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William E. Brown Jr.
Yale University

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GROUP PROCESSING: PLANNING AND MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES

William E. Brown, Jr.

Group processing projects present a series of challenges which demand a wide range of technical and administrative skills from archivists. These are met with varying degrees of success. Often, this is the first opportunity for an archivist to test his knowledge and skills in a supervisory position. Professionals who lack the necessary complement of skills, or who are unable to blend these skills to fit the needs of a project, operate at a distinct disadvantage for themselves and their employers. The following discussion of group processing components outlines some of the advantages and disadvantages associated with each phase and describes the many skills required of archivists who supervise group projects.

Group processing may be defined as the attempt to impose physical and intellectual control over archival and manuscript collections through the work of a coordinated staff of professional and support personnel. The group may range from a body of individuals more accurately described as performing separate but related functions to a truly social unit whose members share a mutual dependency and information exchange essential to the success of a project.¹

Large, complex collections are prime candidates for the creative strategies and labor-intensive work most practical within the group concept. Arrangement and description of these collections often frustrate the physical and intellectual capabilities of archivists in the use of traditional procedures. Appropriate group processing projects may include a large family collection, constantly expanding bodies of archival records, or the all-too-familiar modern manuscript collection, which at first glance might appear to contain the sum knowledge of the twentieth century.

Group processing projects are not the automatic

solution to the problems of processing large collections, however. Each project, or potential project, presents a unique situation, and archivists must be able to structure the work to accomplish the task at hand.² To achieve this structure it is helpful for archivists to conceive of a group project in its various stages.

There are four major components: (1) planning, (2) staffing, (3) management, and (4) evaluation. Each component requires more of an archivist than simply the technical knowledge necessary to process large collections. A combination of organization, personnel, and management skills are necessary. The ability to appraise collections, develop workplans, select project members, manage and supervise work, and evaluate performance are all responsibilities for the archivist. The resultant advantages or disadvantages of a group processing project flow from the archivist's ability to master these skills.

PLANNING

The planning component involves two steps: (1) the preparation of a written appraisal record and (2) the preparation of a project workplan (see appendix). The archivist directing the processing project supervises this work whenever possible. The knowledge of the collection and the overview of the project obtained at this stage often prove invaluable assets in the subsequent work of the group. It is also possible for potential group members, in the form of available staff, to contribute substantially to the compilation of appraisal and workplan information.

Appraisal work includes the review of all donor information and agreements, the research of biographical data on individuals and organizations documented in the collection, the examination of related holdings, and the survey of the collection itself. It is not imperative, and often not physically possible, for the archivist to examine each item, folder, or box in a collection. Properly trained staff can perform much of the research and survey work. The archivist monitors this work and reviews all information and findings. He participates to the degree necessary to build a working relationship with group members and to supplement the skills of the contributing staff.

The appraisal record includes an analysis of the

expected research uses of the collection, an outline of the individual series in the collection and the appropriate levels of arrangement and description for each series, and a review of the material likely to be weeded, discarded, or transferred. There is also a notation of any processing problems caused by the present organization or types of material found in the collection.³

The workplan briefly describes all processing activities, the hierarchy and duties of group members, time schedules, and the quantity and cost of resources allocated, including staff, time, and supplies. The physical dimensions of the project are also detailed. Projects often require substantial amounts of workspace, and the inability to assign a contiguous work area or to employ all group members at the same time can alter processing schedules and affect group performance.

The appraisal record and workplan require the approval of the individual responsible for processing activities in the repository. As such, they form the basis for the determination of final project plans. The preparation of different workplans, which consider a variety of staffing configurations and time schedules, is often a good advantage in identifying the most appropriate course of action for a particular project. The final affirmation of a project workplan also allows all points of contention among project members to be identified and resolved. No misunderstanding or confusion as to the goals and expectations of the project should exist.

