TEXAS-SIZED PROGRESS: APPLYING MINIMUM-STANDARDS PROCESSING GUIDELINES TO THE JIM WRIGHT PAPERS

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ABSTRACT: This article describes the application of minimum-standards processing guidelines to a large collection of congressional papers. These guidelines, recently put before the profession by Mark A. Greene and Dennis Meissner in their article "More Product, Less Process," prescribe making practical changes in the way we process material to increase processing rates. The author explains why this collection was particularly well suited to minimum standards processing, details the techniques used to process the collection, and summarizes the processing rates achieved by using those techniques.

Introduction

The Fall/Winter 2005 issue of *American Archivist* includes an article by Mark Greene and Dennis Meissner in which they advocate revising processing practices and goals.[1] Citing ever-increasing backlogs and the problems associated with unprocessed materials, most notably the lack of access for researchers but also angry donors and unimpressed administrators, Greene and Meissner call for a new set of arrangement, description, and preservation guidelines that emphasize getting collection materials into the hands of users as soon as possible. According to Greene and Meissner, "We need to articulate a new set of arrangement, preservation, and description guidelines that 1) expedites getting collection materials into the hands of users; 2) assures arrangement of materials *adequate* to user needs; 3) takes the *minimal* steps necessary to physically preserve collection materials; and 4) describes material *sufficient* to promote use [italics in the original]."[2] These guidelines include limiting arrangement and description to the series level in most cases and ending the practice of item-level preservation, specifically the removal of metal fasteners and refoldering material in acid neutral folders. Greene and Meissner contend that, while certain collections, or portions of certain collections, may justify attention at the item level, in most cases the traditional amount of time spent on arrangement, description, and preservation serves only to satisfy the archivist's fastidiousness and sense of duty and is not warranted given the current backlogs in most repositories. To maximize user accessibility to collection material, they propose setting a goal of processing a foot of material in four hours or four hundred linear feet per processor per year.

While Greene and Meissner provide the most recent call to implement practical steps to increase processing rates, they are not the first. More than 20 years ago, Helen Slotkin and Karen Lynch conducted a study of processing techniques designed to address growing backlogs. They implemented procedures based on the assumption that "the ideal level of processing is not the same for all collections" and considered a collection "'processed' whenever it can be used productively for research."[3] Around the same time, Megan Desnoyers reached much the same conclusion and warned archivists against their tendency to "strive for an ideal that may not always be practical or appropriate."[4] Instead, she advocated that processing be viewed as "a range of choices along a continuum for each of the four essential processing activities: arrangement, preservation, description, and screening."[5]

The sheer size of congressional collections, combined with the homogeneousness of much of the material within them, makes them particularly well suited for a minimum-standards processing approach. In fact, given these characteristics, it would seem safe to assume that those who work with congressional collections would have been ahead of the rest of the profession in terms of implementing many of Greene and Meissner's suggestions. However, a review of the professional literature weakens this assumption. In a survey conducted by the Society of American Archivists' Congressional Papers Roundtable in 1990 and 1991, duplicates were routinely discarded in 52 percent of the collections. While not an overwhelming majority, the percentage is still surprisingly high given the time and effort required to weed duplicates from such large collections. Traditional methods of preservation were in evidence in the same survey, with 19 of 26 institutions reporting that they refoldered materials, while 22 reboxed.[6] Processing techniques described in some journal articles indicate item-level attention. The author of a study of the processing rates of senatorial papers estimated that "[r]efoldering and alphabetizing accounted for approximately 80 percent of the total time spent on each accession."[7] Another author, in describing a processing project that included detailed appraisal, admitted that the "luxury of having time dedicated to item-level processing … is one that comes infrequently."[8] The point here is not to criticize any individual or repository—at 3.8 hours per cubic foot, the reported statistics far exceeded many processing projects (and meets the goal proposed by Greene and Meissner) despite the refoldering and alphabetizing, and the item-level review of the collection described in the other article resulted in an admirable appraisal effort—rather it is to point out that, collectively, we are not processing congressional collections as closely to the minimum-standards processing model as we may think. The tendency to focus on item-level appraisal, arrangement, and preservation persists, in spite of the size of these collections. With this in mind, one wonders how many repositories can afford to commit the resources necessary to process to this level collections containing, in many cases, a great deal of material of marginal research value.[9] This is not meant to denigrate congressional collections; documenting congress has been and will continue to be an important endeavor. However, many of the current processing practices are causing frustration among researchers who are trying to access large, often unprocessed collections and the archivists attempting to process them. Patricia Aronsson summed things up perfectly when she wrote, "When archivists employ traditional methods in their handling of congressional collections, no one's needs are adequately met."[10] The time has come for more aggressive implementation of new processing techniques such as Greene and Meissner's minimum-standards processing guidelines.

