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Losing It: Strategies for Reducing Archival Collection Backlogs

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Cover Page Footnote

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INTRODUCTION

Archival backlogs are a well-documented, long loathed, and ever present occurrence in special collections and archives. They are discussed at length in professional literature and have been the focus of many specially funded projects over the years. However, little is written about the successes (and failures) of "backlog elimination" projects, leaving institutions with minimal guidance for reducing their un- or under-processed collection backlogs. Institutions define their "backlogs" of archival materials differently. These materials may be completely "hidden" (undiscoverable online), may be in a physical state of disarray or fragility that renders them unusable until processed, may be under-described to varying degrees, or any combination of the above. Regardless of nuances in definition or terminology, the common denominator is that the institution has identified these collections as not being adequately discoverable and/or accessible to the communities they serve. For the purpose of this discussion, authors use the term "backlog" broadly. The authors of this article will share details of a three-year archival backlog elimination project at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas and provide strategies for institutions planning to begin their own project. The authors will discuss project staffing models and accounting for turnover, establishing and re-evaluating project priorities, creating workflow and documentation strategies, and sharing communication and team building recommendations. Lastly, authors will also expand on some of the less successful aspects of the UNLV project to allow those planning similar projects the ability to avoid potential pitfalls.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature suggests that backlogs are a fairly common occurrence in special collections and archives. In 2003, the Association of Research Libraries (ARL) reported that backlogs were consistently cited as a major concern of its member libraries and it formed a task force to focus on the problem. At that time, ARL members' responses indicated 27 to 37 percent of their manuscripts and archives were unprocessed, depending on the collection format.[1] Years later, the OCLC Research Survey of Special Collections and Archives hinted at progress toward decreasing backlogs, indicating that ARL member libraries reported that 52% of their archival finding aids were available online in 2010, compared to 16% available online reported in 1998.[2] Significant concerns about backlogs were so widespread that the Council on Library and Information Resources' (CLIR) created a program dedicated to exposing "hidden" collections. Between 2008 and 2014, CLIR awarded over $27.5 million through 129 grants that made previously hidden rare books, serials, manuscripts, and archives discoverable online.[3] Given the apparent prevalence of backlogs and the fact that the existence of a backlog undermines an archivist's goal to provide access to collections, it is no surprise that the literature abounds with

[1] Barbara M. Jones, "Hidden Collections, Scholarly Barriers: Creating Access to Unprocessed Special Collections Materials in North America's Research Libraries," *RBM: A Journal of Rare Books, Manuscripts, and Cultural Heritage* 5, no.2 (2004): 88-105.

[2] Jackie M. Dooley and Katherine Luce, *Taking our Pulse: The OCLC Research Survey of Special Collections and Archives* (Dublin, Ohio: OCLC Research, 2010), 81.

[3] "Project History," Council on Library & Information Resources (CLIR), accessed June 19, 2021, https://www.clir.org/hiddencollections/program-history/.

case studies, reports, and books outlining strategies for preventing and addressing existing backlogs.[4]

The literature reveals how opportunities to prevent a backlog are present at every step of the collection management workflow. Gordon Daines recommends, "To solve the backlog problem, archivists need to take a hard look at all of the components of the archival enterprise and think about how they interact."[5] Pre-custodial actions can be performed to cull unwanted materials before they cross the threshold, thereby downsizing incoming acquisitions and reducing the need for reappraisal in the future.[6] Shortly after acquisition, all collections can at least receive baseline online description and triage conservation during accessioning to ensure none are hidden from discovery, as described in Christine Weideman's article, "Accessioning as Processing."[7] Selective deployment of processing resources, including tailoring the level of processing to each collection's needs rather than processing every collection at a granular level, can focus processing time where most relevant, as advocated by Dennis Meissner and Mark Greene in their article, "More Product, Less Process: Revamping Traditional Archival Processing" (MPLP).[8] Building on methods of accessioning as processing and tiered processing, Daniel A. Santamaria recommends that standard practice should be an extensible processing approach that intentionally plans for iterative processing that occurs as needed after the baseline processing that is performed at the time of accessioning.[9] Great focus has been placed on controlling backlogs through specific processing techniques, however, Chris Prom cautions archivists to look beyond processing, stating, "We must thoughtfully implement programs to speed processing and reduce backlogs, but we should not place excessive hope in any one solution, because many factors work together to determine the overall effectiveness of an archival program."[10]

Even if an institution successfully employs a holistic archival management strategy that prevents or minimizes the growth of a backlog, their existing backlog may be too substantial to be eliminated as part of daily operations. Much of the archival backlog literature discusses one-time projects and most of it focuses on processing procedures. Case studies on one-time backlog projects dating back to the 1980s center on processing strategies.[11] Some archivists, such as

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[4] The first core value of the Society of American Archivists states, "Archivists should strive to expand access and usage opportunities for users, and potential users, of archival records" https://www2.archivists.org/statements/saa-core-values-statement-and-code-of-ethics

[5] J. Gordon Daines III, "Re-engineering Archives: Business Process Management (BPM) and the Quest for Archival Efficiency," *The American Archivist* 74 (Spring/Summer 2011): 126.