The advantages of planning are cumulative. The preparation of an appraisal record and a workplan establishes the necessary ground rules for processing work and allows all participants the opportunity to understand the goals of the project. Appropriate levels of description are outlined; specific duties are assigned to personnel; and time schedules are provided to measure progress and judge performance. The contributions of staff members, including the expenditure of professional resources through supervisory and advisory work, are also calculated. Ideally, the archivist is free to concentrate his energies on the synthesis of the accumulated information generated by the appraisal record and workplan, allowing for a more effective management of the group. He is thus charged with responsibility

for each step in the group effort as a safeguard against wasted time and money.

The archivist strives to focus his attention on truly professional concerns, while support staff perform the majority of routine processing duties. This allows all staff members to contribute to their full potential, and processing work proceeds in an efficient, organized manner. Fewer problems are likely to arise, an important consideration when the work of a large staff is involved.⁴

Disadvantages may also present themselves in the planning stage. However, the time spent by archivists in the preparation of appraisal records and workplans is a necessary investment, and this work reaps dividends in the subsequent processing work performed by the group. Disadvantages develop when archivists improperly devise and execute workplans or fail to delegate and apportion tasks effectively. Failure to appraise collections properly or to strive for an absolute level of description deemed necessary for all collections reduces the effectiveness of the group and negates its efficiency. Group processing is an advantage only when planning strategies maximize the capabilities of the whole and do not squander the abilities of individuals.

Proper planning decisions consider all resources available to the group, including the abilities and experiences of potential group members. Archivists armed with this information are able to determine the potential productivity of the group.⁵ Potential productivity is expressed as the most efficient processing scenario devised for the project and is measured against the work ultimately performed by the group, or its actual productivity. Seldom, if ever, will actual productivity equal potential productivity, but this is what is sought to the best of one's abilities. By identifying the difference between these two measures and the reasons for such discrepancies, the archivist can continue to refine and improve group processing capabilities.

STAFFING

Staffing considerations are an intricate part of any project. The addition of personnel, whether temporary or permanent, requires funding, training, supervision, and the assignment of work space. Those projects which initiate the realignment of current

staff can force the delay of other work. Such possibilities highlight the importance of planning in group processing projects.

Determining the best mixture of personnel for a group demands a series of interpersonal and communication skills. The ability to judge performance and to evaluate potential is necessary. The selection of project members should maintain the welfare of the group as the dominant concern. Certain individuals flourish in the shared activities and mutual dependency fostered by group processing. Others may chafe at the prospect of highly integrated work schedules and constant social interaction vital to these projects.

Matching individuals to preconceived positions can be an expensive luxury. It may be necessary, and beneficial to all, to structure positions to fit the strengths of participants. For example, those members who demonstrate a high level of organizational skills may be assigned work on the most complex series or difficult collections. Those staff members who are more comfortable in performing routine processing tasks may be assigned most of the refolding and reboxing work. This facilitates the development of talented staff members while allowing others to function most efficiently.

It may be practical to reapportion work as the project develops. Individuals may be delegated more responsibility or more routine tasks as performance indicates. Inadequate performance can be the result of poor work habits or perhaps only signals the need for more challenging work. It is important to utilize the skills of all project members; the failure to do so cannot be excused.

Sheer numbers do not guarantee a successful group project. A group must balance its quantitative advantage against the possibility of unorganized, repetitive, and unnecessary work. Periodic reviews of progress help to insure good communication and to preserve the sense of direction so important to a project. Group meetings are particularly useful in situations where membership in the group fluctuates as work progresses.

Work assignments within a project can vary greatly. Some members may perform a variety of tasks, others only one. Individuals may devote their entire time to a project or, perhaps, only a

fraction. Other members may leave or join the project as goals are accomplished. It is important that the continuity of work not suffer as a result of personnel shifts. The aforementioned review process is the best answer.

