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# Establishing Processing Priorities: Recommendations from a 2017 Study of Practices in US Repositories

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## Abstract

Building upon archival scholarship and previous solutions addressing backlog collections, this study seeks to identify a comprehensive, integrated, and effective strategy to establish and maintain processing priorities. This study is based on supporting research, which includes the results of a survey of archivists and the findings of five focus group discussions about processing priorities. Using these

findings, the authors (a) consider whether this focus on an old problem has motivated archivists to find innovative solutions; (b) determine whether archivists are using these tools; (c) consider whether and how archivists have changed processing priority practices and policies; and (d) seek to clarify current metrics to establish overall processing priorities.

**Keywords:** archival processing, archives collection management, project management

## Research Question

After exploring archival literature and canvassing assessment surveys conducted to help archivists prioritize the processing of backlogged collections, the authors sought to learn whether the profession has made progress in prioritizing processing, demonstrable in the adoption of new tools and practices. Our professional focus in recent decades has highlighted the need to increase access to collections in a timely manner. Since access generally depends on intellectual control and description for our holdings, how do we actively determine processing priorities and what tools are available to help create our plans?

Establishing processing priorities is a matter of balancing available resources, institutional priorities and donor relations. This can be further complicated by the need for more specialized resources and training for staff. Moreover, archivists must consider numerous institutional priorities, such as the backlog of unprocessed collections, reference, outreach, instruction, access, digital projects, and other “public facing” activities. Prioritizing processing requires archivists to consider two main areas of input: ease of access and use; and the research value of the materials. The availability of descriptive information (such as finding aids or inventories created during processing) can influence access and use. The impact of stakeholders, such as donors, corporate managers, or campus administration, can influence research value.

To understand the complicated interaction between access, research value, and prioritizing processing, the authors conducted a widely distributed survey of archivists; from survey respondents, they then engaged five focus group discussions with a total of 35 archival professionals from all types of repositories. The imperative question was how archivists determine and enforce processing priorities. However, the survey and focus groups also targeted other types of questions, such as whether archival professionals have engaged the persistent problem of backlogs and prioritizing processing to find innovative solutions. Archivists continue to look for metrics, tools, and new ways to develop processing priorities, provide solutions to backlogs, and deal with addendums and new collections. However, we found that complex and competing needs frequently put the prioritization of archival processing on the back burner. How can archivists address this issue, using tools and professional networks to support the core practice of prioritizing processing, and establishing intellectual control over all of our holdings?

## Literature review

Processing represents a significant investment of both physical and intellectual labor. Developing priorities for processing helps archivists and archives managers balance the many demands on staffing, equipment and supplies for their institutions. The key questions to be answered in setting our priorities

are: Which collections do we do first? What level of detail is required? and How much time do we spend on each collection?<sup>1</sup> But there are other factors that come into the mix when determining our priorities, and assessing these other factors is where we often fall short.

Collection assessment begins by reviewing the condition of the material and its housing, and assessing how well it can be found and used by researchers.<sup>2</sup> We must also determine the research value of the collection. Wendy Pflug studied whether archival assessment surveys were effective planning tools, rather than a first step in the larger goal to uncover inaccessible backlogs of hidden collections. She concluded that surveys can be an efficient method to gather consistent data in order to prioritize, plan, and describe collections.<sup>3</sup>

The early 2000s saw efforts to set clear, objective criteria for prioritizing backlogged processing. The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation funded several projects aimed at creating new assessment models for unprocessed and under-processed archival collections. The initial projects were completed at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, the University of Virginia and Columbia University Libraries. Archivists at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania developed a “Research Value Rating” to measure the level of research interest in a collection and assess the quality of the records. The Columbia University Special Collections Materials Survey built on this project by refining, testing and validating the original survey methodology and instrument. These projects would later be used as a basis for the Philadelphia Area Consortium of Special Collections Libraries (PACSCL) Consortial Survey Initiative.

The PACSCL project developed a numerical rating system to determine priorities for the backlog of unprocessed, under-processed or underdescribed materials. The survey measured physical condition, quality of housing, physical access, intellectual access and documentation of quality plus interest to provide a research value rating of 1 to 5 for each collection. Each rating included a documented rationale.

Elizabeth Slomba, in *How to Manage Processing in Archives and Special Collections*, also proposes a decision matrix to establish processing priorities. She suggests using the following matrices: collection development policy, institutional priorities, current and future research demand, collection content and condition, available staffing, size of collection, backlog, financial support, and donor relations.<sup>4</sup>

Most recently, “Guidelines for Efficient Processing in the University of California Libraries” lists factors beyond research interest. Value scores are derived from a set of four criteria: user interest, quality of documentation, institutional value and object value. The resulting value scores then factor into the department’s accessioning workflow.<sup>5</sup>

Beyond rating the physical state and accessibility of collections, these surveys also help weigh their research value. Granted, research value is difficult both to define and accurately measure. In “The Practice, Power, and Promise of Archival Collections Assessment,” Martha O’Hara Conway and Merrilee Proffitt acknowledge this difficulty and suggest that a thoughtful, good-faith effort aimed at identifying collections that might be of high research interest is really all that is required.<sup>6</sup> Research value can be determined using known information about a collection, including the topical significance and richness of its material, and using other information provided in an assessment survey. The University of Florida’s Processing Archival Collections Manual suggests that research value should be

determined by rating the topics best or most substantially represented (interest and demand) in each collection in the context of the richness of documentation already available on those topics.<sup>7</sup>

Timothy Nutt and Diane Worrell explain in “Planning for Archival Repositories” that their processing priorities factored in the significance of the collection, its relevance to the university’s curriculum, the acquisition date and the requests for use.<sup>8</sup> Research value depended on the collection’s relevance to the university curriculum. Greta Reisel Browning and Mary McKay, in “Processing Political Papers,” also suggest that research value should be the primary factor, ascertained through conversations with donors and staff, examining the collection inventory and consulting with historians and political scientists.<sup>9</sup>

