

2023

## Assessing Finding Aid Discoverability After Description Improvements Using Web Analytics

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### Recommended Citation

Velte, Ashlyn (2023) "Assessing Finding Aid Discoverability After Description Improvements Using Web Analytics," *Journal of Western Archives*: Vol. 14: Iss. 1, Article 9.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.usu.edu/westernarchives/vol14/iss1/9>

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## Assessing Finding Aid Discoverability After Description Improvements Using Web Analytics

### Cover Page Footnote

Thank you to Nicole Trujillo for providing feedback and statistics. And to Megan K. Friedel for supporting my interest in ArchivesSpace.

# Assessing Finding Aid Discoverability After Description Improvements Using Web Analytics

Ashlyn Velte

## ABSTRACT

Archivists use best practices, like More Product Less Process, and professional standards, like Describing Archives: A Content Standard, to create descriptions of archival collections that promote collection use and discoverability. However, most existing usability literature assessing online finding aids looks at navigability and ease of use, but does not examine increase in traffic and discoverability of those finding aids. University of Colorado Boulder Archives improved online finding aid descriptions on ArchivesSpace during 2020. Google Analytics data from 2020 and 2021 show an increase in users and sessions on ArchivesSpace. It also indicates that most users arrive to the site from Google searches. Based on this data, this case study demonstrates that improving online descriptions is connected to increased online finding aid use.

## Introduction

Many archivists consider creating finding aids an essential part of access to archival collections. To users, the finding aid is a tool that describes an archival collection and facilitates its use. In practice, finding aids allow users to find relevant resources by providing information about the groupings of materials and context for those materials. Archivists rely on professional standards like Describing Archives: A Content Standard (DACS) to create useful and consistent description of archival collections. The statement of principles included in DACS emphasizes that “users are the fundamental reason for archival description” and that “archival description should be easy to use, re-use, and share.... Users are best able to use, re-use, and share when it is discoverable; it is structured; it is machine-readable; it is machine actionable; it is available under an open license.”<sup>1</sup>

Archivists have been making finding aids available online throughout the 21st century. One way that descriptions can be machine actionable is by allowing indexing

1. “Statement of Principles,” Describing Archives: A Content Standard, (Version 2022), accessed January 2023, [https://saa-ts-dacs.github.io/dacs/04\\_statement\\_of\\_principles.html](https://saa-ts-dacs.github.io/dacs/04_statement_of_principles.html).

by search engines, such as Google. By doing so, users from around the world can discover finding aids easily. The Society of American Archivists' *Code of Ethics* for Archivists includes "Access and Use", defined as promoting "open and equitable access to records in their care as much as possible. They strive to minimize restrictions and maximize ease of access."<sup>2</sup> To maximize ease of access, archivists should be concerned about whether improved online collection descriptions increase use. Though many archivists have long believed it to be true, no peer-reviewed evidence supports the idea that increasing the descriptive detail of online finding aids improves their discoverability, and thus access to collections.

This article examines whether improving descriptions in online finding aids on ArchivesSpace at the University of Colorado Boulder (CU Boulder) correlates to increased discoverability of those collections. By comparing Google Analytics data from before and after detailed finding aid descriptions were added to ArchivesSpace, this case study will determine whether there was an increase in online use of finding aids.

## Literature Review

Archives literature generated after the adoption of Encoded Archival Description (EAD) frequently discusses usability of online finding aids. User research and usability studies aim to understand "User behaviors, needs, and motivations through observation techniques, task analysis, and other feedback methodologies."<sup>3</sup> A more detailed review of usability studies on finding aids published before 2011 appears in J. Gordon Daines III and Cory L. Nimer's article "Re-Imagining Archival Display."<sup>4</sup> To summarize briefly what they describe, usability studies on finding aids suggest that improvements to finding aid design include: an A-Z list or a table of contents, fewer text blocks, notes that describe material at the component level, and a search

2. "SAA Core Values Statement and Code of Ethics," Society of American Archivists, accessed January 2023, <https://www2.archivists.org/statements/saa-core-values-statement-and-code-of-ethics>.
3. "User Research Basics," US General Services Administration, accessed January 2023, <https://www.usability.gov/what-and-why/user-research.html>.
4. J. Gordon Daines III and Cory Nimer, "Re-Imagining Archival Display: Creating User-Friendly Finding Aids" *Journal of Archival Organization* 9, no. 1 (January 2011), <https://doi.org/10.1080/15332748.2011.574019>.