Group processing succeeds when the contributing individuals realize that together they create a product superior to anything one individual could accomplish. Individual goals remain important, but the larger the group the greater the possibility of disruption through personal frustration or unnecessary competition. It is vital that group members appreciate the unique satisfaction that is possible in a combined effort. Those cooperative, interpersonal relationships engendered by the group structure can serve to strengthen and reinforce this point. The presence of just one unhappy or unproductive person can have a serious effect on the productivity and morale of the group. An effective group assumes a momentum and discipline of its own, and this environment serves to increase productivity, to stimulate communication, and to raise morale. Processing challenges are then met with energy and determination, not apprehension and indecision.

It is the adaptability and flexibility of the group which creates a major advantage in processing large collections. While musk oxen instinctively gather in a star-shaped formation when challenged, processing teams are capable of a varied array of responses.⁶ The archivist, by virtue of his leadership role, directs these responses. The management of the project thus becomes the primary responsibility once planning and staffing decisions are made.

MANAGEMENT

Effective management creates several advantages for a repository, its staff, and its collections. The supervision of processing work, the delegation of responsibilities, the motivation of staff members, and the evaluation of work are all management functions. These aspects of group processing work may be major stumbling blocks for archivists who might otherwise be quite capable at appraising collections, developing work schedules, and devising staff assignments.

Successful management techniques are built upon a strong foundation of technical processing skills.

This ability to process collections, however, does not always generate the ability to supervise the processing work of others. The role of manager requires the combination of administrative, communicative, and technical skills.

There are a variety of management techniques available to archivists, including the concepts of executive fiat, management by objectives, participatory management, and performance evaluation. These concepts are familiar on a departmental or institutional level. Their application to group processing is a natural progression. The choice of a particular management technique will depend upon the processing duties involved, the abilities of group members, and the preference of the supervising archivist.

Executive fiat is simply management by decree. The archivist apportions the processing work and sets all expectations and delimiters for the participants. This technique sidesteps all consideration of attitude and motivation by the regimentation of behavior to the job at hand. This is not truly group processing in its most advanced state, but the technique is attractive for certain individuals and materials.

The application of Peter Drucker's management by objectives concept is appropriate when planning and staffing decisions allow participants to contribute to the definition of the group and its activities. Drucker advocates the clear definition of the objectives, priorities, and tasks required to achieve the goals of the project. Individuals are then able to see the relationship between their duties and the assignments of others. Qualified and well-motivated staff members are essential if this technique is to succeed.

Participatory management, as espoused by Douglas MacGregor, proposes the hardly revolutionary concept that people perform better when they have a voice in the planning and selection of their work. Clearly, anarchy may not rule. Archival procedures must be observed and authority channels must be maintained. The exercise of personal initiative need not be sacrificed, however. Goals may be achieved in a variety of ways, and employees should be encouraged to develop better procedures and practices.

The rate and quality of work often improves with

the introduction of participatory management. Staff members who contribute to goal-setting are more committed to performing well. It is important that all members engage in the communication network. The disadvantages of paying mere lip service to the thoughts and ideas of group participants surface in terms of low morale and reduced productivity. An archivist who is supportive of the group, one who gathers a talented and energetic staff, is able to accomplish more work in less time.

Performance evaluation is a useful, although often misunderstood tool. It proposes to judge performance according to mutually determined criteria. The premise that people perform better when they know how well they are performing is central to this concept. To be meaningful, however, the evaluation process must be a mutual and constant one. It should include feedback from both the supervisor and the employee as a vehicle to improve the performance of all concerned. It is helpful to schedule group or individual evaluations at preset points, such as the projected date for accomplishing specific goals within the project. If the evaluation process is not treated as a bureaucratic hurdle, it can be a most effective method for monitoring progress, exacting ideas, and insuring communication.

Management strategy is one direct influence the archivist has on the group. Another equally important influence is the leadership ability of the archivist. As leader, the archivist determines the extent to which group processing is really a group process. The impact of the archivist's physical presence on a day-to-day basis and the communication of assignments and information should not be underestimated.

