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Professor David de Lorenzo

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The paper by Mark A. Greene and Dennis Meissner outlines a problem which is currently occurring in archives across the country as well as the world. They state the case that processing collections to the item level is creating enormous backloads which are unprocessed. So much time is spent on refoldering, removing staples, and documenting each item in a collection that there is no time to actually process the majority of an archives' holdings. Greene and Meissner conducted a survey and compared responses from 100 respondents in order to compile a well-researched report on how much time, money, and resources goes into processing a single collection; the standards archivists accepts as commonplace; and the percentage of backlog each archive holds in waiting.

They also provide quotations and supporting evidence from a variety of sources and conflicting viewpoints in order to describe the current mind-set of archivists; drawing on such notaries as Schellenberg, Megan Desnoyers, David Gracy, Kenneth Duckett, Frederic Miller, Ruth Bordin, Robert Warner, Mary Lynn Ritzenthaler, Lucille Kane, Greg Bradsher, Jim O'Toole, Frank Boles, Kathleen Roe, Charles Schultz, Uri Haller, and William Maher. By providing both the theories of those who approach item level description as an art and those in favor of eliminating backlogs quickly, the paper makes solid points in favor of the latter.

The root cause of backlogs is revealed to be item level processing while the reason for this level of intensive description is a combination of fear, pride, and status quo. Item level processing is the way it has always been done and to give up on this is to become, in the eyes of its proponents, a substandard excuse for an archivist. Greene and

Meissner argue against this view: "…we allow our pride in craft to get in the way of our real objective," (4), and "…we must stop fretting over what users might think about us if given a dirty, disorganized collection," (29). Fear and pride are powerful deterrents for the status quo to remain in place, however Greene and Meissner are adamant in their push for change as the only way to resolve the problem of ever-increasing backloads, "despite the weight of tradition and the attraction of inertia, the time finally seems ripe to challenge U.S. archivists to change," (17)—"it is time…to make backlogs more embarrassing to the profession than failure to remove paper clips," (20).

Within this very class, Professor de Lorenzo has stated time and again that the Bancroft Library at UCB has its own immense backlog of unprocessed records. This problem appears to exist, then, even in my own experience thus far as an archives student. Greene and Meissner point out, emphatically, that the user should be the archivists' central raison d'être—not the beauty of their perfectly processed, item-level described, collections. The user, as well as the donors and the grant suppliers, will soon be clamoring for unprocessed collections to be available, and they would sooner have a disorganized collection than not have the collection at all. This makes perfect sense and is an excellent goal.

The methods by which Greene and Meissner describe achieving a reduction in archive backlogs is to forgo refoldering and removing staples—unnecessary precautions in climate-controlled environments—as well as performing only series level descriptions rather than the minute detail necessary for item level. This cuts out on re-housing photographs and discarding duplicates as well as sandwiching newspaper clippings with acid-free leaves. However, it does get the collection into the hands of the user that much

more quickly. Their argument in favor of series level processing allows for the occasional regression to item level if the collection is important enough, or even if just one section of a collection is going to see heavy use. They want to streamline the process as much as possible but are still willing to concede that some collections will continue to require more description than others based on the notoriety of their author or the interest of the subject matter.

Overall this paper is engaging and presents contrasting viewpoints in the archives world between maintaining the "craft" as is and updating practices to reflect 20th century massive paper collections and backloads. Greene and Meissner address a difficult question with revolutionary fervor for the need to change. Their paper presents some startling truths and some radical ideas which were probably not wholeheartedly agreed upon by the entirety of the profession. My own personal opinion is that their argument is logical and necessary in order to deal with the immense amount of paper accumulating in archives around the world.

Works Cited

Greene, M.A. and D. Meissner. "More product, less process: Pragmatically revamping traditional processing approaches to deal with late 20th century collections". pp. 1-61. Retrieved on July 1, 2007 from: http://ahc.uwyo.edu/documents/faculty/greene/papers/Greene-Meissner.pdf