[6] See Rachel Searcy, "Beyond Control: Accessioning Practices for Extensible Archival Management," *Journal of Archival Organization* 14, no. 3-4 (2017): 160-161, https:doi.org/10.1080/15332748.2018.1517292 and Mark Greene, "MPLP: It's Not Just for Processing Anymore," *The American Archivist* 73, no.1 (2010): 175–203, https://doi.org/10.17723/aarc.73.1.m577353w31675348.

[7] Christine Weideman, "Accessioning as Processioning," *The American Archivist* 69, no. 2 (Fall/Winter 2006): 274-283.

[8] Mark A. Greene and Dennis Meissner, "More Product, Less Process: Revamping Traditional Archival Processing," *The American Archivist* 68, no. 2 (2005): 208-263.

[9] Daniel A. Santamaria, *Extensible Processing for Archives and Special Collections: Reducing Processing Backlogs* (Chicago: ALA Neal-Schuman, 2015).

[10] Christopher J. Prom, "Optimum Access? Processing in College and University Archives," *The American Archivist* 73 (Spring/Summer 2010): 169.

[11] See Helen W. Slotkin and Karen T. Lynch, "An Analysis of Processing Procedures: The Adaptable Approach," *American Archivist* 45, no. 2 (Spring 1982): 155–63 and Terry Abraham, Stephen Balzarini, and Anne Frantilla, "What

Donna McCrea, Matt Gorzalski, and Marcella Wiget, who wrote about diminishing their backlogs, cite Meissner and Greene's MPLP processing philosophy and techniques as instrumental in their progress.[12] A 2009 survey indicates that 81% of processors who responded were using an MPLP-type approach to mastering their backlogs.[13] Similar to the scenarios described in the literature, UNLV Libraries adopted theories from MPLP to develop a one-time archival backlog elimination project and implemented practices that minimize their backlog's growth, such as accessioning as processing and extensible processing.

PROJECT BACKGROUND

Founded in 1957, the University of Nevada, Las Vegas (UNLV) is a public land-grant R1 university of more than 31,000 students and is home to one of the nation's most diverse undergraduate student bodies.[14] The Special Collections and Archives (SCA) division of the UNLV University Libraries documents the history, culture, and environment of Las Vegas, the Southern Nevada region, the global gaming industry, and the University. SCA's holdings include over 14,000 cubic feet of archival collections, over 32,000 books and periodicals, 1,800 maps, and 4,000 oral history interviews. As of 2021, SCA is composed of five units: Digital Collections, Public Services, Technical Services, the Center for Gaming Research, and the Oral History Research Center. Over the past five years, the extent of SCA's annual archival acquisitions averaged 3 to 4 terabytes of unique digital content and over 650 cubic feet of physical materials.[15]

UNLV Special Collections and Archives was established in 1967 and initially focused on building its collections. Acquisitions outpaced the development of SCA's organizational and technical infrastructure and quickly exceeded the staff's capacity to manage the collections, creating a backlog of archival materials that were not adequately described or physically processed. The Technical Services department was established in 2014 to supplement SCA staffing, build a technical infrastructure, and apply current professional standards to accessioning and processing activities. They began by implementing UNLV's first archival collection management system (ArchivesSpace), normalizing the many different collection identifier schemas that had been used throughout the years, and obtaining internal funding to conduct a needs assessment in the form of an archival collections survey.

The ten-month survey assessed archival holdings at the box level and spanned 1,324 collections totaling over 6,500 cubic feet. It targeted manuscript collections, photograph collections, and

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Is Backlog Is Prologue: A Measurement of Archival Processing," *The American Archivist* 48, no. 1 (Winter 1985): 31–44.

[12] See Donna E. McCrea, "Getting More for Less: Testing a New Processing Model at the University of Montana," *The American Archivist* 69, no. 2 (Fall/Winter 2006): 284-290 and Matt Gorzalski and Marcella Wiget, "'More Access, Less Backlog': How the Kansas Historical Society got its Groove Back," *Archival Issues* 33, no. 1 (2011): 7-24.

