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Review of Extensible Processing for Archives and Special Collections: Reducing Processing Backlogs

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Review of *Extensible Processing for Archives and Special Collections: Reducing Processing Backlogs*

By Daniel A. Santamaria. Chicago: Neal-Schuman, an imprint of the American Library Association, 2015. 248 pp. Softcover. $75.00. ISBN: 978-0838912577

Daniel A. Santamaria, author of *Extensible Processing for Archives and Special Collections: Reducing Processing Backlogs*, is director of digital collections and archives at Tufts University. Before arriving at Tufts, Santamaria served as head of technical services at the Seeley G. Mudd Manuscript Library at Princeton where he received the Society of American Archivists' (SAA) 2013 Coker Award for innovation developments in archival description. His previous work experience includes the New York Public Library and the Bentley Historical Library at the University of Michigan. In his professional career, Santamaria has overseen the processing of thousands of linear feet of organizational records and personal papers. He also authored *Designing Descriptive and Access Systems*, a component within the Society of American Archivists' *Trends in Archival Practice* series and currently teaches SAA's "Implementing More Product, Less Process" workshop that emphasizes changing descriptive practices for minimally processed archival materials.

"Archives exist to be used"— that is how Santamaria launches his book's Preface. Use, or rather the ability of users to find, identify, select, and obtain (i.e., access) materials under the archivist's care, is the main rationale for the profession's existence. Unfortunately, as the author illustrates in Chapter 1, many archival institutions have not succeeded in making their collection backlogs accessible, even minimally – potentially damaging the reputation of the repository with resource allocators, donors, and users. Santamaria credits the groundbreaking research and article by Mark Greene and Dennis Meissner, "More Product, Less Process (MPLP)," as a catalyst for change within the profession, as well as heavily influencing his own professional career. The MPLP article called for a user-centered approach that accelerates access to materials by stripping inefficient processing practices, such as "overzealous housekeeping" tasks that users do not value, stopping preservation actions of negligible value, and removing the optimal standards and uniformity of archival description among and within collections that invariable slows the availability of materials. Santamaria adds that archivists struggle to make their materials accessible is only compounded by the increased size and complexity of late twentieth and twenty-first century collections in both analog and digital formats. If MPLP propelled archival backlogs to the foreground of our professional discussions, it also spawned a series of techniques and practices intended to improve access and

enhance visibility to archival collections. *Extensible Processing for Archives and Special Collections* is Santamaria's contribution to that literature.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines "Extensible" as an adjective meaning that an object (or process) is "capable of being extended in any dimension or direction" or "capable of being enlarged in scope or meaning." In Chapter Two, Santamaria describes an extensible processing program as an iterative rather than linear process that is systematic, but flexible, in its approach to processing and backlog reduction. Instead of the old-school 'do it once, do it right' philosophy, he proposes that archivists consider these fundamental principles when processing archival materials: creating baseline level access to all collections; create standardized, structured description; manage archival materials in the aggregate; limit physical processing; plan future iterative processing based on use statistics and research value; and manage processing holistically. It is this last principle that I found most valuable to the professional discussion –that archival processing does not occur in isolation. Santamaria argues, in my view, correctly, that success in implementing the extensible process program successfully will depend on a repository's ability to understand that the functions and activities assigned to the acquisition, processing, technical, and public service departments should support and inform the archival processing program. Therefore, it is critical that actions and workflows at the stages of appraisal, accessioning, description, and management are aligned with and supportive of the core extensible principles for it to have an impact and succeed.

- Chapters 3 through 8 contain specifics on processing and related functions associated with an extensible processing program. Some of the highlights of the following chapters include:

- The structured data gathered during an assessment survey of unprocessed collections is not limited to analysis and planning for future processing projects, but can be repurposed to create baseline descriptions for online discovery by users.

- Pre-accessioning and pre-custodian intervention is a crucial opportunity – before archivists make an institutional commitment – to survey the materials, gather content and contextual information for the donor, explain their processing approach and learn of possible privacy concerns, and appraise the research value of potential collection. Be proactive!

- *Describing Archives: A Content Standard* (DACS) principles are still relevant in the creation of baseline, minimal descriptions within the extensible processing program. These descriptions are the foundation for discovery, future processing, or further collection analysis.

- Large-scale or on-demand digitization of archival content in the aggregate is increasingly necessary to increase archival materials' visibility, meet basic user expectations, and provide equitable access globally.

- Project management skills and the establishment of policies that clearly delineate goals, allocate resources, as well as measure performance and collection usage are critical components to beginning and sustaining a successful extensible processing program.

In his last chapter, Santamaria addresses the perceived harm that a departure from traditional processing might have on archival programs, such as the negative impact and extra workload experienced in reference, privacy and confidentiality issues, security concerns, the application with non-paper formats and born-digital materials, and the attack on archival professionalism. These are not new concerns, many of which surfaced after the MPLP article appeared a decade earlier. Santamaria adeptly tackles each argument equipped with statistical data and a review of the explanations provided in previous chapters. I understand the need to write the chapter, but some readers who already agree with the precepts of extensible principles and do not feel they need to cover old ground might be better served by proceeding to the appendices.

Santamaria encourages the application of extensible processing principles at the consortia, institution, or at the individual collection level. The appendices include contributions from archival managers and processing archivists from a variety of project levels who supply their own testimonials of extensible processing as case studies. These are insightful contributions that provide readers with the benefit, impact, and lessons learned that each processing project has to offer. The book concludes with examples of actual processing work plans, finding aids, and a deed of gift based on the framework's principles. This example documentation should prove useful to managers and archivists interested in developing their own project. Unfortunately, the quality and legibility of many computer screenshots within these appendices and throughout the book are poor and too difficult to read.

For the archivist and archival manager grappling with an existing backlog, unwieldy collection, or potential new donation, this book offers an achievable alternative to the traditional process methodology of a bygone era that no longer is suited for the donors and researchers of the digital age. The archival profession needs attainable methods and approaches that are based on sound archival principles to "front-log" their backlog. This book provides those methods and approaches. Whether one implements an entire extensible processing program or introduces and refines elements within existing workflows, Santamaria provides the information necessary to reduce backlogs and hasten access to archival materials. The book's premise that "archives exist to be used" reinforces the idea that we do not process for ourselves, but for our users. Let them decide which collections deserve the additional investment of our resources.

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