

2017

BOHMs AWAY! Lessons from a Collection Survey

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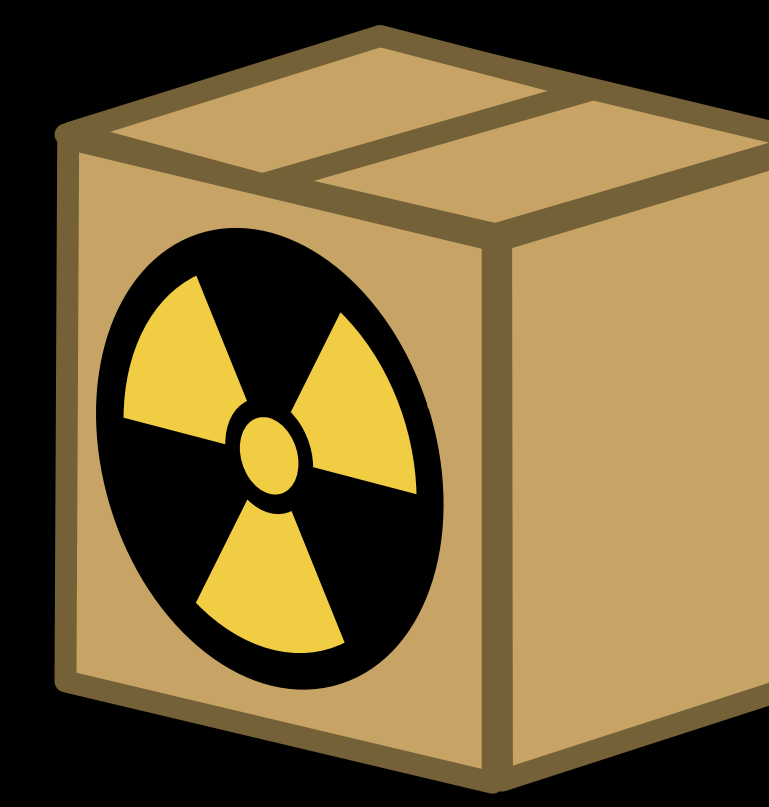
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BOHMS AWAY!

BIG OL' HOT MESSSES

Lessons from a Collection Survey



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For more information, visit: <http://bit.ly/2pg77Jv>

PROCESS

WHAT MAKES A BOHM: [BIG OL' HOT MESS]

- A dismal combination of
 - Low rankings in most areas
 - Perplexing arrangement, description, or control paperwork
 - Reappraisal needed
 - Unacceptable physical condition

James Branch Cabell Library at Virginia Commonwealth University underwent a major renovation and expansion from 2014 to 2016, requiring a move of all special collections and archives materials. Following the move, archivists conducted a survey to assist in regaining intellectual and physical control of the processed collections. The goals were to identify collections lacking proper housing, requiring further processing, or needing updated finding aids.

PROCESS

After some discussion and review of several survey tools, we decided to use the assessment module available in Archivists' Toolkit (AT). We created a paper survey form that mapped to the fields in AT and customized the ratings scale to suit our specific needs. To expedite the capture of our observations, we developed a list of frequently-used abbreviations. It took two archivists approximately 14 months to physically survey the collections and record the information in AT.

FINDINGS

We identified housing, description, and intellectual control as areas in need of attention but discovered unexpected challenges as well. Materials had been removed and placed in artificial collections with little or no documentation. Other collections had incomplete donor and accession information. We found some collections with problematic materials including food items, the departmental lost and found box, unsampled realia, and boxes of complete newspapers. Many boxes and folders were in poor condition and finding aids did not necessarily reflect the current arrangement of a collection. In other cases, we discovered that some internal finding aids had been updated while the public online version had not.