The archival literature thoroughly addresses how archivists can interest faculty and students in using our materials. Yet few articles acknowledge the impact of faculty research, even though the research presented later in this article confirms that faculty frequently have a decisive influence on processing priorities. We only see a few examples of this in the literature. For example, Alice Schreyer’s article, “University of Chicago Explores Library-Faculty Partnerships in Uncovering Hidden Collections,” describes a collaboration where the scholarly expertise of subject specialists among faculty, graduate students and professional archivists guides archival processing priorities and processing levels.<sup>10</sup> Schreyer found that processing projects will appeal to faculty members who have themselves worked with archival materials and whose own areas of current research would benefit from access to new sources.<sup>11</sup>

Recent archival literature stresses the importance of potential use. In *ARL’s Processing Decisions for Manuscripts & Archives Spec Kit 314*, survey respondents were asked to identify factors that were considered in setting priorities for processing manuscript and archival collections. Most individuals (96% of the 73 responding institutions) responded that anticipated high-use of the collections was the most important factor. The other two highest-ranked factors were response to user demand and size of the collection. Some respondents noted that the experience, special skills and number of staff could also impact their processing decisions.<sup>12</sup>

The archival literature also reflects the importance of researcher influence in determining the research value of collections, which affects processing priorities. Alexis Ramsey observed in “Viewing the Archives: The Hidden and the Digital” that archivists should evaluate each collection for its anticipated use, size, the nature of its contents, the resources available for processing, preservation concerns, confidentiality issues (such as the presence of social security numbers) and relevance to the archives collecting mission. The anticipated research value should determine when collections are processed, based on past patterns of use and user demand as observed by archivists.<sup>13</sup>

In “Archives of the People, by the People, for the People,” Max Evans suggests that by making our collections available, even those which have only been minimally processed, archivists can better determine researchers’ interests. Reviewing their requests will influence decisions about additional processing. Archivists thus invite researchers into the decision-making process. Further, to understand our patrons’ demands, archivists must thoroughly track the use of our collections. With data about both the nature and the use of collections, together with researchers’ comments and requests, archivists can make informed decisions about which collections should get the fuller treatment of detailed processing.<sup>14</sup> When Mark A. Greene and Dennis Meissner undertook their NHPRC-funded

archival processing survey in 2002–2003, they found that only 9% of the survey respondents proactively invited users to influence processing priorities. However, 34% indicated that they might change processing priorities if users supported this idea.<sup>15</sup>

One of the biggest challenges in understanding researcher influence is how to *consistently* measure use. In “Data-driven Management and Interoperable Metrics for Special Collections and Archives User Services,” Joyce Chapman and Elizabeth Yakel discuss ways to track research use and provide quantitative data for improving research services. For example, North Carolina State University’s Special Collections Research Center created an Access database to track all user registrations and collection usage from 2007 to 2010. The resulting data helped archivists determine processing priorities based on areas of research interest.<sup>16</sup>

The SAA-ACRL/RBMS Joint Task Force on Public Services Metrics surveyed how we collect, work with, and think about data in a public services context. The task force states that the primary purpose of special collections and archives repositories is to acquire, preserve, describe and facilitate access to their holdings. Monitoring levels and patterns of collection use measures their success in fulfilling this mission. The approved standard for measuring collection use is to count the number of checkouts for a collection by registered users, onsite and virtual, as well as track requests for reproduction, exhibits and interlibrary loans.<sup>17</sup>

One thing that assessment surveys do not measure is the influence of stakeholders on our processing priorities. Stakeholders include donors (whether of money or materials), administrators, government or corporate managers, researchers, faculty, and archivists who acquire the collections.<sup>18</sup> These stakeholders can have a significant role in determining processing priorities. Our focus group respondents admitted that they may shift processing priorities when stakeholders request access to specific collection materials. While this kind of input can be helpful, such demands were not always seen as a positive influence. In *Donors and Archives*, Aaron Purcell reiterates that despite donor influence, researcher demand remains the primary factor in determining priorities for processing backlog collections.<sup>19</sup>

Donna McCrea, in “Getting More for Less: Testing a New Processing Model at the University of Montana,” examines the criteria she employs for prioritizing collections, based on a review of research requests and initial collection inventories, as well as donor sensitivities. She considers (a) the potential negative impact on donor relations if the collection remains unprocessed; (b) whether processing the collection could attract monetary donors or “friends” to the library, a very important issue for administrators; (c) whether processing the collection could attract materials of similar scope; and (d) whether processing the collection is the only way to understand potential research demand.<sup>20</sup> Proactive communication about processing priorities—whether with donors, parent institutions, staff or researchers—can build understanding between all parties involved in the decision-making process.

In general, the literature provides a useful discussion about the importance of creating and establishing processing priorities. Archivists have been trying for years to develop tools and best practices to prioritize processing. However, the discussion and accompanying reports do little to show how specific ideas are actually applied in practice, even where assessment tools have been created.

## Survey methodology

To evaluate the archival profession's current efforts to establish and maintain processing priorities, the authors issued a 29-question survey (see Appendix A). The survey focused primarily on the following questions: Who establishes processing priorities? What preparatory information is gathered? What outside factors influence decision-making? What are the common barriers to success?

The survey was web-based, and a URL link was distributed to national and regional archival LISTSERVs, including EXLIBRIS-L, Midwest Archives Conference, Society of Georgia Archivists, Society of Southwest Archivists, Mid-Atlantic Regional Archives Conference, New England Archivists, Northwest Archivists, Chicago Area Archivists, St. Louis Area Archivists, and the Society of American Archivists Archives & Archivists Listserv. In addition, the link was distributed to several SAA sections including the Manuscript Repository Section, Description Section and Reference, Access and Outreach Section. Participants were made aware of the stated goal of the survey, namely to investigate how processing is prioritized, examine how assessment tools are used, and identify barriers to those practices.