function for the page.<sup>5,6,7,8</sup> Other usability studies have described user difficulty navigating collection hierarchies in online finding aids, with some participants describing the text in container and series lists to be “totally overwhelming.”<sup>9</sup> Additionally, users find archival jargon difficult to navigate. Joyce Chapman explains that archival terms like “series,” “container” and “content list” make sense in context, though when use of these words, such as “Series List,” suggest that users navigate elsewhere on the finding aid, they will not, because the terminology is not clear.<sup>10</sup> Many articles focus on divergent behaviors across different types of users such as experienced and non-experienced users and historians and non-historians.<sup>11,12</sup> Though these studies suggest improvements to the usability of finding aids, they do not specifically mention increased traffic or improved discoverability of archival collections as a result of these changes.

Most published usability research suggests changes to finding aids but only a few discuss the impacts those changes have on usability, or discoverability. For instance, Daines and Nimer discuss improvements to the Brigham Young University (BYU) finding aid database, allowing for single-level records and inherited description for those single-level records.<sup>13</sup> These changes intended to address problems such as user difficulty navigating the hierarchy and too much text. Similarly, an early article by Dennis Meissner about online finding aids discusses difficulties users had navigating legacy finding aids and describes making improvements to finding aid organization,

5. Christopher Prom, “User Interactions with Electronic Finding Aids in a Controlled Setting,” *American Archivist* 67, no. 2 (September 2004), <https://doi.org/10.17723/aarc.67.2.7317671548328620>.
6. Wendy Scheir, “First Entry: Report on a Qualitative Exploratory Study of Novice User Experience with Online Finding Aids,” *Journal of Archival Organization* 3, no. 4 (January 2005), 61, [https://doi.org/10.1300/J201v03no4\\_04](https://doi.org/10.1300/J201v03no4_04).
7. Dennis Meissner and Jackie Dooley, “First Things First: Reengineering Finding Aids for Implementation of EAD,” *American Archivist* 60, (1997), <https://doi.org/10.17723/aarc.60.4.6405275227647220>.
8. Morgan G. Daniels and Elizabeth Yakel, “Seek and You May Find: Successful Search in Online Finding Aid Systems” *American Archivist* 73, no. 2 (September 2010): 554, <https://doi.org/10.17723/aarc.73.2.p578900680650357>.
9. Scheir, “First Entry,” 61.
10. Joyce Celeste Chapman, “Observing Users: An Empirical Analysis of User Interaction with Online Finding Aids,” *Journal of Archival Organization* 8, no. 1 (February 2010): 17-19, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15332748.2010.484361>.
11. Daniels and Yakel, “Seek and You May Find,” 535-568.
12. Wendy M. Duff and Catherine A. Johnson, “Accidentally Found on Purpose: Information-Seeking Behavior of Historians in Archives,” *Library Quarterly* 72, no. 4 (October 2002), <https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/10.1086/lq.72.4.40039793>.
13. Daines and Nimer, “Re-imagining Archival Display,” 4-31.
14. Meissner and Dooley, “First Things First,” 380.

such as putting component-level descriptions with the inventory for that material—something most archives now do.<sup>14</sup> However, neither of these articles follow up with user studies assessing the success of these changes, nor whether these changes increased discoverability and user engagement with their online descriptions.

A recent article on finding aid usability discusses the effect of More Product, Less Process (MPLP), which has been considered efficient practice since 2005.<sup>15</sup> Betts Coup conducted a task analysis user study on finding aids for three collections with different levels of description. They found that no matter where the detailed description is (collection level or component level), the users find material to request in the reading room. When asked what information is valuable to them, users indicated that detailed component-level descriptions, scope and content notes, and biographical historical notes were all useful. They also described the importance of keywords and subject headings in their search efforts.<sup>16</sup> Though important for understanding the impacts of MPLP on finding aid usability, the study does not examine whether descriptions that are more detailed improve traffic to and discoverability of the finding aids.