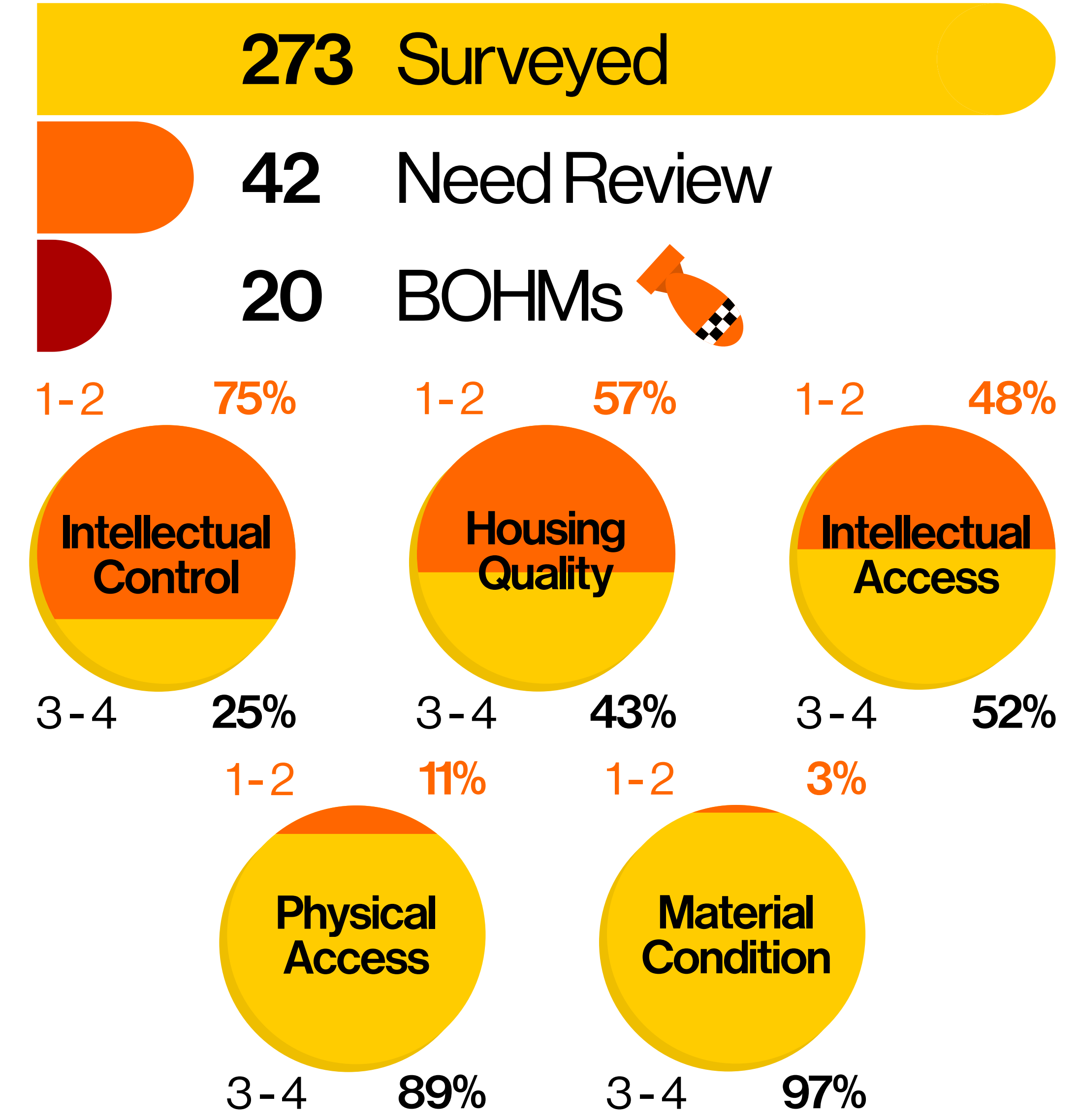
ACTIONS

Having reviewed and assessed the workflows and guidelines for accessioning, processing, and finding aid creation we developed a new framework. It has helped us set new processing priorities and make appropriate work assignments based on the processor's position, knowledge, and experience. Student workers, interns, and volunteers are now given only student-appropriate projects (SAPs) as identified in the survey while the professional staff tackles issues related to collection ownership, reappraisal, or complex processing.

LESSONS & OBSERVATIONS

Like other archival repositories, VCU's Special Collections and Archives must manage collections that were accessioned and processed inconsistently over the course of many decades. The survey has reinforced the lesson that clear, uniform accessioning and processing guidelines are essential. A periodic review of collections can be an instructive exercise for setting priorities for retrospective processing and ensuring that internal guidelines and professional best practices are followed. We now have a more accurate assessment of the state of our archival and manuscript holdings and have hard data to share with administrators and resource allocators. Guided by our work on the survey, we can look forward to making more informed decisions about collection care and access.