[13] Stephanie H. Crowe and Karen Spilman "MPLP @ 5: More Access, Less Backlog?" *Journal of Archival Organization* 8, no.2 (2010) 110-133, https://doi.org/10.1080/15332748.2010.518079.

[14] A recent issue of *US News & World Report on Campus Ethnic Diversity* (2020) ranked UNLV third in ethnic diversity of undergraduates at national universities. "Campus Ethnic Diversity National Universities," *US News & World Report,* accessed on June 19, 2021, https://www.usnews.com/best-colleges/rankings/national-universities/campus-ethnic-diversity.

[15] Annual acquisition extent represents the pre-processing extent of archival acquisitions and does not include monographs or serials.

UNLV University Archives, but did not capture the full extent of unprocessed outlying materials—such as additional architectural drawings, collections housed in off-site storage, oral history media, legacy audiovisual media, unprocessed born-digital material in hybrid collections, and "mystery collections" that were lacking any identifying information. Largely composed of graduate students in public history, the survey team made recommendations guided by their knowledge of American history and their experience processing to the golden minimum.[16] Employing the charts in the *Guidelines for Efficient Archival Processing at the University of California Libraries*, surveyors suggested processing levels and estimated processing times, considering variables such as the existing level of access, collection characteristics, potential restrictions, research value, and the nature of the work required to make each hidden and under-described collection serviceable.[17] The survey team also centralized collection documentation, labeled unmarked boxes, and labeled unnumbered shelving to support future processing and location tracking.[18]

SCA was pleased to find that only 22% of the collections surveyed were completely hidden and 88% of the collections were discoverable online in some way (via a MARC record, a brief description in a homegrown database, or a finding aid). However, only 19% of the collections were described in the collection management system (ArchivesSpace) following current professional standards. The remaining 81% of the collections still needed description and/or physical processing of some kind. The survey gave structure and substance to collection needs that SCA staff had been aware of for decades, but lacked the resources to address. By quantifying the needs, the survey served as the foundation for a proposal that outlined the services, strategies, and resources required to meet those needs. The survey results, combined with educated guesses about unprocessed outlying materials that were not part of the survey, estimated more than 31,000 staff hours were needed to responsibly manage the backlog of legacy collections. SCA had one full-time processing archivist, half of whose time was committed to other responsibilities, such as reference services. The number of staff hours allocated for processing was insufficient to keep pace with the average annual acquisition of more than 600 cubic feet, which compounded the backlog. Assessment of the survey data highlighted that, in order to responsibly steward UNLV's archival collections, a concentrated effort to eliminate the existing backlog must be accompanied by a sustainable strategy to prevent its future growth.

When the survey was completed in 2016, the UNLV University Libraries had substantial funds to disburse and entertained internal proposals for one-time projects. The SCA Division Director and the Head of SCA Technical Services proposed an ambitious three-year project to eliminate the archival backlog. Factors that contributed to the success of the proposal included:

- Organizational commitment to protect and preserve the unique assets with which they have been entrusted and provide appropriate access to the communities they serve

[16] The "golden minimum" is a concept that focuses on doing only what is necessary to achieve an objective and is employed in efficient processing methods. Mark A. Greene and Dennis Meissner, "More Product, Less Process: Revamping Traditional Archival Processing," *The American Archivist* 68, no. 2 (2005): 240.

[17] The surveyors referenced Version 3.2 of the University of California Libraries, *Guidelines for Efficient Archival Processing in the University of California Libraries*, September 18, 2012.

[18] For survey methodology, data points collected, and examples of past forms, see UNLV Archival Survey Documentation at https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/0B25SSpmxsyXOLVp3UjZSWFJMR00. As of this writing, UNLV has retired the survey Google Form and migrated collection data into Airtable.

- SCA Technical Services' record of efficiency, productivity, and successful management of large internal projects and temporary staff
- SCA Technical Services' proven commitment to teaching and mentoring students and emerging professionals during previous project positions
- Implementation of a sustainable strategy to prevent (or at least minimize) future growth of the backlog without requesting additional internal resources[19]
- Data that identified and quantified the need
- A detailed breakdown of the positions and funding needed for all aspects of the project, enabling the Dean of Libraries to consider funding a specific portion, if not all, of the project

The Libraries approved the majority of the proposal and allocated over one million dollars to fund three years of wages for select positions, approved $148,000 to create and furnish a temporary processing space, and committed to funding the archival supplies needed to preserve and rehouse the legacy collections.

