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May 15, 2011

Essay 1

Archives and the archival profession currently face a number of issues that affect archives' institutional and collection development policies. Some of the issues touched upon in class include digitization, budget cuts, deaccessioning collections, processing efficiency, reference services, preservation, promotional activity, and so on. For the purpose of this question, I will address digitization of archival material and processing efficiency, since these core issues have a huge impact on archives' budgets and usage.

Processing is a highly debated topic in archives management, since backlogs seems to be a constant problem. Should archives focus on creating a detailed container list for each collection, or should they sacrifice detail in order to process more collections? On one hand, detailed processing means that every single item in a collection is findable. On the other hand, expedited processing will make more collections findable. Either way, archives must find the right balance of detail and efficiency that will maximize the accessibility of their collections.

Archivist Mark Greene and Dennis Meissner address the processing issue in their well-known 2005 paper, "More Product, Less Process." During their survey of various archival institutions, they found out that at least a third of the collections at three out of five repositories were unprocessed, which is an extraordinarily high percentage. Some archives had a backlog of more than half of their collections (Greene & Meissner.) In response, Greene and Meissner examined realistic ways archivists could make processing more

efficient, in hopes of making more collections available for researchers. As the archives processing manual at St. Johnsbury Athenaeum says, the simpler the finding aid, even as simple as a MARC record, the better. After all, “researchers are coming to do research, so you don’t have to do it for them in advance” (St. Johnsbury Athenaeum Archives, 15). While it would be ideal for many archivists to have item-level arrangement and description, it simply is not feasible.

Other ways that archives could reduce processing and processing costs is to reevaluate their conservation methods. When Greene and Meissner evaluated several archives’ processing policies, they found that many of them required that all metal fasteners be removed, records should be put into new folders even when the original folders were perfectly fine, weed duplicate items, and so on. Even as archives attempt to minimally describe collections, their manuals seem to prescribe item-level processing and conservation. The University of Texas at Arlington Libraries Special Collections manual had contains a revealing quote, “By the time the finding aid is completed, the archivists will have worked with the material in each folder in the collection several times,” (Boley, Hull, Rodnitzky, & Saxon, Chapter 5 E, n.p.). This proves that they probably subconsciously want to conduct item level description, which only perpetuates the problem of backlogs.

Greene and Meissner do acknowledge that some of the experienced archivists may shudder at the thought of reducing the amount of information available in the finding aids and minimizing processing—yet they assert that it is okay to conduct conservation practices at the description levels. For example, if the archive is arranging things at a box level, they should do conservation methods at the box level as well, even if that means notebooks keep their metal spirals on, papers remain stapled (Greene and Meissner).

As some students brought up in class discussion, how much processing archivists do can vary depending on the collection. Some collections would do better with traditional description and conservation procedures such as item-level descriptions and refolding, while other collections really only need box-level arrangement and descriptions with a minimum of conservation. This may help expedite processing of backlogs, while giving special attention especially important collections. Also interesting, though this may not work for all archives, is allowing researchers access to unprocessed collections, and through the course of their research, they can provide some description assistance. This would give the archives a very rudimentary description of and finding aid for the collection, and free up archivists' time so they can process other collections. This would also free up time for digitization.

Digitization, though it often is part of processing a collection, is a separate and complex issue. According to the results of an archives colloquium, "New Skills For a Digital Era," there are two types of digital records—the digitized "born-analog" and the "born-digital" records (Pearce-Moses & Davis). For the purpose of this discussion, I will focus on digital preservation of "born-analog" materials.

Archives digitize materials as a way to help preserve material and make them more accessible to users, and as the editors of the New Skills for a Digital Era colloquium paper, Pearce-Moses and Davis, said; more people are digitizing records because it's become increasingly easier and cheaper to do so. As Mary Samouelian discussed in her award-winning paper, "Embracing Web 2.0: Archives and the Newest Generation of Web Applications," digital material can easily be shared on the Internet, so users can conduct research and look at material rapidly, even when they live far away or when the archive is

closed at night. This can boost the archives' user base and generate more interest for the un-digitized collections, drawing researchers in. More researchers and increased usage of the archives helps the institutions argue for increased funding.

While discussing digitization of archival material, it is important to note that it is not the panacea of archival conservation; there are some concerns to keep in mind. Even though digitization is relatively inexpensive, it still takes time and money to create digital versions of documents and photographs. When archives struggle with funding and with huge backlogs, they may not want to devote limited resources to digitization. On the contrary, following the spirit of Robert Byrd's paper "One Day...It Will Be Otherwise," I would argue that in times of limited resources, archives should focus *more* on digitization for two reasons. One, as I previously mentioned, it would generate interest among researchers and help bolster archives' case for more funding. Two, it will actually save time in the long run, because it will help reference librarians search archival records more efficiently through the use of digital records instead of through paper finding aids. Reference transactions will likely go faster and will generate more results, which will make for a more pleasant searching experience for researchers.

The other drawback to digitization is that the process can be damaging to material. We had a lively discussion in class about this, debating whether the damage caused by scanning documents was outweighed by the benefits of having a digital copy or not. The process of scanning is damaging—the powerful light affects paper negatively, and inverting an open book injures the spine. However, as others discussed in class, once the document has been scanned, it can remain in the climate-controlled archival facility and not incur any further damage while patrons primarily handle the digital version. This better preserves

the original “born-analog” document. If the document in question is too fragile for flat-bed scanning, one student in the discussion spoke of an alternative method of digitization called a copy stand. It involves using book props similar to the ones used in reading rooms and a camera on a specially designed tripod. Set up with a slightly longer exposure, flash or additional damaging lighting is not necessary.

Finally, the other thorny issue of digitization is the fact that technology becomes obsolete, which can make digital records unreadable in a short amount of time. Or as Jeff Rothenberg says, “our digital documents are far more fragile than paper” (1). There are some methods that can be used to preserve digital documents. Rothenberg uses the example of how the ancients preserved written text by transcribing, either in the original language or whatever new language is more beneficial. Digital information can be preserved in the same way by migrating them, either by copying them onto new media or by translating it to a new format. Both then and now, this process needs to be an ongoing effort; otherwise the information will be lost in time (Rothenberg). What Rothenberg did not touch upon was what we discussed in class—the use of PDF as a stable and readable digital format. PDF is well documented, so it will be relatively easy to write a program that can read .pdf extensions, as opposed to the rapidly changing word processing programs.

Inexpensive technology and the relative ease of posting digital material online makes digitization very attractive to archives, and indeed, archives should work on digitizing their collections as appropriate. However, it would be prudent to view digitization as another way to conserve documents, in conjunction with proper archival environments and other precautions. Digitization should not be used as an excuse to toss out the original paper documents.

Works Cited

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