FINDINGS



ACTIONS

CONTENTS LIST	
Box Box 1	Architects: photocopied pictures
Box Box 1	Architecturd photocopied pictures
Box Box 1	Article 'The Antebellum Preacher' photocopy

BEFORE

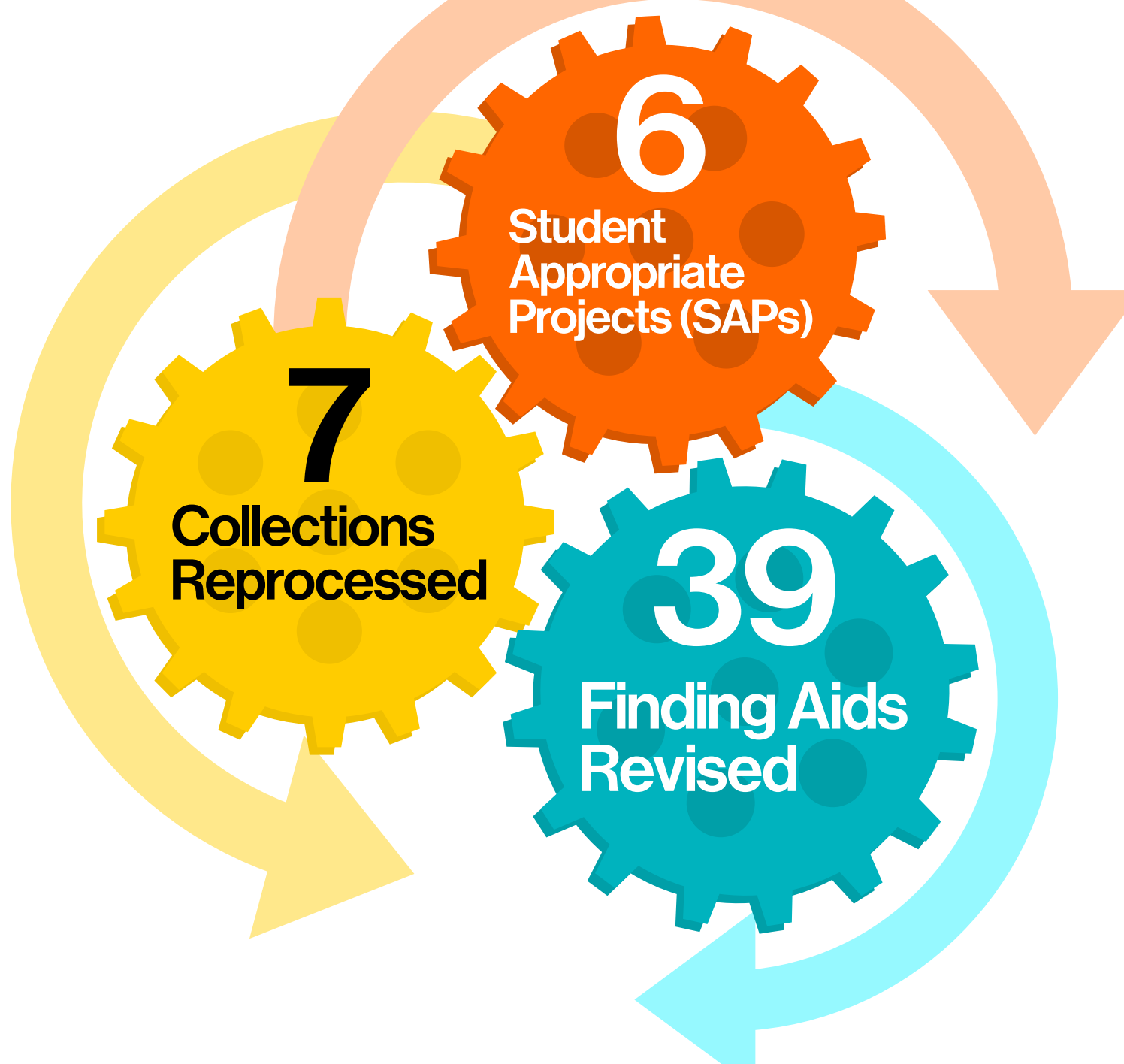
AAAAHHHHHH!!!!!!!



AFTER



IMPROVEMENTS



LESSONS & OBSERVATIONS

- No assessment module in ArchivesSpace, so need to keep AT data accessible after migration
- Documenting changes to collections is essential for future care
- Too generous in our ratings early on
- Rating scale helpful, but still challenging to maintain consistency in evaluations
- Some SAPs proved more complicated on closer inspection