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The "Re-" in Reprocessing

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Who knew a simple prefix could make such a difference? When I initially accepted a position at Clemson University to reprocess the James F. Byrnes papers, I thought, "process...reprocess...what's the difference, really?" The collection consists of about a hundred and thirty cubic feet of manuscript material, and I thought I would be doing the same old arranging I had been trained to do, just on a much larger scale. However, after a closer examination of the collection, apprehension and even dread slowly began to set in. This was much more than just a simple arrangement project.

James F. Byrnes was one of the most important and influential political figures of the twentieth century. He is one of few statesmen to have served in all three branches of the Federal government, as a US Representative, a US Senator, a US Supreme Court Justice, Director of War Mobilization during World War II, US Secretary of State, and finally as Governor of South Carolina. He also served as a Life Trustee of Clemson University, which resulted in the donation of his papers to the University Libraries. Clemson received the Byrnes papers in several different accessions during the 1960's and 1970's, none of which were processed similarly or integrated in with the others. The first accession was indexed using a card catalog system and no folder numbers. The second (and largest) accession was described using a continuous folder number schema, resulting in a list of over 1200 numbered folders. And the remaining smaller accessions received no description at all. So not only were the descriptions different, but there existed no logical arrangement of materials. Only staff members familiar with the collection could make heads or tails of it, which caused much frustration among users. But because of Byrnes' illustrious and distinguished political career, his papers are a rich resource for scholars of domestic and foreign policy, and researchers had no choice but to plow through them in their illogical state. As a result, the papers have been heavily cited according to the existing "arrangement."

The abundance of references to the papers proved to be quite a challenge when I began to reprocess the collection. Rearrangement becomes difficult if the collection has been heavily used and cited according to its original organization. Many researchers request materials by asking for or providing a description of specific documents. In this case, the requested materials can usually be located fairly quickly (made easier as a result of reprocessing efforts) and everyone is happy. But all too frequently, we get the researcher who has gleaned bibliographic information from a reference source and requests a certain folder number or title. However, because the collection has been rearranged, folders have likely been assigned new numbers and/or titles. For small collections, a simple cross-reference list of the old and new numbers/titles will usually provide the best solution. But when dealing with larger collections, this task can be quite cumbersome.

The maintenance or cross-reference of the original organization can be complicated, but it is necessary. And it can be relatively painless if there is no change other than a new number or title assigned to a folder. But it can get pretty sticky when rearrangement requires splitting up the contents of a folder. Now you, the archivist, are faced with more than just a basic number-to-number or title-to-tile list. Assume, for example, that you go through the contents of a folder labeled "miscellaneous" and determine that the five documents in the folder each belong in different folders. You now have to keep track of the five new folders that contain materials from the original miscellaneous folder, as well as any other materials that belong in the five new folders. This can obviously become very complex and convoluted the deeper you go, but if the collection has been used frequently and referenced according to its previous organization and you are committed to providing the best description for your users, you do not have many alternatives.

The problem of maintaining a record of the original organization poses other problems. For instance, if a folder's contents remain intact, it is just a matter of keeping track of both the old and new folder numbers. But what do you do with the folder that contains a conglomeration of materials that do not exactly fit together? Although it may make better sense to split these items up into different folders to fit the new arrangement scheme, it adds that additional level of cross-referencing mentioned previously. Because of this "Catch 22" situation, you may just have to leave some folders "as is", despite the illogical placement. As a result, you may not have as much control over the arrangement as you would for a collection you processed from scratch. Giving up this level of control is rather frustrating when you are committed to providing your users with a well-organized collection of papers.

The discussion of organization leads to another major issue to consider--provenance. It can sometimes be difficult to decipher original organization from the work of previous processors and archival staff, so trying to determine provenance can be tricky. Take, for example, the token folder of random miscellany that raises any number of questions about its creation. Was it compiled by the collection's creator, or is it the work of archival staff who could not find a better solution? First instinct may suggest that such a folder was put together by the creator, because surely a fellow processor would not have put together such a random assortment of documents. But the fact alone that the collection requires "RE"- processing may be indicative of unsatisfactory processing the first time around. Provenance itself is a sticky subject, considering the ever-present and ongoing argument in the archival profession of remaining true to original order versus arranging materials to provide better access to the papers. Whichever side of the fence you choose to sit on, it is still the archivist's responsibility to determine and define the provenance as clearly as possible.

The issue of access must also be addressed. While reprocessing a collection, do you close the entire collection? Do you just close the parts/series you are currently working on? Or do you keep it open throughout the duration of the project? Depending on the size and the condition of the collection, reprocessing could take anywhere from a few months to several years. Restricting access to an important and heavily used collection is not practical, especially for an extended period of a time, and would undoubtedly hinder research and scholarship. Therefore, accommodating the needs of users should be a high priority.

In order to assist researchers in using the collection in its "in-process" state, it may be necessary to keep a "running" finding aid. Users will need an updated container list that describes where materials are while they are being reprocessed. Under regular circumstances, a finding aid is usually written once a collection has been completely arranged and processed. But in the case of reprocessing a collection that is used frequently, materials are constantly being moved from one box or folder to another. Therefore, it is essential to maintain a record of where documents are so that they can be easily located and retrieved should a researcher request them. This requires consistent and ongoing revision of the finding aid or container list, which in turn requires more time.

Furthermore, since space is a premium at most institutions, many of us are faced with space constraints and limited processing areas. Reprocessing can require even more space because materials may be pulled from several different places within the collection. How do you handle a request for materials that are currently spread out all over the place or temporarily housed in multiple locations? Many institutions do not provide access to unprocessed collections, so requests for research are limited. But a collection that has been previously available for research, especially for a number of years, will likely continue to attract scholars. It is the institution's responsibility to make available to potential users information about the reprocessing of the collection, either via a website, through mailings, or through any other public access points. In most cases, a serious researcher will make his/her plans known to an archives before visiting, which gives staff time to prepare the materials for research beforehand.

We are all familiar with the issues involved in processing manuscript collections and archives. But without the benefit of reprocessing experience when I accepted this position, I did not foresee any significant differences between processing and reprocessing a collection. But as outlined above, there

were several key factors that I had not planned for -- factors requiring more time and effort than was originally anticipated. Nevertheless, reprocessing a collection to increase the use and ease of access is worth the time and effort, despite any additional tasks and obstacles, if the collection is an important part of the institution's holdings and is regularly sought out by researchers.