Though most usability studies have not examined increased use of online finding aids, some discuss perceptions of increased use. They anticipate increased reference interactions as a result of finding aids being easier to find online. Christina J. Hostetter says of online finding aids, “While they help bridge the distance gap, they also place more demand on the archives staff and resources.”<sup>17</sup> Others discuss that online finding aids provide the potential for widening the types of researchers who would discover the archives. Anne Goulet and Nicolas Maftei feared placing finding aids online would strain already limited staff resources.<sup>18</sup>

The biggest change in finding aid delivery after EAD enabled online access was the release of the open source collection management software ArchivesSpace in 2013.<sup>19</sup> Several case studies have described the migration of finding aids to ArchivesSpace in specific contexts, such as a large university, a medical library, a

15. Mark Greene and Dennis Meissner, “More Product, Less Process: Revamping Traditional Archival Processing,” *American Archivist* 68, no. 2 (September 2005), <https://doi.org/10.17723/aarc.68.2.c741823776k65863>.

16. Betts Coup, “The Value of a Note: A Finding Aid Usability Study,” *Journal of Contemporary Archival Studies* 8 (2021), <https://elischolar.library.yale.edu/jcas/vol8/iss1/13>.

17. Christina J. Hostetter, “Online Finding Aids: Are they Practical?” *Journal of Archival Organization* 2, no. 1-2 (June 2004): 136, [https://doi.org/10.1300/J201v02n01\\_09](https://doi.org/10.1300/J201v02n01_09).

18. Anne Goulet and Nicolas Maftei, “Giving Structure to Legacy Finding Aids Before Conversion to EAD: The Case of the Archives Départementales des Pyrénées-Atlantiques, France,” *Journal of Archival Organization* 3, no. 2-3 (January 2005): 51-52, [https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1300/J201v03n02\\_04](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1300/J201v03n02_04).

19. “History,” ArchivesSpace, accessed January 2023, <https://archivesspace.org/about/history>.

small rural state college, and a private liberal arts college.<sup>20,21,22,23</sup> Each discuss the benefits and challenges of implementing ArchivesSpace in their particular contexts, as well as their migration and implementation procedure. However, none of them discuss the web traffic to those finding aids after the migration. In contexts where ArchivesSpace enabled institutions to provide online access to finding aids where previously limited staffing prevented their ability to encode finding aids, page views and site use may provide insight into the value of online finding aids.

In his article “Applying Web Analytics to Online Finding Aids”, Mark O’English discusses web statistics from 814 complete finding aids at Washington State University’s (WSU) Manuscripts, Archives, and Special Collections (MASC). His 2011 study is similar to the case study in this article in that he uses web statistics to assess traffic to online finding aids. O’English describes how finding aids at WSU were uploaded and made discoverable on Northwest Digital Archives (NWDA). His research uses Google Analytics to compare number of page views and users for online finding aids versus the WSU Libraries catalog, which was the traditional online access point for their collections. He found that more people were using the online finding aids than the MARC records in the library’s catalog.<sup>24</sup> This has implications for the impact of online finding aids on discoverability of collections. He explains that Google Analytics allows for rudimentary data gathering about user behavior to determine whether finding aids are useful based on web traffic.<sup>25</sup> Wisely, O’English points out that more cataloging resources should be spent creating finding aids rather than MARC records since more users find and interact with online finding aids.<sup>26</sup> He explains that finding aids mirror “Google-like” search functions that support full- text searches more familiar to users, whereas MARC records for collections support “fielded search[es].”<sup>27</sup>

