

Greene and Meissner's Minimalist Approach to Processing

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Greene and Meissner's discussion of a more streamlined approach to archival processing is a rather dramatic call for change in its emphasis on something of a cost-benefit analysis, its assumption that all processing activities should generally be focused at the series level or above, and its suggestions that many traditional processing activities are often unwarranted wastes of time and resources. It is a very user-focused approach, meant to provide more access to more materials in less time. It mirrors trends within the library community, particularly OCLC's 2007 recommendations on library digitization initiatives, which essentially state that access trumps preservation concerns and that quantity probably also trumps "quality" (defined as extensive cataloguing).

Greene and Meissner recommend first determining the appropriate processing level for the collection in question (apparently it will almost never be the item or even the folder level), and then applying appraisal/weeding, arrangement, description, and preservation consistently at that level, moving into more specific sublevels only when the collection - or specific items within the collection - merits it. Any exceptions applied at the folder or item level must be justified by the material, and should not suggest that the same level of detail be applied uniformly. The authors suggest that item-level description, arrangement, and preservation are almost always a waste of time, resulting in unnecessary delays in providing access to the materials. The suspicion is that such obsessive attention to detail is more for the benefit of the archivist than the researcher. With respect to preservation, they question the wisdom of spending vast amounts of time and money on refolding and unstapling materials that will be stored in climate-controlled facilities that minimize the effect of these things to begin with. They also disparage the detailed arrangement schemes and hierarchies of Miller and others, and suggest that some very small collections might even be left in their original and chaotic states. In fact, they are very strong proponents of "original order" because in addition to

its theoretical benefits, it is also the most efficient means of arranging materials for rapid processing. Theory becomes practice.

Aside from the affection for provenance and original order, Jenkinson would presumably be aghast at this whole notion, primarily because it places the archivist in the position of determining the relative research value of a collection in order to determine the level at which it will be processed. Schellenberg might find it less horrifying, given his more user-centered approach and his increased tolerance for value judgments by archivists.

The obvious advantage of Greene and Meissner's approach is that it allows a dramatic (fourfold or more) increase in the speed of processing, and - in their view, at least - does not significantly compromise the quality of the materials being presented. The approach promises to eliminate backlogs and allow "good enough" access to all collections instead of superb access to a few select ones that may have been prioritized due to donor pressures rather than to their research value anyway.

Disadvantages, however, include the fact that this approach does force archivists into what may be a rather selective role in determining which collections, if any, merit more intensive treatment. It is also possible that important preservation or description issues will be overlooked if there is less detailed scrutiny; while there may be no studies on the benefits of archival-quality folders and other containers, it very well may turn out that they are of significant benefit. Perhaps the biggest potential disadvantage, though, is that without intensive inspection, archivists may become less familiar with their collections. Greene and Meissner address this to some extent, suggesting that much can be learned just from peeking into a few folders at random, but many archivists would likely disagree.