The Libraries constructed a temporary workspace for the project by carving out space from a study area in the main library and relocating the patron seating from there to another area of the building. They enclosed 2,320 square feet with frosted glass and equipped the space with a secure electronic entry system. They outfitted the space with 720 linear feet of shelving, a white board, seven desks with computer stations, and fifteen work tables. They chose desks and tables on casters to facilitate periodic reconfiguration of the space, which accommodated flexibility in the composition of processing teams and the various sizes of collections assigned to teams. They intentionally selected shelving and furniture that could be repurposed in the future. Construction permit delays postponed the project launch, cutting the project's timeline to two years and nine months (October 1, 2017 to June 30, 2020) from the original three years.

In planning the positions for the project, SCA staff were keenly aware that temporary positions serve as stepping stones for students and emerging professionals. At UNLV, temporary positions are open to individuals with little to no experience and offer opportunities for professional growth. Following university guidelines for temporary employees, SCA staff tried to achieve the most impact with available funds. Part-time employment enabled them to provide a greater number of individuals with opportunities to gain experience. They created twelve positions:

- *1 Visiting Faculty Librarian* (full time with benefits; required MLIS)
- *1 Digital and Media Archives Assistant* (full time with benefits, required bachelor's degree)
- *4 Archival Processing Assistants* (19 hours per week; required bachelor's degree)

[19] Preventing the growth of a backlog begins with acquisitions. UNLV curators are encouraged to be selective when acquiring collections. However, fulfilling the archives' mission demands continuous collecting. SCA reallocated resources by converting its University Archivist position into an Accessioning Archivist position and implemented baseline processing at the time of accessioning. The Accessioning Archivist physically and digitally stabilizes every collection, generates basic DACS-compliant finding aids, and identifies candidates for additional future (iterative) processing. This approach slowed the growth of the backlog for 2.5 years, until the global COVID-19 pandemic closed UNLV Libraries facilities intermittently. As of this writing, the pace of acquisitions has not decreased, but archivists (who are conforming with pandemic-related protocols) have limited access to physical collections and have fallen behind in accessioning and processing.

- *2 Graduate Student Assistants* (10 hours per week)
- *4 Undergraduate Student Assistants* (16 hours per week)

UNLV conducted national searches and rigorous interviews for the Visiting Faculty Librarian and Archival Processing Assistant positions. They appointed an internal candidate to the Digital and Media Archives Assistant position. Over time, twenty-three individuals worked in these twelve project positions, some of them rising to positions of greater responsibility within the project. Only two individuals remained on the project the entire time. Some individuals left to accept permanent positions or further their education. Three individuals were terminated because they did not meet job performance expectations. During the project, UNLV also hosted three unpaid MLIS student interns seeking to gain course credits and/or hands-on experience. Overall, the team was diverse in age, gender, race, subject knowledge, skill sets, and levels of commitment to the archival profession. The project team was supported by three SCA Librarians who supervised aspects of the work and one SCA archivist who contributed to the work.

UNLV Librarians set up basic technical infrastructures for the management of different aspects of the project, created orientation activities, developed hands-on training for ArchivesSpace, archival processing, workflows, policies, and procedures to prepare the team for the work that lay ahead. They set up a framework of priorities, workflows, and assessment measures with the expectation that the Visiting Librarian would implement tools to support the work and identify areas for process improvement as the project unfolded.

Project accomplishments

In spite of challenges posed by the global pandemic, in less than three years, the project team successfully created DACS-compliant descriptions for nearly all of the collections listed as part of the backlog. At the end of the project on June 30, 2020, 93% of all backlog collections were processed and had a DACS-compliant finding aid publicly available. The project also recovered almost two thousand linear feet of shelf space in SCA.

Throughout the project, it was not uncommon for the team to observe patrons in the SCA Reading Room using recently processed collections. The team was encouraged by these signs that their work was making collections more discoverable and accessible. SCA's Reading Room usage statistics confirm these observations. The frequency of archival collection requests jumped significantly over the course of the project. In 2017 (when the project began), archival collections were requested 481 times. In 2018, there were 1,021 requests; and 2019 there were 1,026 requests.

LESSONS LEARNED

Project team structure and staff turnover

UNLV SCA's backlog elimination project was carefully designed by permanent staff. As mentioned previously, the project consisted of twelve project positions. The project manager (Visiting Librarian) was responsible for the hiring, onboarding and training, and management of the core project team (four part-time archival processors, one graduate student, flexible number

of interns/volunteers). Even this core management position turned over as the incumbents found permanent positions elsewhere. The project manager position was filled by three people over the course of less than three years, some of whom were promoted from within the existing project team, which eased the transition between leadership even though it required redefining positions.[20] In addition to the change in project management, the team of processing assistants and student assistants also experienced fairly regular turnover. While student work is in a natural state of flux, the part-time processing assistants were on eleven-month contracts with the possibility of renewal for a total of three years (33 months of work). Some team members were let go after a few weeks or months, or their eleven-month contracts were not renewed. This required interviewing, hiring, onboarding, training, and bringing together a new team multiple times during the course of the project, which is not an easy task. The process can and did cause unpleasantness among remaining team members and bouts of poor team morale. It is important to consider all of these consequences of changing the team midway through a long-term, important project.