The leadership role begins from within, and the archivist must have the self-confidence, in addition to the skills, to direct a group project. He must be prepared to make the necessary administrative and personnel decisions, yet be flexible enough to elicit and accept contributions from staff members. Archivists must be able to manage their own time if the resources of the group are to be properly supervised. Shortcomings in the abilities and performance of the archivist are multiplied through the inefficient and limited work produced by the group.

Management techniques are a tool to improve the performance of a group while reducing, if not eliminating, the possible disadvantages of group processing. For smaller projects little more than a definitive leader is necessary. Larger and more diverse groups, which possess far more potential than their smaller counterparts, are fertile soil for the creative management schemes outlined here. Archivists who are able to select and implement strategies effectively compound the advantages of group processing. The final analysis of a group project, that is, its evaluation, charts the productivity of the effort and illuminates the advantages and disadvantages encountered in each phase.

EVALUATION

The primary purpose of the project evaluation is to analyze the group effort as an entity, and therefore, it may or may not include formalized evaluations of individual participants. Using the appraisal document and the workplan, the archivist, the project staff, and appropriate administrators review the planning estimates, potential productivity, and actual productivity of the group. Discrepancies between the planned and actual expenditures of time, supplies, and other resources are identified and examined. Equal attention should be placed on those aspects of processing work which proved most efficient. As with individual evaluations, it is important not to focus on the negative at the expense of the positive. The continued development of staff members and group processing capabilities are served by this activity.

A useful critique may also involve the participation of a staff member not directly involved in the project. It is interesting to note that the perceptions of the group by a nonmember can vary greatly from those of the participants. Another option involves the use of a third party from outside the institution. Administrators may be hesitant to discuss their internal operations with others, especially when the results are less than ideal, but the mutual exchange of information and ideas can be most helpful in improving processing capabilities.

CONCLUSIONS

Group processing is a realistic alternative for many repositories struggling with the physical and

intellectual control of archival and manuscript collections. The creative processing strategies possible within the group structure require a battery of skills, not always evident at first glance. Archivists must possess planning, communication, and management skills in order to maximize the processing capabilities of a group.

Technical processing skills are not enough. The nature of contemporary documentation and the expansion of processing work to include professionals, clerical and student assistants, and volunteers all operating at different levels demand the continued development and refinement of professional skills. Group processing offers several advantages to those archivists and repositories willing to commit their energies and resources to the practice. Large collections are no longer viewed as inherently more difficult, time-consuming, and, therefore, expensive problems. Professional staff are able to maximize their contributions through the efficient use of support staff, who in turn accomplish processing feats greater than the sum of their parts.

The rewards of group processing are not without their costs, however. It is vital that archivists understand the implications group projects hold on the role of the processing archivist. The pros and cons of group processing must be weighed with each project, and the best processing strategy available under the circumstances then selected.

The archivist as omnipotent leader is most appropriate for those projects which involve support staff engaged in routine processing work. More complex processing projects, aided by the availability of proficient group members, lend themselves to the more cooperative strategies of management by objectives and participatory management. Performance evaluation remains a useful tool in any group situation, providing all members understand its purpose.

Archivists must continue to process collections based on analysis and knowledge. It is foolhardy to assume a predisposition toward any one management technique or processing strategy; rather, professional judgment should guide in selecting the best alternative for each situation. Group projects then allow archivists to function as true

professionals. They are a practical solution and deserve further discussion and experimentation.

APPENDIX

APPRAISAL RECORD

A review of the donor file, preliminary inventory, available biographical data, and information on related collections precedes the physical survey of the collection. This activity provides the archivist and staff with pertinent information on the collection and the individuals documented therein and allows for a more immediate grasp of the intellectual content of the collection as it is examined. The following information on the Farnham Family Papers indicates the type of data identified and recorded in order to facilitate a group processing project.

The Farnham Family Papers consist of 250 linear feet of material arranged in 400 nonarchival containers. A fragmentary preliminary inventory indicates that the collection is currently organized into three main series, one for each of the three major individuals documented in the papers: Henry Farnham, Henry W. Farnham, and William W. Farnham. Introductory research allows identification of the family relationships in the collection, a fact which often facilitates the later identification of material and processing of the collection.