The survey was made available for four weeks, and the authors received 312 usable responses. Participants who did not click "submit" after answering questions generated incomplete responses which were eliminated. The process of allowing archivists to self-select as respondents may have allowed for bias in the response pool and had an impact on the response rate. In particular, those who are more interested in discussing processing priorities may have been more likely to respond. However, the authors viewed listserv distribution as the best way to access the target population of archivists from different types of institutions. The results were analyzed using Google Analytics. Survey data was presented as part of the research forum poster session at the 2017 SAA Annual Meeting in Portland, Oregon.<sup>21</sup>

At the end of the survey, respondents were invited to indicate willingness to participate in focus groups, which convened from September to October 2017. Again, these volunteers were self-selected; of those who volunteered, the authors selected 35 individuals who worked in academic, religious, corporate, state/federal government, public library and museum archives. Thirty-three of the 35 selected archivists participated in the discussions. The focus groups were given a set list of discussion topics that explored issues related to determining research value and priorities for processing, as well as challenges in developing and maintaining them. The narrative data was analyzed qualitatively by reviewing the responses from the notes taken by the authors during the discussions and by assigning each response to a specific topic or theme. For each question, responses were rendered anonymous and aggregated to identify themes or patterns, and were organized into coherent categories. (See Appendix B for the list of questions and coded responses). Emergent categories or themes became apparent after reviewing the data several times. These would be grouped together by emerging ideas or patterns and the categories were defined by our own descriptive phrases.

## Survey results

As the literature and ongoing professional discussion have shown, establishing processing priorities is a key aspect of archival program management. The survey, designed to learn more about current

practice in various repositories, was the first step in a series of attempts to gather information that included a poster session at SAA, where the authors gathered feedback from attendees, and follow-up discussions with 33 archivists in five focus groups. The survey established baseline practices in repositories, which informed both the poster session and the focus groups. While many respondents were from academic institutions, a number hailed from museums and referenced the processing of material culture collections. Corporate and government archives were also represented.

The survey began by identifying the individuals responsible for processing—defined as arrangement, description and housing of archival materials for storage and use—in the special collections, archives or combined programs. Ninety-two percent of the respondents stated that processing, whether manuscripts, archival materials, digital-born materials or material culture collections, was an activity within special collections or archives. The remaining 8% indicated that manuscripts and archival materials were processed outside their area of responsibility.

While 60% of institutions noted that determining processing priorities is primarily the responsibility of the department or unit head, with other archivists' input if available, some institutions take a team approach (11% of respondents). As one respondent noted, "The staff person who oversees our arrangement/description activities works with curators and processing staff annually to identify priorities and prepares a comprehensive proposal for arrangement and description priorities for the following year, which is reviewed and adopted by the full department."

When asked when processing priorities were determined, 80% stated that this was done as part of the accessioning workflow or when "demanded by researchers, donors or management/administration."<sup>22</sup> This reflected the influences voiced in the archival literature. Only 14% indicated that prioritization was done systematically and annually. Most institutions track their unprocessed collections using either databases or content management systems, although 11% of survey respondents admit to not tracking this information at all.

The types of information that archivists gathered and reviewed prior to assigning processing priorities included research value, donor influence and preservation issues. Respondents also highlighted size of collection, use statistics, reproduction requests, length of time in repository backlog, intrinsic value, preexisting arrangement and description, and privacy issues or significant restrictions.

Collection use was the top determining factor in prioritizing processing. High demand by researchers was identified as either important or extremely important to 90% of respondents. When asked to describe how they evaluated the use of collections and series within collections, respondents listed: observation as a result of discussion with user or anecdotal (63%), use statistics from year to year (60%), website hits and database access figures (16.5%) and online surveys (post use) or user comment cards (4%).

One individual noted, "We take patron and staff comments into account when deciding if collections should be re-processed for easier use. We also prioritize collections for processing if patrons are actively requesting to use them (via Reading Room requests)." Another explained, "As a small agency, we coordinate with the departments to discuss our preservation efforts and receive input back from them on items of concern or those that can wait." And another stated: "In my collection, the archivists ARE the researchers (I work in a business repository) so observation is key. Not only of how often we



need to access particular collections, but understanding what trends we are observing in our business, and knowing what we need to make available soon. (e.g., perhaps we know a company anniversary is coming up soon, or the company is focusing on a particular business area, and we know of an archival collection that could be tapped as a resource).”

The second highest ranked factor was whether the collection was designated to be a significant collection by archivists or other staff, which drew a 78% response of either “important” or “extremely important.” This is largely based on observation and anecdote, where staff members share observations made during reference work and processing. Less influential factors included the work needed to complete processing, the expectation of the donor, the size of the collection, and the conservation needs of the collection (see Chart 1).

### Chart 1

In order to measure outside influence on processing priorities, participants were asked if researchers, faculty or donors were part of the planning discussion. The majority (65%) indicated that they were not. Of the remaining respondents, 32% replied that these decisions were discussed in an informal setting. While there seems to be a strong push to use social media in archives,<sup>23</sup> it is notable that 97% of archivists responding to this survey do not use social media as a way to seek information from their users about processing needs or improvements to access. We use social media to provide information about our repositories, but we are not using social media to gather information about our users.