Texas Christian University has recently applied the minimum-standards processing guidelines put forth by Greene and Meissner, hereafter referred to as "minimum standards," to the Jim Wright Papers, a large collection of congressional papers.[11] The staff at TCU measured its progress during the processing of the two biggest series, one consisting of constituent correspondence, the other of subject files kept by Wright and his staff. Following is a description of the archives at TCU, the techniques used to process the Wright Papers, and a summary of the processing rates.

Special Collections at Texas Christian University and the Jim Wright Papers

The situation at TCU is similar to that at many smaller university repositories, with archival material and rare books grouped together in the Special Collections department. During the processing of the Wright Papers, the staff consisted of four full-time employees and one part-time. The archives included approximately 3,500 linear feet of university records and manuscript collections, the vast majority unprocessed and without catalog records.

The Jim Wright Papers arrived at TCU during the summer of 1989. TCU is in Fort Worth, the heart of Wright's congressional district, and the school had contacted him earlier that year inquiring about his papers. Discussions did not progress, however, due largely to Wright's busy schedule and his apparent preference that his papers go to the University of Texas at Austin. All that changed quickly when Wright resigned as Speaker of the House in late May of 1989. Soon after his resignation, a member of Wright's staff contacted TCU, offering the papers and suggesting that representatives from the school be dispatched to Washington, D.C., as soon as possible. The school had no archivist on staff at the time, meaning that no one with archival experience, let alone experience with congressional collections, was on site to appraise the material. To make matters worse, the nature of Wright's departure placed added pressure on Wright and his staff to vacate their offices. As a result of these circumstances, TCU accepted everything offered. Wright served in Congress for 34 years, and approximately 2,400 linear feet of material documenting his career found its way to TCU. These consisted of roughly 1,800 linear feet of paper records, 300 linear feet of audiovisual material, 200 linear feet of memorabilia, and 100 linear feet of books.

The Wright Papers immediately became TCU's flagship collection and served as the justification for hiring an archivist in 1990. The donor agreement called for a Jim Wright room to be built, complete with an attendant to watch over the memorabilia on display. While the room never came to be, there is a permanent Wright exhibit that starts at the front door of Special Collections and winds its way down the hallway toward Mr. Wright's current office, a space carved from the department when he himself arrived on campus in 1990. To this day, the sign next to the front door announcing that the Jim Wright Collection resides at TCU dwarfs the department name stenciled on the door itself.

Appraising and Processing the Wright Papers

The first step for the Special Collections staff was to appraise the collection. The professional literature is rich with ideas and strategies for appraisal of congressional papers. Patricia Aronsson is the most ambitious, recommending that, in order to properly and thoroughly appraise congressional papers, archivists should research Congress and the particular senator or representative, become involved with the office staff as soon as possible, be aware of the materials in the papers and also those present in the papers of his or her contemporaries, and coordinate appraisal efforts with other repositories that hold congressional collections.[12] Others agree with Aronsson that the earlier the archivist can become involved with the congressperson's staff the better, even before the congressperson leaves office, if possible.[13] The major issue with congressional collections is size, and the literature is full of well-grounded suggestions and warnings to pare them down. The detrimental effects of insufficiently appraised collections on both repositories and researchers are well documented.[14]

Unfortunately, the situation with the Wright Papers made many of these strategies unusable. As mentioned above, the papers arrived on campus before TCU had an archivist in place, they are and will remain the only collection of congressional papers housed at TCU, and the Special Collections' connections with other repositories in the region that hold congressional papers do not exist. In addition, the gift agreement requires permission from Wright before anything can be separated from the collection.