The papers include correspondence, financial records, diaries, account books, business records, teaching files, writings, and miscellanea for each of the three family members. The major subjects covered by these materials include: (1) family relationships, (2) Connecticut politics and social history, (3) New Haven, Connecticut, (4) Yale University, (5) railroad construction in New England and the Midwest, (6) United States Civil Service reform, (7) American Indian missionaries, and (8) Chicago, Illinois. The physical survey of materials is conducted by the archivist and an assistant, who

identify the main series groupings and significant subseries and sub-subseries groupings. Based on the survey, the following recommendations are submitted for the arrangement and description of the Farnham Family Papers:

1. Maintain the three major series as determined in the survey:

- I. HENRY FARNHAM PAPERS
- II. HENRY W. FARNHAM PAPERS
- III. WILLIAM W. FARNHAM PAPERS

2. Refine these series by completing the arrangement of material by record type (i.e., account books, correspondence, diaries) within each series.

3. Refolder and rebox all material into acid-free folders and boxes.

4. Prepare a folder level inventory for the papers.

5. Discard duplicate copies of material.

6. Weed extraneous and unrelated clippings and printed material from the papers.

7. Prepare concise series descriptions, which focus on the major subjects, activities, and individuals documented in the papers.

8. Transfer eight linear feet of the papers of Henry W. Farnham to this collection. This material was removed from the Farnham Family Papers at an earlier date for no discernible reason.

9. Maintain the original order of series, subseries and sub-subseries whenever possible. This includes the alphabetical and chronological arrangement of groups of materials. Supplement this arrangement through the use of partial indexes available within the collection, such as the presence of letterpress copy books containing alphabetical indexes to correspondents.

10. Identify those materials in the papers which require preservation photocopying and treatment by the Conservation Department.

WORKPLAN

Group members are to include the following:

| | | |
|-------------|---------------------------|-----------|
| Archivist | 10 hours/week for 6 weeks | 60 hours |
| Assistant | 20 hours/week for 6 weeks | 120 hours |
| Students(2) | 10 hours/week for 6 weeks | 120 hours |

Total staff time 300 hours

Students perform all routine processing work, including the refolding, reboxing, listing of contents, stamping of folders, and typing of finding aids. The assistant archivist directs this work on a daily basis and is responsible for the integration of material into prescribed series, subseries, etc., and for recommendations on supply needs, material to be weeded or transferred, and the physical movement of material to and from work areas.

The archivist constructs arrangement plans in consultation with staff members, determining the final arrangement schemes and description of materials. The archivist writes the collection description and approves or disapproves the recommendations of staff members regarding the disposition of materials. The archivist also prepares supply statements and work schedules. Survey and arrangement plans for the Farnham Family Papers indicates that the collection will be reduced from 250 linear feet and 400 boxes to 150 linear feet and 225 boxes.

CONCLUSION

The Farnham Family Papers were processed in late 1984. The papers were organized in the three series identified, and most of the material was reduced to 150 linear feet and some 230 boxes. The group was able to complete the work in slightly less time than projected, although the eight week schedule was adjusted to ten weeks due to other necessary commitments of staff time. The project consumed 275 hours of staff time, with students able to perform work more rapidly than predicted as procedures became routine.

NOTES

¹Ivan D. Steiner, Group Process and Productivity, (New York: Academic Press, 1972), 5.

²Collections less than twenty linear feet in size are often excluded from consideration, but smaller holdings may also be appropriate for scaled

down versions of group projects.

³Helen W. Slotkin and Karen T. Lynch, "An Analysis of Processing Procedures," American Archivist 45, 2 (1982): 155-163.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Steiner, Group Process and Productivity, 8-9.

⁶James C. Worthy, "Management Concepts and Archival Administration," Midwestern Archivist IV, 2 (1979): 77-88.