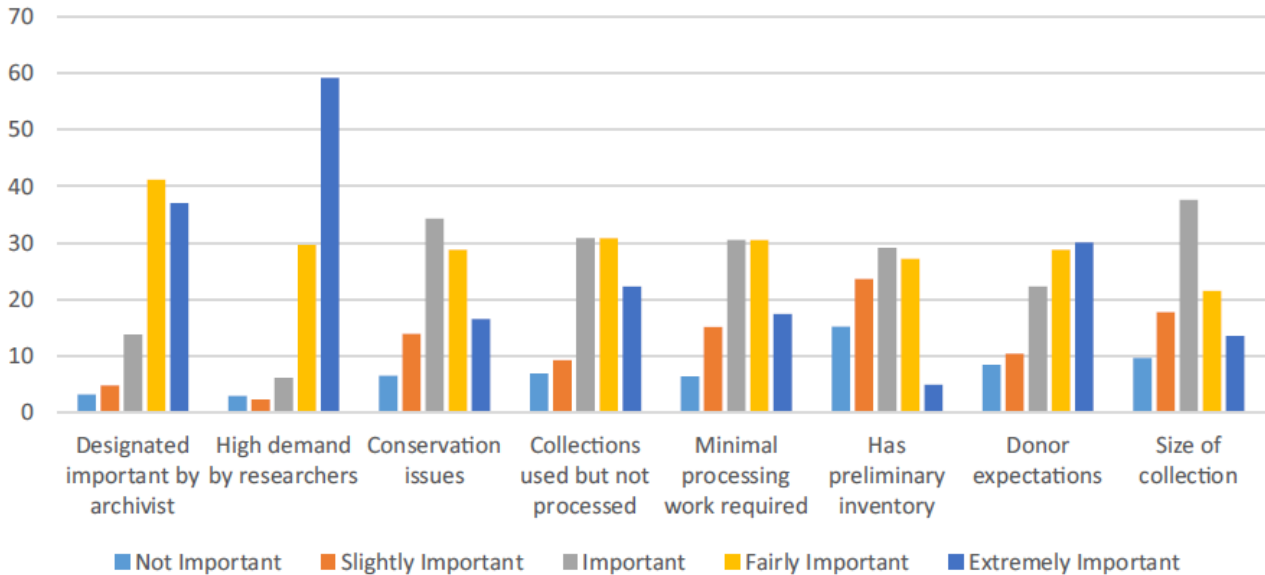


Chart 1. Factors that determine processing priorities.

Several respondents did advocate for soliciting opinions outside of the archives. As one noted, “It’s useful in determining what kinds of research projects are of interest to researchers right now. One patron’s opinion shouldn’t affect processing priorities, but if several of them are interested in a

particular collection for their work, that might influence decisions simply so these collections can start being used. Archives exist in part to be accessed.” Another added: “Part of the reason behind processing is to facilitate user access. If a collection is requested, it obviously has some value to a researcher. Processing that collection not only completes a task that would have to be completed eventually, it also shows the user that you value them.” Clearly, outside opinions can help us learn more about our users, as a third respondent noted: “While every conversation might not result in the same level of impact, having discussions with those who use our collections is of the utmost benefit as it helps us to understand their information seeking behaviors and also gives us a better sense of what materials will be/are of interest/use to them. We want our collections to be used, so by seeking input from the users, it helps us to gauge our strategies to make materials as accessible as possible.”

With inclusiveness, however can come challenges. One respondent observed: “Generally these discussions lead to changing priorities dramatically and sometimes collections have to be dropped from priorities all together to meet the established processing need. Archivists in a corporate setting must be flexible in setting processing priorities, provide quick turn-around, while realistically managing expectations.” This reflects a tension found not only in corporate archives, but in the shifting needs in all types of repositories.

A collections assessment can serve as a useful tool for informing, planning, implementing and guiding processing priorities. Eighty percent of respondents indicated that their institution has not used an assessment tool such as PACSCL<sup>24</sup> or the Columbia University Preservation Survey tool. Twenty percent of respondents use such assessment tools as PACSCL<sup>24</sup> or an adaption of a similar tool, as well as content management systems such as Archivist Toolkit<sup>25</sup> or Trello,<sup>26</sup> which is not archives-specific. In fact, one respondent explained “All of our collections are surveyed (PACSCL style) when they arrive onsite (either as new acquisitions or from storage) and are added to the queue in a position based largely on the skill set required for processing... I cannot imagine dealing with a backlog such as ours without the survey.”

Barriers to establishing and maintaining processing priorities paralleled many of the ongoing barriers for multiple activities in repositories, as experienced by archivists across the profession. Most frequently mentioned were reduced budgets and/or staff (74%), backlog of accessions (41%) and lack of organizational infrastructure (20%). The perception of the time necessary for processing collections and the value of processing itself was also an issue. As one respondent noted, “processing is one of the few parts of my work that doesn’t have a deadline. Therefore, when I’m mostly concerned about the ‘survival’ of my repository, I focus on things that nonarchivists ‘see’ value in—reference, exhibits, outreach, class visits, presentations, etc. As much as I hate it, processing is always least and last.”

Overall, respondents from different sizes and types of institutions indicated that these barriers persisted across all parts of the processing workflow: planning priorities, maintaining priorities, reference and outreach programming, instruction and collection development. The lack of adequate staffing and the challenge of working with reduced budgets had the biggest impact on maintaining priorities.

## Focus group discussions

To gain a better understanding of the practical application of processing priorities in a repository, the authors interviewed 33 archivists in five focus groups. These discussions served to clarify tacit practices and norms shared by archivists from different types of institutions around the country, adding to the insights generated by the survey results.

Evaluating potential research interest within academic institutions, government archives and museums depends a lot on subjectivity. Though archivists often have sufficient information about past users, we lack information about future interests because we have little direct input from current users, whether those researches are faculty teaching classes or scholarly researchers. Thus, evaluations of research interests are anecdotal or ad hoc. Nonetheless, one familiar theme emerged from our discussions: archivists frequently determine potential future use based on past research questions or patterns.

When archivists received sufficient input from faculty or their corporate body, or when they tracked collection use to evaluate research interest, they were much less likely to rely on ad hoc or anecdotal methods to determine future use. This, in turn, helped shape processing priorities.

Academic and museum archivists received input from instructors about collections that supported classroom use or projects, or from direct queries to faculty and teachers about research interest in a specific collection. Archivists also gathered information from users in a reference interview, during the course of research, or after the research was completed. A small percentage of archivists (6%) responded to requests to provide access to unprocessed materials specifically made by users or other external influences, such as donors, media or public relations. Museum archivists worked with curators in much the same way, identifying collections that supported exhibits, while a small number also received direct requests for processing from curators or others in museum administration. Of the four archivists in the focus group representing business or government archives, only one indicated that records format and record restrictions were used to guide processing decisions. Typical records management practices, in this case, seemed not to influence processing decisions.

Beyond direct feedback, many archivists use statistics to interpret research interests. Nearly half of archivists (46%) use in-house tracking reference systems, including pull slips of requested collections and patron registration forms. Roughly 18% of institutions use automated request and workflow management software, such as Aeon, or apply a program such as Google Analytics to assist with tracking research use and interest.