UNLV SCA's project had a high number of part-time staff. It would have been easier to manage with fewer, full-time staff. Advocating for full-time employees (FTE) over part-time employees (PTE) is ideal for both employee and project manager. From a managerial perspective, it is more efficient to have fewer FTEs (as opposed to more PTEs) on a project. Less frequent turnover, deeper knowledge base (due to nature of the position), fewer scheduling issues, and reduced number of direct reports to manage are all reasons to advocate for a smaller staff of FTEs over a larger staff of PTEs. Working full time brings a greater understanding of workflows, processes, and team dynamics to a project. Hiring full-time employees for a long-term project means less training, turnover, and supervisory work for the project manager.

SCA Librarians recognize the importance of student work and intern labor, as many projects rely on this additional workforce. SCA strives to make internships and student positions stepping-stone experiences, and tailors each experience to individual needs or interests whenever possible. Oftentimes, mentoring an inexperienced individual through an internship (typically a semester in length, 16-22 weeks) is time consuming. However, SCA is committed to helping students and new professionals gain experience to boost their career development and does not rely on students or interns as an integral source of labor.

By nature, temporary positions are vulnerable to turnover as the incumbents gain the experience needed to move on when permanent positions become available. Additionally, an important part of project management is recognizing when members of the team are not a good fit. Carefully weigh the outcomes and decide if an individual is truly bringing down the team, or if they may be more successful in a different role within the project that is more suited to their specific skill

[20] In summer 2017, a Visiting Librarian position (MLIS required) was converted to a digital archives position (Letter of Appointment with Benefits; no MLIS required) so an internal candidate could be appointed. The project manager position was then made a Visiting Librarian (MLIS required), when originally the degree requirements were switched. Toward the end of the project, a vacant graduate student position was converted into two undergraduate positions to leverage internal talent rather than hire and train a new person. In October 2019, the Visiting Librarian position (MLIS required) was redefined to a Project Manager position (no MLIS required) in order to quickly place an internal candidate in the position who could provide continuity for the team and the project.

set.[21] Staff turnover, whatever the reason, disrupts team dynamics and efficiencies. Project managers must balance retaining staff for the sake of continuity and terminating staff who are inefficient or difficult to work with. When planning multi-year projects for temporary staff, the timeline should account for the reality that turnover causes gaps in productivity because it takes time to hire and train new staff, as well as time for the team to adapt to new team members. Turnover is inevitable, but the desire is for temporary staff to develop skills, grow professionally, and find permanent employment. The lesson here is to account for delays caused by turnover when creating the project timeline, allowing time to recruit, hire, and onboard new staff periodically which will impact overall project progress.

Establishing and re-evaluating priorities

When the project began, the Special Collections and Archives curators, Technical Services department head, and division director created a short list of seventeen collections that were immediate priorities for processing. These collections reflected the different curatorial collecting areas and priorities: gaming, entertainment, and Las Vegas visual history. After the project team gained experience by processing smaller, less complex collections, they moved on to the curators' priority list. The project staff processed a few of the larger priority collections as teams. A few collections on the list immediately brought up bigger questions about born-digital processing, preservation and conservation, and difficult access restrictions that needed to be answered before the team could continue processing these particular collections. The curators, division director, and Technical Services department head prioritized remaining collections once more. Once the second round of priorities were completed, it was up to the project manager to determine what collections to process next. Giving the project manager the experience and authority to make decisions on priorities contributed significantly to achieving the best overall outcome.

Regularly establishing, reviewing, and revising processing priorities contributed greatly to the success of SCA's backlog elimination project. Different priorities may be recommended by a number of people with varying degrees of responsibility or authority in relation to a project. It can be challenging to respectfully balance competing priorities. One strategy that proved effective was to rotate priorities based on the subject areas/interests of the curators, ensuring that the team was regularly processing at least one collection from each of the curator's recommendations. Another strategy was to target collections that were large or complex in content, or required significant conservation work. These collections were prioritized to best utilize the availability of a team of processors and the large workspace temporarily allocated for the project. Collections with conservation issues were prioritized towards the beginning of the project to ensure the collection had time to undergo necessary conservation work and still allow time within the project to complete the physical processing. Regularly reviewing existing priorities within the context of project deadlines and available resources (including space, supplies, and personnel schedules) allowed the project manager to adjust project milestones, reassign collections as needed, and either speed up processing (minimal/collection level records) or spend more time finely processing select collections. Utilizing the well-documented principle

