archival users expect reference archivists to bridge the information gap created by MPLP finding aids.

RAO Reference Archivist Study

The findings of the user survey spurred me to wonder what reference archivists’ opinions were. So, with the help of Jackie Dean of the University of North Carolina- Chapel Hill, Joanne Archer of the University of Maryland, and the rest of SAA’s Reference, Access, and Outreach section steering committee, I

created another instrument designed to gauge reference archivists' opinions about the impact of MPLP on public services. The response to this survey was much less robust. While 265 members of RAO viewed the survey, only 73 actually answered it. Still, I believe the results give us a beginning glance at what we know and what we want to know about the impact of MPLP on public services.

I believed that MPLP would have the strongest effects on public services in an institution with four characteristics: large collections, a large, specialized staff, a large patronage, and a robust online presence. In terms of both collection and staff size, responses varied wildly, from 36 linear feet to 130,000 cubic feet of collection material and 1 staff member on up to 3,900 employees. With regard to the number of on-site patrons served annually, the most common response was between 100 and 500. When asked about reference requests, responding reference archivists most often reported that they answered between 120 and 449 reference requests from off-site researchers annually. With regard to online presence, 94% indicated their repositories maintained a web site. 75% reported that they posted catalog records to an OPAC, and 61% reported that they maintained digital collections.

Another theory I entertained was that reference service for basically processed collections would pose less of a problem in institutions in which the entire staff shared reading room responsibilities. 60% of respondents indicated that a cross-section of staff worked reference shifts. Many respondents indicated that they performed both processing and reference duties.

When asked about how much time was spent on individual reference queries, the most common response was 15-30 minutes, garnering 36% of responses. Another 29% of respondents reported that they typically spent 30-60 minutes on an individual request. 76% of archivists reported that their institutions did not charge for research conducted on behalf of their patrons.

Participants in the reference archivist survey were asked to rate their level of agreement with a variety of statements similar to those in the user survey. The statement "I am confident in my ability to find material relevant to my patrons' research, even when the collections I am using are not well organized" received an average agreement rating of 2.8. Archival users responded to an analogous statement with an agreement rating of 3.1, but when asked to rate their agreement with a statement indicating their confidence in an archivist's ability to find material that they could not locate, they gave it a rating of 2.8 as well. It

appears that patrons believe in archivists exactly as much as archivists believe in themselves!

From the responses of archivists to this survey, it appeared that the impact of MPLP on public services was likely limited to institutions with large staffs divided along functional lines (accessioning, processing, reference, etc.) that managed large collections. Indeed, respondents more emphatically indicated a desire for guidance on how to make MPLP decisions systematically and consistently than they expressed concern over impacts on their reading rooms. That said, some participants did indicate that they worried about impacts on discovery, the physical security of materials, barriers to novice researchers created by basic finding aids and uneven description, and the potential impacts on staff time with regard to reference requests.

Conclusions

So, what do we take away from all of this? It appears, both from the user survey and that conducted for reference archivists, as if access to manuscript collections does not necessarily entail information discovery, as I supposed at the beginning of my research process. In the infancy of my career in reference, I aspired to be the kind of archivist who could put her hand on any particular item

in any given collection in her care, and I must admit that I felt a bit like a failure when I had to admit to patrons that I couldn't say for sure if a certain piece of information was contained in a given collection. As archival description moves from the intensive to the extensive in its methodology, I have learned that so must the reference archivist. We simply no longer have that luxury.

The results of these surveys also point up the need to maintain more detailed metrics around the use of our collections and how we answer individual reference queries. Many libraries and archives are working on just that, and I look forward to seeing their findings more widely disseminated. I also look forward to seeing more content management systems that facilitate reference work as well as they do accessioning, arrangement, and description.

Lastly, the results of these studies point to the need for public services and arrangement and description to enjoy a more symbiotic relationship. The more responsive that processing work can be to the needs of users on both sides of the reference desk, the more likely it is that patrons will be able to successfully use the collections we have revealed through the implementation of MPLP.