As with the survey, the focus groups were asked about barriers to many archival tasks. Insufficient funding and staffing are regularly identified as the most significant impediments to progress. Asked about additional barriers, 31% of archivists in the focus groups agreed that they had too many competing priorities to effectively prioritize processing. This is attributed to administrative/departmental goals changing over time, and included new acquisitions, exhibitions and digital projects. Another common theme was managers' and administrators' lack of awareness of the basic resources required to process collections. In large repositories (e.g., a unit with separate public services and processing staff), archivists themselves may not fully grasp the resources necessary to complete a processing project. Processing takes training, time and physical space. As a result, some collections which are not associated with a high profile donor or do not reflect a well-known research strength of the institution can easily be put aside in favor of higher-profile collections.

Beyond processing priorities, it appears few programs have strategic plans in place to effectively manage resources and programs. This was especially evident in academic archives. Academic archivists may be involved in strategic planning in their libraries, but based on focus group responses, that strategic planning has not trickled down to the repository, nor to the level of setting processing priorities.

Business archivists expressed a mandate for strategic planning and were thus more likely to include prioritization of processing in that planning. One business archivist noted: "We establish priorities and a 3-year plan that is reviewed annually. Priorities may shift, but they are established." Business archivists expressed a similar complaint about conflicting priorities, however, noting that setting priorities was easy, but keeping them was difficult.

Most respondents (84%) allow public access to unprocessed collections. However, 71% indicated that this had little to no impact on their processing priorities, despite the fact that a request for access to unprocessed material implies evidence of demand and potential use for the particular collection.

Finally, archivists were asked to consider how the profession can develop a more proactive approach to providing resources that can be used, adapted and implemented when establishing and maintaining processing priorities. The single most popular response suggested developing a shared resource documenting best practices. The kinds of best practices mentioned varied greatly and included project management, policy development, processing guidelines, means of educating administration and devising processing metrics and standards. Several individuals agreed that many of these methods needed to be incorporated into the archival education curriculum and taught in library/archival graduate programs. One individual noted that establishing best practices "is an iterative process," explaining that it took their institution five years to develop a processing priority metric, as it continually changed over that time.

In a lighthearted, but no less significant suggestion, some of the archivists wished for the development of a support therapy group for collegial motivation, reflecting the desire to discuss timely issues and to provide inspiration to actually set and act on plans like establishing and maintaining processing priorities. This speaks to the importance of some kind of shared resource.

## Discussion

Processing collections to gain intellectual control, and ultimately make them available to researchers, is one of the archivist's fundamental tasks. Our surveys and focus groups helped show how archivists struggle to prioritize processing, and how it can be postponed because of competing priorities and demands. Archivists tend to put a high premium on service, and therefore we often respond to our administrations, to the immediate needs of our users, and on occasion to donors or to other stakeholders in deciding what material is accessible and when it becomes accessible. However, this is often done at the expense of a true understanding of the priorities and true workflow of the repository.

When it comes to assessing collections and determining research value, the survey and focus groups illuminated a big challenge for archives: the need for objective standards and metrics to measure

things we claim are of great importance, such as the “research value” of a collection. As many archivists echoed, the research value of a collection should be a driving factor when determining processing priorities. However, what we mean by research value is ultimately determined in many different ways, and there is little or no agreement on how archivists understand it. “Research value” may be dependent on the context of the repository, the current research interests, or on anecdotal information gathered by the individual archivist. Unfortunately, it does not appear that we are actively and consistently seeking guidance from researchers and users to facilitate a clear and objective standard.

The realities of practice and workflow often lead to an uncritical reliance on reviews of past trends, rather than a proactive assessment of future uses. What is more, how archivists identify the materials used by patrons is not consistent across repositories, and we are not systematic in our approach to gathering information about our collections. As a result, much information about research value or potential research value is purely anecdotal, and archivists tend to interpret research value by gut and intuition rather than concrete data. Survey and focus group responses show that we are not consistently gathering feedback from users or compiling data and statistics for assessing use. We generally do not have constructive conversations with our users, managers, faculty, or donors to make decisions about priorities. We are sacrificing assessment and analysis to react to immediate needs.

The press to address immediate needs also highlights another problem. Our research has shown that processing often yields to other priorities within the repository. In busy repositories, the main concerns are responding to reference requests and demands for use. Archivists prioritize these service activities above all others, and processing may take a back seat, especially when staff is not sufficient to maintain both activities at once. Archivists also expressed concern about funding levels, which may contribute to inadequate staffing, a lack of physical resources (boxes, computer software, etc.), or inadequate facilities for large processing projects. Finally, archivists were extremely concerned about their inability to hire staff with advanced processing skills – an inability based on multiple factors including lack of funding for positions and a lack of adequate pay to bring in archivists with skills above the entry-level. This trend is not isolated. Our research shows that this happens across the profession, regardless of the size and type of repository. Barriers to effective processing and prioritization, therefore, reach well beyond the walls of the repository, and sound processing practice can be directly influenced by the budget and hiring priorities of the institution itself.

The difference in resources at different repositories put the prioritization process into high relief. Some repositories have specific staff devoted to processing, while others are “lone-arrangers” who must attempt to do everything. In repositories that have dedicated processing staff, there was often a disconnect between those who work intimately with the researchers (and therefore have anecdotal information about the research value of the collections) and those who process. While repositories with larger staff resources had some chance to create feedback mechanisms that would steer information about archival value toward processing decisions, this was not a failsafe. All archivists agreed that the needs of administration or management could derail a processing project with ease. In repositories where lone arrangers were responsible for processing, priorities were almost exclusively based on immediate needs: priorities would be overtaken by a collection that a patron wanted to use, or a collection that might be of interest to an administrator or donor. Staffing and funding are not guaranteed measures of success in prioritizing processing.