[21] Examples of work that contributes to the processing of backlogged collections but is not strictly archival processing includes finding aid proofreading, authority control work, conservation and preservation tasks, or social media/promotional work (if applicable).

of MPLP and different levels of processing the collections also contributed to getting every collection described within the project timeframe. Accepting that the project had limited time and resources and strategically assigning collections the appropriate level of processing was a balancing act. Although there were a few missteps along the way, reviewing and reevaluating priorities was critical to the success of the project.

During the second and third years of the project, the confluence of the team's refined archival skills and each individual's unique subject expertise came to fruition. The project manager paired team members with collections related to their subject areas of interest to serve a twofold purpose: it maintained individuals' excitement and interest in their work and also provided in-depth subject expertise that greatly facilitated arrangement and enhanced collection descriptions. In the second year, project assessment and prioritization was key to the ultimate success of the project. The project manager performed continuous assessment on the status of all the collections to track the number of remaining collections and celebrate the team's progress. Establishing a regular timeline for assessing the team's overall progress was extremely helpful and monthly updates on progress and remaining collections kept the team motivated. Monthly assessment of the project also generated data that informed annual progress reports to the wider UNLV Libraries.

Without ongoing assessment, it is nearly impossible to understand if a multi-year project is on schedule to meet its deadline. The assessment needs may change over time -- certain data points may prove not as informative or useful and may be abandoned, while others may be created out of necessity. However, documenting the process of assessment is important as it allows for anyone (if project leadership changes mid-project, statistics are needed on the fly for a last minute presentation, etc.) to generate reports whenever they are needed. It also ensures that all data is consistent, something that is particularly important if multiple people will be assessing the data on a regular basis. Knowing how a project's progress will be evaluated before the project begins is critical. For example, are we concerned with how much shelf space is recovered? The number of finding aids generated? The percentage of collections described in an online catalog record or DACS-compliant finding aid?[22] Establishing a list of data points that need to be assessed regularly and documentation of the process of collecting the necessary data is critical for evaluating progress in large-scale backlog reduction projects.

While reviewing and reevaluating priorities based on curatorial collecting areas and priorities was an important part of the success of the project at UNLV, there are many different ways of establishing collection priorities and how the overall project goals are structured. As mentioned above, the goal was to have every collection described in the collection management system by the end of the project. Instead of going through the collections one by one and processing them individually (as was done for this project), a different strategy would be to create collection level records for everything upfront, and use remaining time to process a select number of collections more intensively (iteratively). This would give the project manager or person determining

[22] Due to complex workflows, certain benchmarks could not be relied on for project assessment, such as the number of new catalog records. A different division is responsible for creating MARC catalog records for archival collections; SCA's project progress was not measured by another department's accomplishments. SCA reported progress in number of collections with a published ArchivesSpace PDF finding aid and internal SCA database record as they were the records that SCA could most directly control and report out.

priorities the added benefit of context, especially important if the project manager is an external hire and lacks institutional knowledge. If the team of processors is diverse in skill level, this would also allow for better management of available team resources.[23] Depending on an institution's holdings, collections could also be prioritized by collection age (the oldest collections are sometimes the most valuable and/or fragile), conservation needs, or frequency of patron requests. If additional staff outside of the immediate project team wants or has input in the prioritization process, establishing a baseline of what each person's expectations or personal interests are is important. Creating an understanding of what each party sees as valuable in collections better informs collection prioritization and description.

Workflows in flux

Before the project began, UNLV SCA permanent staff set up basic technical infrastructures for project workflows including a new collection management system (ArchivesSpace), conservation request workflows, and location tracking. These workflows encompassed work performed by permanent staff and project staff, and were created with the intention of adapting as necessary. The backlog existed for many reasons, one of which was the "problem" collections, which presented challenges that staff were unsure how to approach or lacked resources to properly address. As the large-scale project commenced, "exceptions" to the normal workflows arose in the form of unusual access issues or insurmountable preservation concerns. Numerous decisions had to be made that affected cross-divisional and departmental workflows and staff. This delayed the processing of challenging collections, sometimes halting work on a collection for six months or more until a difficult decision was made, special equipment was set up, or a workflow put in place.

Archival processing is never a one-size-fits-all process. Problems and unanswered questions will arise during processing, especially processing collections that have sat untouched for decades in a repository. Quickly adapting and reacting to these challenging questions will determine the success of a project, as work may halt until the problem is resolved. The ability to adjust workflows that involve numerous people and departments is critical to the success of a large backlog elimination project.