In an effort to avoid appraising the collection at the item or folder level, the appraisal strategy adopted for the Wright Papers focused on document types. For example, the staff removed the academy files and published House committee reports from the constituent correspondence and legislative material in series I. For the most part, the rest of the series went untouched. In series II, accepted and declined invitations were the major separation, although in order to save time, staff separated invitations only when the entire box consisted of them. This means that some invitations, when in a box with other types of records, remain in the papers. We separated 90 feet of material from series I and II combined. Included in the separations were 40 feet of invitations and 35 feet of books, largely bound volumes of the public papers of various presidents, *Foreign Relations of the United States* and *Congressional Records*. The collection will further decrease in size over time. The case files—records of constituents asking Wright to intercede on their behalf in a matter concerning a government agency—are still closed and therefore remain untouched. When the time comes, they will be sampled and trimmed considerably from their current 250 linear feet. Eventually, the memorabilia will be offered back to Wright or his family, and most unclaimed items will be separated from the collection. In addition, many of the books will be added to the library's general holdings.

Despite the progress made, I would have preferred a different method of appraisal for the Wright Papers. Dealing with material that should never have been accessioned, challenged by a complicated donor agreement, and thwarted by the university's desire not to offend the donor, the staff must manage a collection that is still much too large. In particular, I would have liked to have sampled the constituent correspondence.[15] Unable to be bold, we stayed conservative and carried out appraisal as quickly as possible.[16] In so doing, we remained safely within the comfort level of those at the school. However, if TCU ever resumes processing the Wright Papers, it will be because space issues have forced further appraisal.

Slotkin and Lynch's premise that "the ideal level of processing is not the same for all collections" guided the general arrangement and description strategy for the Wright Papers.[17] With a collection of its size, the staff applied that philosophy series by series.[18] The constituent correspondence in series I is seldom used, and the arrangement and description of the series reflects this. The portion of the series that had been arranged before the implementation of minimum-standards processing remains untouched, sorted by Congress, divided into four subgroups and, from there, arranged alphabetically by committee name and chronologically within each folder. While this arrangement undoubtedly increased intellectual control over the material, the immense amount of work necessary to impose it could not continue to be justified. For the remainder of the series, the staff created a box-level inventory using the descriptions Wright's staff had written on the boxes. The archival staff did not arrange, rehouse, refolder, or relabel the material, instead they left it in the same folders and Federal Records Center boxes in which it arrived. The TCU staff also undertook no item-level conservation or appraisal, spending just a few minutes on each box to verify that the contents matched the description written on the boxes and folders, that the records were not seriously damaged in some way, and to note the date range.

Series I of the Wright Papers is 488 linear feet. The staff processed the remaining unprocessed portion, 353 feet of the series, using the minimum-standards procedure described above. It took 80 hours to complete this section—including entering the box listing in the finding aid and labeling the boxes—for an average of a little over four linear feet per hour. The box listing for all of series I is only five printed pages. Admittedly, this is spartan, but fair considering the material and how little it has been used over the past 15 years. The finding aid, the box listing, and a series description that provides an overview of the material and explanation of the two systems of arrangement within the series, give researchers enough physical and intellectual access to explore the series while not assuming the responsibility of leading them through it.