With that said, all archivists in these focus groups agreed on the importance of actually establishing and adhering to processing priorities. Understanding our collections allows us to meet our most basic responsibilities. In order to answer reference questions, create digital projects, or undertake outreach, you must have basic intellectual control of your materials. You must know what collections you have, and they must be accessible. Prioritization also helps us address the very problems that we have identified in this discussion. If we have a firm grasp of our processing priorities, we are better able to respond to shifting administrative priorities, by providing evidence of the value of collections and concrete reasons for why we need to provide timely access. Processing priorities allow us to establish the value of our collections in an environment where repositories are competing for resources within their institutions, and where institutions are competing for resources from outside. A good grasp of the most valuable collections that we have, and a commitment to making those highly accessible, speaks to the value of the repository and to the value of the materials it holds.

While most archivists prize responding to users as their most important work, we can make a serious argument that it is the intellectual and physical control of collections which underpins processing that makes this work possible. Carefully establishing processing priorities is key to managing our programs, because it provides the basic infrastructure that supports all other archival tasks, including making informed acquisitions, conducting appropriate preservation, providing successful reference and outreach, and arguing the case for the use of storage facilities (whether physical or electronic). The “chicken or egg” question of what work is more important shows that without a firm foundation of basic intellectual control over our collections, a repository can’t respond to any of its users, or to administration.

## Looking forward

Establishing processing priorities means balancing available resources, institutional priorities and donor relations. In the course of our research, we have identified several meaningful metrics and shared best practices for establishing and maintaining processing priorities, but the resources are scattered and disparate. While we provide a list here (See Appendix C), these resources must be rebranded or better marketed to inform and assist a wide audience. One promising development is the Society of American Archivists’ Task Force on Research/Data and Evaluation, which is looking at how to gather data that benefits archivists across the profession.<sup>27</sup> Archivists clearly want to better understand project management and administrative prioritization. Our archival associations (local, regional, and national) and university graduate programs must address this need. The authors see this as an opportunity to pursue a discussion with leaders and archivists in the profession that seeks to create useful resources and bring an awareness of the value of prioritizing processing into high relief. As we strive to foster meaningful dialog around resources and best practices, individual archivists can take the following steps to better prioritize processing in their own repositories:

### Update Policies Consistently:

Archivists recognize the value in reviewing archival policy on a regular basis. Use the opportunity to review processing priorities at the same time. As you review Reading Room policy, Collection Development Policy or other departmental policies already in place, use the same time to review processing priorities.

### Tie a review of processing in your repository to yearly goals:

You evaluate your staff goals every year. Consider including a one-to-three-year processing plan in those goals. In this way, prioritizing processing becomes part of a regular cycle of archival management and a part of a regular cycle of assessment.

### Lean in to changing priorities:

Archivists must accept and respond to organizational change. Use shifting priorities as an opportunity to reflect on how those changes impact tasks in the cycle of archival management. It may throw you off track, but document it and find a way to return to the cycle or to revise as necessary.

### Know the tools available:

See the list of resources in Appendix C. As our research indicated, few archivists are using the tools they have now. Keep an eye on developing tools and think of ways that your institution can adapt free tools to your own uses. Document your decisions and provide meanings to your metric. As an example of a tool which is backed by best practices, the University of California, Irvine adapted and excerpted assigning value scores to determining processing priorities from their Guidelines for Efficient Archival Processing in the University of California Libraries, which is listed in Appendix C. Tools are most useful when they reflect best practice, and can be tailored to the needs of your repository.

### Develop proactive best practices:

Focus on how you can gather data to develop processing priorities proactively. Use tools that you may already have: accessioning data, user surveys, discussions with faculty liaison librarians, public relations managers or exhibit curators, backlog surveys, or other tools that can help you assess the research value of your collections.

### Collaborate:

Archivists repeatedly stressed the need to work together to develop tools and best practices. The ongoing support of the profession is necessary. Archivists need no ghost-come-from-the-grave to realize that we all face this serious issue, and we can collaborate to develop new solutions to common challenges. This article begins to gather resources and make suggestions. Reject the easy temptation of inertia and the status quo. Take action and stay in touch with us and with each other.

### Project management skills:

Adopt an incremental, team-based approach when undertaking significant projects, such as processing. This allows archivists to efficiently and realistically prioritize staffing, collections, and budgets.<sup>28</sup> Focus groups all agreed on an increased need for knowledge and skills associated with formal project management training. Many professionals traditionally trained in library or archival science find themselves wanting additional coursework to become conversant in project management. Beyond incorporating project management software and Gantt charts, there are books, online classes, and other resources, including SAA's two classes in project management. Archivists must recognize the connection between our professional skill set and the broader business approach to project management. Archivists often resist adopting business practices, but processing and setting priorities both incorporate project management skills that archivists ought to acquire.

Decisions are never easy; resources are not evenly distributed nor are they easily acquired; change is constant and priorities will shift. But in order to carry out the fundamental tasks in our archival programs, we must pay heed to the core of our work. The pressing priorities of digital projects, outreach events, daily research queries, and administrative demands all have importance and meaning, but we must make room in the mix to create and maintain a comprehensive, integrated strategy to establish priorities for processing our holdings. This research begins the discussion about attitudes, solutions, barriers, resources, and hopes that we share about the ability to effectively work priorities into our processing agendas. These goals aren't modest, but they are achievable. We look forward to working with archivists and archival organizations to insure that the discussion continues, and ultimately provides resources that can be used by professionals across repositories.