Documentation strategy

Due to continuously adapting and improving processing workflows, at the end of three years UNLV SCA had a substantial amount of documented workflows, an instruction manual that was over 90 pages, and an internal website with over two dozen linked instruction documents. Over-documentation led to confusion and "documentation fatigue" for some team members, which manifested as careless mistakes building up over time, skipped steps in the workflows, and incomplete or inaccurate work products. By addressing these issues directly with project staff, the project manager used staff feedback to revise and simplify workflows and documentation resources. Routinely soliciting feedback from staff who utilized the documentation revealed repetition or gaps in workflows, and continuous revision led to fewer mistakes and more content staff. Notably, staff of all experience levels provided feedback - senior team members knew the

[23] Students, interns, or less experienced processors may be assigned to create broad, collection-level records. More experienced team members may come after, building on the core information to create and execute a processing plan or perform more nuanced processing for higher-value collections.

processes and workflows well, but may have drifted away from documentation; recently onboarded team members saw processes with a new perspective.

Documentation of project workflows and decisions is extremely important, particularly for a multi-year, large-scale project that involves a number of stakeholders and staff. However, while documentation is key to the success of a project it is also important to be aware of the danger of over-documentation. Re-evaluating documentation annually or during periodic staff turnover helps weed out unnecessary documentation and refocus existing workflows.

Processing metrics

The UNLV SCA backlog project team participated in the department-wide effort to collect detailed processing metrics. Since the project consisted of a large team of individuals with a wide variety of archival processing experience, the project provided a broad sampling of processing metrics. Processors entered the total hours they spent processing the collection, level of processing, and processing notes in separate data fields. Processors broke their time out into detailed subsets of processing (rehousing, foldering, description, etc.), administrative tasks (meetings, emails, time spent tracking metrics), and logistical tasks (retrieving/storing collection boxes, building boxes, etc.). Staff recorded their own time in individual or group spreadsheets as directed by project managers. When they completed a collection, processors updated the online collection survey Google form for the collection, which fed into a central collection status tracking sheet.

Collecting processing metrics was useful in providing the raw data that SCA analyzed to create local benchmarks for processing estimates, rather than relying on the *UC Guidelines*. However, post-project assessment indicated that the metrics captured an unnecessary level of detail. Some of the information UNLV SCA was trying to quantify was easily gleaned by the project manager who worked with the team closely on a daily basis. Observation of the project team allowed the project manager to note those who worked quickly, strengths and weaknesses that made good processing pairs, and conditions or collection attributes that caused a processor to slow down (presence of restrictions, conservation issues, etc.). Nevertheless, the project team's metrics enabled UNLV SCA to assess a wide range of processing data, refine their data collection methods, and improve the accuracy of their local processing rate estimates.[24]

Feedback and communication

Establishing a schedule for regular feedback to all project team members is essential for the health of the team and the success of the project. At UNLV, temporary staff fall outside of administrative requirements for performance evaluations. However, at UNLV SCA temporary positions are seen as stepping stones to permanent positions and career advancement. Including project staff in regular performance evaluation cycles provided constructive feedback that positioned them for continued success in future positions. It also provided a framework for

[24] For a detailed analysis of processing metrics assessment, see Cyndi Shein, Sarah R. Jones, Tammi Kim, and Karla Irwin, "Balancing the Art and Science of Archival Processing Metrics and Assessment," *Journal of Western Archives* 11, no.1 (2020).

project managers to dedicate time to employee reviews, and document the strengths, weaknesses, and areas of improvement for the entire team. Including all staff in regular evaluations also improved the team dynamic, as no one was singled out for their performance - good or bad. This type of reflection was also beneficial as it allowed direct reports to ask questions and provide feedback to the project manager. Regular team meetings also helped disseminate important project information and served as a time of sharing knowledge, team building, and open communication. Incorporating team building exercises, both formal and informal, built a stronger team dynamic and improved morale.

Utilizing free, open-source project management and communication platforms also helped with team communication. Transparent, digital communication among the project team was important since the team was not always onsite together and needed to communicate processing plan changes, note where they left off processing, or share interesting "finds" with the rest of the team. This type of virtual communication and project management was particularly helpful when the team transitioned to remote work for the final four months of the project due to the global COVID-19 pandemic. The project team used Trello to manage project progress and assignments, and Slack for daily team communication. Trello is a Kanban-style list-making application that assists in project management by assigning team members to tasks, tracking progress, and automatically notifying team members.[25] Team members were assigned to individual collection "cards", and digitally moved the cards along the Trello board as they physically progressed through processing an archival collection.[26] Slack is a communication platform that allows the teams to communicate with each other, privately message, and connect up with Google Drive and other platforms if necessary. This helped keep the team's communication transparent and kept everyone informed when their schedules did not overlap. Communication on this platform became the essential way the team communicated during remote work. It not only helped with project management, it quickly became a place where the team continued their "in person" conversations and helped keep morale and team spirit up during a particularly challenging part of the project.