Series II consists of subject files about both local and national issues, which were maintained by Wright's staff, along with a variety of other materials, including Wright's speech files and correspondence from other members of Congress. This is the largest series in the collection, 540 linear feet, and contains the material most used by researchers. Because of its popularity, the staff described the series to the folder level while employing the same general principles used in series I. Wright's staff labeled nearly every folder and those labels were used whenever possible, with bracketed statements added when necessary to provide more information about the contents of a folder. The TCU staff did not refolder or rebox the material. Special Collections staff did not refolder or rebox the material and did not arrange the material or conduct item-level conservation. We combined folders dealing with the same topic into a one-line description whenever possible but went into greater detail when necessary. For example, I decided that a run of correspondence with Wright's colleagues in the House deserved to be listed by the last name of each correspondent rather than under the general heading of "correspondence." The inventory for series II is approximately three hundred pages, an indication of this series' perceived research value compared with that of series I.

Student assistants performed the majority of the work on series II. Freed from their previous duties of photocopying and sorting constituent mail, the students added folder titles to the inventory. Rather than relying on the archivist to produce work for them, they assumed an active role in the process. The archivist interceded only when material was loose or in an unmarked folder and therefore needed to be identified, or when certain types of documents (for example, academy files or case files) appeared in the folders. Student assistants entered a folder-level inventory for 540 linear feet of material in roughly the same number of hours. The additional 60 hours the staff spent reviewing the inventory, answering the resulting questions, and labeling boxes dropped the average processing time to just below one linear foot per hour.

Summary of Processing Rates

Using minimum standards, the staff at TCU processed a total of 893 feet in 680 hours for an average of .76 hours, or 45 minutes, per foot. Finding processing metrics for congressional collections for comparison is difficult. In the study previously noted, which was conducted at the University of Washington in the mid-1980s, Uli Haller reported that staff there processed four accessions from two collections of senatorial papers at a rate of 3.8 hours per cubic foot.[19] In his article, Haller reported that refoldering and alphabetizing accounted for approximately 80 percent of the time spent on each accession. If the time spent refoldering and alphabetizing is subtracted, the University of Washington processed at the same rate as TCU, or 45 minutes per foot. When Haller notes that "[t]he relatively low percentage of appraisal and arrangement time is no accident since most of that work was done at the box and folder levels," the similarities in processing rates are no surprise, given the similarities in processing procedures.[20] While Washington's processing rate was excellent, the comparison to TCU's rate helps quantify how much time TCU saved by not refoldering or alphabetizing.

Conclusion

It is hard to overstate the positive effects that making substantial progress with the Wright Papers has had on the Special Collections department at TCU. Before the minimum-standards project started, the staff thought of the papers as an albatross, the collection that would take many lifetimes to process. Now, having processed the first three series (series III consists of personal papers), the department is able to turn its attention to other collections in the backlog. Equally important, the finding aid has provided access to the papers. Reference requests have increased and reference service has improved. Although portions of the finding aid lack the detail many traditional finding aids have, to concentrate on what the finding aid is not does it a disservice. The staff may retrieve more boxes and spend slightly more time on reference requests in the future, but these are small sacrifices considering the amount of time saved during processing. Faced with a huge collection and a large backlog, TCU decided to do enough to provide access to the collection and no more. The state of the archives as a whole will benefit greatly from this decision over time.

Given the nature and the magnitude of the change that minimum-standards processing calls for, it is understandable that the profession would debate its merits. However, when user access is given top priority, as it should be, the question must be asked: What is more detrimental, loosening our grip on traditional processing practices or keeping collections hidden in our backlogs? It may be too much to expect the profession to feel liberated by Greene and Meissner's assertion that "[t]he archivist's job is simply to represent the materials sufficient to affording acceptable access," but it should not be threatened by it either.[21] Given their size and other unique characteristics, many of the minimum processing guidelines are undoubtedly already being employed in the processing of congressional collections. It is time to fully embrace the guidelines to maximize the processing efficiency of these large and ever-growing collections.