## Notes

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2. Martha O'Hara Conway and Merrilee Proffitt, *Taking Stock and Making Hay: Archival Collections Assessment* (Dublin, Ohio: OCLC Research, 2010), 14.
3. Wendy Pflug, "Assessing Archival Collections Through Surveys," *The Reading Room* 2, no. 1 (Fall 2016): 78.
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14. Max Evans, "Archives of the People, by the People, for the People," *The American Archivist* 70, no. 3 (Fall/Winter 2007): 390.
15. Mark A. Green and Dennis Meissner, "More Product, Less Process: Revamping Traditional Archival Processing," *The American Archivist* 68 (Fall/Winter 2005): footnote 75, p. 232.
16. Joyce Chapman, and Elizabeth Yakel, "Data-driven management and interoperable metrics for special collections and archives user services," *RBM: A Journal of Rare Books, Manuscripts, and Cultural Heritage* 13, no. 2 (Fall 2012): 138.
17. SAA-ACRL RBMS Joint Task Force on the Development of Standardized Measures for Public Services in Archival Repositories and Special Collections Library, *Standardized Statistical Measures and Metrics for Public Services in Archival Repositories and Special Collections Libraries*, 2018, 24.
18. Daniel A. Santamaria, *Extensible Processing for Archives and Special Collections: Reducing Processing Backlogs* (Chicago: Neal-Schuman, 2015):103.
19. Aaron D. Purcell, *Donors and Archives: A Guidebook for Successful Programs* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), 104.
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23. See, for example, Chern Li Leiw, Vanessa King, Gillian Oliver, "Social Media in Archives and Libraries: A Snapshot of Planning, Evaluation, and Preservation Decisions," *Preservation, Digital Technology and Culture* 44, no. 1 (2015): 3–11.

24. <http://pacscl.org>
25. <http://www.archiviststoolkit.org>
26. <http://trello.com>
27. See SAA President Tanya Zanish-Belcher’s discussion of the Task Force and its early efforts in her April 23 blog post, “Some Archives Questions Need Answers.” Off The Record, April 23, 2018, <https://offtherecord.archivists.org/2018/04/23/some-archivesquestions-need-answers/>
28. “2018 top trends in academic libraries,” C&RL News 79, no. 6 (June 2018): 288.

## Appendix A

### Survey Questions

Please indicate whether special collections, archives, a combined special collections/archives department, or another department/unit at your institution processes (defined as the arrangement, description, and housing of archival materials for storage and use by patrons) each type of material listed.

	Special collections	Archives	Combined department	Another department/Unit
Manuscripts (personal or literary papers of people and families)				
Archival materials (records of formal organizations, such as universities, businesses or governments)				
Born digital material (records created in electronic format and/or scans of records in other formats, such as photographs, maps, etc.)				
Material Culture collections (an object or artifact having physical or intellectual substance)				

If you selected “Another Department/Unit” above, please name that department or unit.

**Please indicate which positions in your unit/department/library have responsibility for developing processing priorities. (Choose as many as apply)**

- a. Archivist
- b. Department/Unit Head
- c. Technical Services staff (or unit)

- d. Processing Unit staff
- e. Other professional, (please specify)
- f. Team (specify titles of team members)
- g. Committee (specify make up of committee)

**When are your processing priorities determined?**

- a. Annually
- b. Quarterly
- c. Dynamic process (part of general accessioning workflow)
- d. Ad hoc or on demand
- e. Never

**How do you currently track unprocessed collections and additions?**

- a. Word document or other word processing software
- b. Database, such as Access, Excel other
- c. Built into existing Content Management System database (such as ArchivesSpace)
- d. Other [please identify] \_\_\_\_\_
- e. We don't track

**What types of information do you gather and review prior to assigning processing priorities for unprocessed or under-processed collections? (Choose as many as apply)**

- a. Circulation/Use statistics
- b. Reproduction requests (photocopies or scans)
- c. Length of time in repository backlog
- d. Research Value/Potential Use
- e. Intrinsic Value
- f. Preexisting arrangement and description (re-processing)
- g. Preservation issues (housing and condition)
- h. Privacy issues/Significant restrictions
- i. Size of collection
- j. Significant donor/organizational influence
- k. Patron input
- l. Other (please specify)

**When setting processing priorities, please rank the following on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 = least important; 5 = most important:**

- Collections designated as important by curators or other archives staff
- Collections in high demand by researchers
- Collections being used which are partially unprocessed
- Collections with serious conservation problems
- Collections which require minimal work, such as simple rehousing (folders and boxes)
- Collections with preliminary inventories

- Collections from important donors that have been recently received
- Size of the collection (either extremely large or extremely small)

**What measures are used to evaluate the use of collections and/or series within collections?**

- a. Comparison of use statistics from year to year (both onsite and remote reference requests)
- b. Online surveys (post-use) or user comment cards
- c. Website hits and database access figures
- d. Observation, discussion with patrons or department anecdote? (briefly explain)
- e. User Survey software (Identify software) \_\_\_\_\_
- f. Other?

**Which has more impact on your processing priorities?**

- a. Significant collection content
- b. Significant collection creator
- c. Both
- d. Neither

**Does your unit/department/library discuss which collections should be processed in the near future with patrons/researchers/faculty/donors?**

- a. Yes, in a formal setting (committee meeting or other meeting)
- b. Yes, in an informal setting (anecdotes, follow up after use)
- c. No

**If yes, please briefly describe how these discussions affected manuscript and archival collections processing priority decisions.**

**Are you using social media to seek input from patrons to identify collections to process, or to gather information about collections for which they want improved access?**

Yes                                  No

**If so, what social media do you use?**

- Reddit
- Blogs
- Facebook
- Twitter
- Other (please identify)

**What, if any, benefits do you see in patron input as part of developing processing priorities?**

**For institutions with large backlogs of un- and under-processed collections, a collections assessment serves as a useful tool for planning, informing, and guiding priorities**

**for collections processing. Which, if any, of the following assessment tools have you used:**

- None
- Historical Society of Pennsylvania project
- Smithsonian Institution Archives Condition Assessment
- Columbia University Preservation Survey tool
- Philadelphia Area Consortium of Special Collections Libraries (PACSCL)
- Other, please name

**What are your most significant barriers to establishing processing priorities? (Choose as many as apply)**

- Backlog of accessions
- Budget and/or staffing limitations
- Not a priority of archival administration
- Organizational infrastructure
- Lack of data to determine priorities
- All of the above
- None of the above

**If you have processing priorities already established, what are your most significant barriers to maintaining processing priorities? (Choose as many as apply)**

- Adequate funding/resources
- Adequate staffing
- Making best practices for appraisal and processing part of regular workflow
- Not a priority of archival leadership
- All of the above
- None of the above

**Please provide any additional information regarding processing priorities in your unit/department/library that may assist the authors in accurately analyzing the results in this survey.**

