The Overhaul Project at Seton Hall University Archives and Special Collections Center: Gaining Control Over an Unruly Archives

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**Situation:**

The Archives and Special Collections Center holds more than 300 archival collections, totaling approximately 5120 linear feet. As of the fall of 2012:

- Collections not well inventoried, many not inventoried at all
- Very few finding aids online, no catalog records at all, less than a dozen listings in an outside union catalog
- Control documentation on collections scattered and incomplete
- Collection housing often inadequate (temporary that became long-term)
- Limited space used inefficiently or inappropriately for materials

This was more than a backlog problem: virtually none of our collections were accessible or documented in a way useful to researchers or staff.

**Actual Process:**

Both the order of the original steps and the tasks accomplished in each step has evolved over the course of the project.

- Student availability, particularly over the summer, has affected the project drastically.
- Step 1 was only partially successful
  - A much longer process than anticipated
  - Student assigned to enter accession records did not consistently link records to collections
  - Records themselves were inconsistent, and incomplete
  - Recently, many more records were found and are being entered and linked; this step is ongoing, and part of a larger effort to centralize documentation through the Archives.

- Step 2 is continually being revised
  - Introduced and modified survey form
  - Collections with inaccurate or incorrect name, location, extent make this step iterative, with more intervention on part of the Processing Archivist

- Step 3 has been largely discarded
  - Instead of a priority assigned, a matrix is constantly updated noting what has been done to a collection and what tasks need to be completed
  - A separate list groups together work to be done according to level of experience required to complete it
  - Digitization is not being considered at this time.

- Step 4 and Step 5 have been reversed.

- Step 5 is largely successful
  - Shelving materials according to format is not completely possible due to minimal re-housing and another ongoing project in the shelving that prevents a complete re-organization at this time
  - Locations are being tracked in AT and an Excel spreadsheet to provide easier access to location information.

- Step 4 is going well
  - Even when the most experienced students work on a collection, this step still requires a lot of work for the Processing Archivist for each collection, as the only person currently able to generate finding aids and MARC records, and the only person who can post finding aids or modify MARC records to pass to Cataloging.

**Lessons Learned and Takeaways:**

- Well-trained students are needed to follow detailed instructions.
  - Narrative documentation created for this purpose does not appear adequate, as students and interns do not always follow procedures as outlined. A checklist for each collection might prove more effective.
  - Students should be more familiar with basics of processing before handling collections to prevent too little or too much time taken to ensure care of collection materials.

- Time and Space Management is Essential
  - Processing Archivist should check name, location, and contents of collections are correct before student workers begin surveying collection.
  - Students must have enough space to gather a collection together, and to work on multiple collections.

- Something is Better Than Nothing
  - Step 1 did not need to be completed before Step 2 began; access to collections takes priority over consolidated collection files; files are created and sorted as the project proceeds.
  - Basic finding aids provide access to collections, and patrons and stake-holders can communicate about which collections need more processing.

**Results:**

Since November, 46 collections totaling 165.3 linear feet have been inventoried, and finding aids for each collection have been posted online.

Currently, the Archives holds more than 300 collections, totaling approximately 5120 linear feet, of which 94 are considered processed or inventoried. There are currently 90 online finding aids. Collections and finding aids are also available via ArchiveGrid, the Catholic Portal, the Newark Archives Project, and SetonCat.

Therefore the Overhaul Project is responsible for inventorying and making available 15% of total collections, 3% of total linear feet of holdings, and 49% of processed/inventoried collections. The project has resulted in 51% of the online finding aids currently available.

Collections described by this project were not visible to researchers at all prior to this work. To date, 14 of these collections have been used by researchers in the reading room, and 45 of the finding aids have been visited at least once.

**Next Steps:**

A lot of work remains to be done.

- 200+ collections still need to be inventoried and described in some way. At the current rate of work, roughly 5 collections/month, the project will be completed in 2016.
- Shelf finds, unlabeled boxes, and intermingled materials in "to be processed" areas have added to work.
- Implementing a system of tracking project metrics might assist with improving efficiency and provide more data; however, the time and training needed to implement such a system might very well outweigh the benefits.
- An anticipated increase in student workers this academic year will increase the pace of work.

**Original Plan for Overhaul Project:**

The Overhaul Project was conceived of as a way to systematically go through all collections and documentation, to ensure that all materials were adequately housed, minimally described, and accessible to researchers and staff.

- **Step 1:** Consolidate paper accession records into the Archivists’ Toolkit
- **Step 2:** Physically collocate each collection, assess its condition and housing, do basic re-housing only as necessary, and gather basic information about the creator and contents.
- **Step 3:** Assign a processing priority and digitization priority.
- **Step 4:** Create and upload a basic finding aid, with very basic container list, and a basic MARC record.
- **Step 5:** Clearly label the boxes, shelve, and track locations.

As might be expected, this plan evolved rapidly, and has taken far longer than originally hoped.

**Some collections will not be a part of this project, for reasons including being fully processed by a student or staff member separately from this project, or the size of the collection (>100 linear feet) prevents its inclusion.**  

**ADN 0003.011 Bishop Francis papers: Before No finding aid, collection not listed online, very brief inventory, materials in six boxes with large stack of framed items in bubble wrap.**

**ADN 0003.011 Joseph A. Francis papers: After Completed finding aid and catalog record available online, consolidated boxes and framed items into appropriate boxes for format, locations recorded in Archivists’ Toolkit and spreadsheet in share drive.**

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