Beginning in March of 2020, the rise of the global COVID-19 pandemic forced many universities to close their doors temporarily, including UNLV. The project team was contracted through June 2020, so the last few months of the project shifted to remote work. In order to continue their work remotely, project staff utilized legacy itemized lists saved to the Libraries' network drive and digitized images from Digital Collections to create collection descriptions. It was remarkably successful. Utilizing a Trello board, the team noted which collections were definitely completed physically, and which required on-site, physical follow-up once staff were allowed to return onsite. For each collection, a processing plan was created and saved to the network drive so that future processors could jump in to complete processing the collection, as all the documentation and information was gathered and synthesized into a tailored processing plan. While the return to onsite work did not occur before the end of the project, the project

[25] At the time of this article, Special Collections and Archives has transitioned away from Trello and into a paid version of Airtable to better manage and export their data.

[26] Team members moved their assigned collections through the following cards (steps) of processing: Collections to process; Collection review/Processing plan; Processing; Finding aid circulating; Ready to upload/Survey marked complete; Supervisor quality control; Collections on hold; Routed for digitization as preservation; Routed for storage in LASR (the Libraries' automatic storage and retrieval system).

team's remote work left minimal physical work for UNLV's processing archivist when FTE staff finally returned onsite.

Onboarding and continuous training

As mentioned previously, temporary and part-time employees often find more stable positions elsewhere, creating staff turnover. Since the project had limited funding and a hard deadline, the urgency to fill vacancies and not "waste" any time in onboarding led to rushed training throughout the duration of the project. This created a long-term knowledge gap for employees and more work for supervisors because problems arose that could have been avoided through stronger upfront training.

Peer-to-peer coaching and teams of processors was a successful strategy that the project manager employed, particularly when turnover occurred and a new team member needed more one-on-one mentoring. Pairing a new employee with someone more experienced proved successful in many cases, and helped both people grow and mature in their understanding of workflows and archival processing theory. While the senior staff may have deeper knowledge of processes, the more junior staff asked questions that challenged the senior staff's knowledge and understanding of processes and allowed them both to grow and learn. Assigning teams of processors to larger collections also helped with team building, and led to a higher group morale and team-mentality for the remainder of the project.

Projects designed to reduce an archival backlog involve processing collections from across the institution's collecting areas and reflect a broad range of subjects, themes, and historical periods. Investing additional time to train project staff on important figures, places, terminology, or time periods represented in the materials they are responsible for processing will benefit the team and the project as a whole. It will inspire confidence and give independence to archival processors, lessen the burden on subject experts not directly involved in the project, and minimize the number of mistakes that require correction. Historical information and background provided upfront to archival processors will ultimately improve the accuracy and detail of the collection description. Striking a balance between information overload and neglecting to disseminate sufficient information is a challenge of onboarding new staff, no matter what the project. For a backlog elimination project, everyone is eager to dive into processing and start seeing progress -- a natural and understandable tendency. However, investing time at the beginning of staff onboarding creates a solid foundation that will carry the project farther and faster towards success.

CONCLUSION

After nearly three years and the efforts of twenty-three individuals who worked exclusively on the project at different points in time, SCA's backlog project concluded amidst a global pandemic. The project team achieved its main goal, which was to improve the accessibility and discoverability of archival collections, address outstanding conservation needs, and assure that nearly all backlog collections were represented in both the library catalog and UNLV's online database of finding aids. An additional benefit resulting from the project is that SCA developed better tools for training new staff, refined processing procedures, and streamlined departmental documentation. Using the data collected throughout the project, SCA also refined its data

collection methods and established realistic local processing benchmarks. Utilizing the increased number and variety of staff skill levels over the course of the project allowed SCA to significantly improve documentation and collect enough data to improve internal benchmarks.

UNLV SCA recognizes that not every institution will have the same amount of funding, space, and staff to dedicate to eliminating their archival backlog. The authors of this paper hope that by sharing examples of successful and unsuccessful strategies, institutions can implement them in their own projects or daily operations to help reduce archival backlogs. Institutions with limited resources should focus on establishing and continuously reevaluating priorities and refining processes and documentation, as these are critical to the success of any backlog reduction strategy.