Appendix B

### **Focus Group Questions: Summary**

**Q1 – How do you determine the potential interest in the CONTENT of the collection?**

**34 responses**

Coded response	Number	Percentage (%)
External patron	14	40
Curatorial influence	9	26
Donor influence	7	20
Faculty influence	7	20
Instruction influence	6	17
Internal patron	5	14
Metrics	4	11
Collecting initiatives	4	11
Retention schedule	3	8
Anecdotal/Exhibits/Outreach	2	5
Anniversary/Records Management/Strategic Planning/undocumented material/backlog	1	2

**Q2 – Our research suggests that the factor considered most important in setting priorities for processing was high demand by researchers. Another important factor was potential use, but the survey was not clear in how we establish those criteria. how do you gather information about your researchers and the collections they would like to see processed?**

**35 responses**

Coded response	Number	Percentage (%)
In-house tracking system	15	46
Anecdotal	10	31
Faculty influence	6	18
Analytics programs	6	18
Exhibits	4	12.5
Donor influence	3	9
User request/Curator influence/external influence	2	6
Records format/restrictions	1	3

**Q3 – Our initial research shows that staffing and funding are generally the primary barriers to establishing processing priorities. What do you experience as the most significant barriers beyond staffing and funding? If you have processing priorities in place, what barriers (beyond staffing and funding) do you experience in maintaining those priorities?**

**35 responses**

Coded response	Number	Percentage (%)
Too many priorities	10	31
Lack of appropriate skill level	6	18
Lack of collection information	6	18
Inability to establish value of archives	5	14
Space	5	14
Lack of intellectual control	4	12.5
Unexpected acquisitions	4	12.5
Changing department plans	4	12.5
Administrative priorities	3	9
Lack of expertise to deal with electronic records/emerging formats	3	9
Inability to use appropriate tools/backlog volume/external influence	2	6
Lack of strategic plan/Location of physical materials	1	3

**Q4 – Do you allow access to unprocessed collections? (27 = yes = 84%; 5 = no, 16%)  
If you allow access, how does this impact your processing priorities?**

Coded response	Number	Percentage (%)
High impact	8	29
Low impact	8	29
No impact	12	42

**Q5 – Our research overwhelmingly suggests that, though developing and maintaining processing priorities is a fundamental part of archival practice, it is rarely done in more than an ad hoc manner. Why do you think that establishing processing priorities isn't as widely practiced?**

**35 responses**

Coded response	Number	Percentage (%)
Too many competing priorities	18	51
Lack of staffing expertise at advanced level of processing	6	18
Lack of resources (funding and staffing)	5	14
Time commitment	5	14
Backlog	3	9
Lack of strategic planning	3	9
Lack of administrative Buy in	3	9
Lack of intellectual control/Lack of processing metrics/Unwilling to request donor contributions/Lack of training in archival management/Need to develop best practices	2	6
Lack of policy	1	3
No Barriers	1	3

**Q6 –How can we, as a profession, develop a more proactive approach to establishing and maintaining processing priorities?**

Coded response	Number	Percentage (%)
Open source/shareable archival documentation	10	29
Administration support	9	26
Training in project management/processing metric	7	20
Best practices	6	17
SAA support/support therapy	4	11
Address backlogs/Dedicated processing staff	2	6
Collaboration with colleagues/prioritizing as an organic process	1	3

## Appendix C

### Survey Tools Examples (arranged by date)

- Smithsonian Institution Archives (1993)**  
 The Commission on Preservation and Access Task Force on Archival Selection. "Preservation Priority Survey" (Washington, D.C.: The Commission on Preservation and Access, 1993).<http://cool.conservation-us.org/coolaic/sg/bpg/annual/v15/bp15-18.html>
- Historical Society of Pennsylvania Collections Preservation and Backlog Survey Project (2000-2002)**  
<http://www2.hsp.org/collections/manuscripts/Mellon/about.html>
- University of Virginia Special Collections Assessment Project (2002-2004)**  
 This project is referred to in Conway, "Taking Stock and Making Hay: Archival Collections Assessment," (2011), however information is no longer available on the web.
- Columbia University Libraries Survey of Special Collections Materials Project (2003-2004)**  
[http://library.columbia.edu/services/preservation/survey\\_tools.html](http://library.columbia.edu/services/preservation/survey_tools.html)
- Philadelphia Area Consortium of Special Collections Libraries (PACSCL) Consortial Survey Initiative (2006–2008)**  
[http://clir.pacscl.org/wp-content/uploads/2009/07/Survey\\_and\\_Processing-Manual.pdf](http://clir.pacscl.org/wp-content/uploads/2009/07/Survey_and_Processing-Manual.pdf)
- University of Michigan Special Collections Library Unprocessed Collections Survey Project (2009)**  
<https://www.oclc.org/content/dam/research/activities/backlogtools/michiganmanual.pdf>
- Bancroft Library (University of California, Berkeley) Manuscript Survey Project (2008–2011)**  
 Information is no longer available on the web.
- Black Metropolis Research Consortium Survey (2009–2011)**  
<http://bmrc.lib.uchicago.edu/about-bmrc/>
- Society of American Archivists' Manuscript Repositories Section Jump In Initiative (2012)**  
<https://www2.archivists.org/groups/manuscript-repositories-section/jump-in-initiative>
- Guidelines for Efficient Archival Processing in the University of California**



**Libraries Version 3.2 (2012)**

[https://libraries.universityofcalifornia.edu/groups/files/hosc/docs/\\_Efficient\\_Archival\\_Processing\\_Guidelines\\_v3-1.pdf](https://libraries.universityofcalifornia.edu/groups/files/hosc/docs/_Efficient_Archival_Processing_Guidelines_v3-1.pdf)

- **University of California, Irvine, Department of Special Collections and Archives  
Accession Manual for Archival and Manuscript Collections (2017)**

Recommendations established by the Guidelines for Efficient Archival Processing in the University of California Libraries (“UC Guidelines”) report published in 2012. This report encourages UC campuses to process collections at an appropriate level and provides repositories with a suite of tools to guide local processing decisions. <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/0f29v7p5>