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NOTES

1. Mark A. Greene and Dennis Meissner, "More Product, Less Process: Revamping Traditional Archival Processing," *American Archivist* 68:2 (2005): 208–263.
2. Greene and Meissner, "More Product, Less Process," 212–213.
3. Helen W. Slotkin and Karen T. Lynch, "An Analysis of Processing Procedures: The Adaptable Approach," *American Archivist* 45:2 (1982): 156–157.
4. Megan Floyd Desnoyers, "When Is a Collection Processed?" *Midwestern Archivist* VII:1 (1982): 6.
5. Megan Floyd Desnoyers, "When Is a Collection Processed?" 8.
6. Mary Boccaccio, "Processing and Maintaining Congressional Collections: The Congressional Papers Roundtable Survey," *Provenance* X (spring/fall 1992): 57–64.
7. Uli Haller, "Variations in the Processing Rates on the Magnuson and Jackson Senatorial Papers," *American Archivist* 50:1 (1987): 104.

8. L. Rebecca Johnson Melvin, "The Appraisal of Senator John Williams's Papers," *Provenance* X (spring/fall 1992): 45.
9. According to Richard A. Baker, historian of the Senate, "Those who have worked extensively in the papers of recent former senators readily agree that as much as 80 or even 90 percent of a given collection is of marginal value." Richard A. Baker, "Managing Congressional Papers: A View of the Senate," *American Archivist* 41:3 (1978): 295. While it may not be safe to assume that those percentages apply to all congressional collections, it is reasonable to expect to find significant portions of any given collection to be of marginal value.
10. Patricia Aronsson, "Appraisal of Twentieth-Century Congressional Collections," in *Archival Choices*, ed. Nancy E. Peace (Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1984): 83.
11. The finding aid for the Jim Wright Papers is available at http://libnt4.lib.tcu.edu/SpColl/wright.htm (18 April 2007).
12. Aronsson, "Appraisal of Twentieth-Century Congressional Collections," 82–84.
13. For examples of how this has worked in the past, see Lauren R. Brown, "Present at the Tenth Hour: Appraising and Accessioning the Papers of Congresswoman Majorie S. Holt," *Rare Books and Manuscripts Librarianship* 2 (fall 1987): 95–102, and Susan Goldstein, "Appraising a Retiring Senator's Papers: A View from the Staff of Senator Alan Cranston," *Provenance* X (spring/fall 1992): 27–34.
14. Mark Greene succinctly states the problem for repositories: "Unless archivists can develop appraisal guidelines to significantly reduce the size of Congressional collections, overall documentation of Congress will suffer because fewer collections will be preserved." Mark A. Greene, "Appraisal of Congressional Records at the Minnesota Historical Society: A Case Study," *Archival Issues* 19 (1994): 33. Lydia Lucas effectively describes the problem an overly large collection presents to researchers: "If researchers perceive a collection *as a whole* to be overwhelming, then the whole of that collection is likely to remain unused [italics in the original]." Lydia Lucas, "Managing Congressional Papers: A Repository View," *American Archivist* 41 (1978): 280.
15. For an example of a project that sampled constituent mail, see Eleanor McKay, "Random Sampling Techniques: A Method of Reducing Large, Homogeneous Series in Congressional Papers," *American Archivist* 41 (1978): 281–289. McKay and her staff removed 80 percent of the constituent mail from a congressional collection. According to the author, "Stacks glutted with constituent correspondence of questionable value preclude repositories from accessioning other collections of more certain research value." McKay, "Random Sampling Techniques," 285.
16. Of the material separated from the collection, only the approved invitations would be the slightest bit controversial.
17. Slotkin and Lynch, "An Analysis of Processing Procedures," 156.
18. This approach is not revolutionary. In her overview of the Congressional Papers Roundtable survey, Mary Boccaccio mentions that many institutions reported processing and describing different series at different levels. Boccaccio, "Processing and Maintaining Congressional Collections," 61. See also Greene and Meissner, "More Product, Less Process," 243.
19. Haller, "Variations in the Processing Rates on the Magnuson and Jackson Senatorial Papers," 102.
20. Haller, "Variations in the Processing Rates on the Magnuson and Jackson Senatorial Papers," 104.
21. Greene and Meissner, "More Product, Less Process," 247.