20. Kate Dietrick, Lara Friedman-Shedlov, and Caitlin Marineau, “A Long and Twisted Road: The Journey from EAD to ArchivesSpace Implementation at the University of Minnesota,” *Journal of Archival Organization* 13, no. 3-4 (April 2018), <https://doi.org/10.1080/15332748.2018.1443462>.
21. Michael Moseley, Lydia A. Howes, Geoffrey S. Pettys, and Adam J. Roloff, “Creating an Online Presence for and Managing the Institutional Archives Using ArchivesSpace,” *Journal of Hospital Librarianship* 20, no. 2 (April 2020), <https://doi.org/10.1080/15332269.2020.1738845>.
22. Paromita Biswas and Elizabeth Skene, “From Silos to (Archives)Space: Moving Legacy Finding Aids Online as a Multi-Department Library Collaboration,” *The Reading Room* 1, no. 2 (Spring 2016), [https://libres.uncg.edu/ir/wcu/f/Skene\\_FromSilostoArchivesSpace\\_2016.pdf](https://libres.uncg.edu/ir/wcu/f/Skene_FromSilostoArchivesSpace_2016.pdf).
23. Laura Buchholz, “Out With the Old, in With the...ArchivesSpace,” *OLA Quarterly* 25, no. 1 (August 2019), [https://journals3.oregondigital.org/olaq/article/view/vol25\\_iss1\\_8](https://journals3.oregondigital.org/olaq/article/view/vol25_iss1_8).
24. Mark O’English, “Applying Web Analytics to Online Finding Aids: Page Views, Pathways, and Learning about Users,” *Journal of Western Archives* 2, no. 1 (2011), <https://digitalcommons.usu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1011&context=westernarchives>.
25. *Ibid.*, 10.
26. *Ibid.*, 12.
27. *Ibid.*, 10-11.

A recent study conducted at Utah State University studied web traffic to EAD finding aids delivered on Archives West, the new name for the NWDA also used by O'English. By comparing two versions of the same finding aid with different levels of description, one with folder and box-level description and the other with item-level descriptions, they empirically compared the difference in traffic and search terms. They found that item-level description increased discoverability of that finding aid by an average of 6100% and that 98% of all page views in their research project occurred with finding aids at the item level. They found a number of effects search terms had on discoverability, including that using personal names increased discoverability of finding aids and where exactly in the EAD XML search terms appeared in the finding aid, but most relevant to this case study, they found that search terms most often appeared in the collection inventory or component descriptions.<sup>28</sup>

This case study builds on the work of O'English and Daybell et al.'s studies by examining traffic to online finding aids' web traffic, and to ArchivesSpace in particular. Archival literature commonly has not addressed effects on discoverability after online finding aid descriptions are improved by adding collection- and component-level notes, or component inventories. By examining Google Analytics data, this case study will determine whether improving finding aid descriptions across collections at CU Boulder is related to increased use of online finding aids on ArchivesSpace.

## Background and Methods

The University of Colorado Boulder Libraries' Archives (referred to here as the CU Boulder Archives, which is a collecting area of the University Libraries' Rare and Distinctive Collections), is part of the University Libraries at a public institution. As such, its mission is to make records for archival resources accessible to as wide an audience as possible. The CU Boulder Archives includes approximately 1,780 collections and over 35,000 linear feet of material. Some strengths of the collections include Colorado politics and labor history, experimental film, the atomic West, environmental history, American music, and University history among others.

In 2016, the CU Boulder Archives began using ArchivesSpace for collection management and online finding aid discovery. Until then, most finding aids were only available on paper guides; only 34 finding aids were available on Rocky Mountain Online Archive (RMOA). To make as many collections discoverable in a short amount of time, CU Archives staff and faculty imported a list of collection names, identifiers, dates, and extents as resource records, which created minimally-described collection-level finding aids that were publicly accessible. Through that process, most collections had finding aids accessible online, but they included

28. Paul Daybell et al., "A Tale of Two Levels: Analyzing the Discoverability and Impact of Item-level Description in EAD Finding Aids," *Journal of Archival Organization* 18, no. 3-4 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.1080/15332748.2022.2089321>.



minimal information about the collection. Though some had collection-level descriptive notes like Scope and Contents and Biographical/Historical Notes, some only had collection dates and brief abstracts. Very few included detailed component descriptions, or inventories, of contents at the series, box, or file level, even if those existed in legacy paper finding aids. In most cases, component descriptions include keywords that do not appear elsewhere in the finding aid. Any reference to migration or description improvements in this article refers to the process of adding inventory and component-level description to collection-level ArchivesSpace finding aids. At the beginning of 2020, there were approximately 1,665 collections on ArchivesSpace, but only around 340 collections were identified as having existing legacy inventories that needed cleanup and migration. See Appendix A for an example of what a typical find aid looked like before the addition of an inventory.

Until 2019, CU Boulder Archives staff, faculty, and students slowly added additional information to records including collection-level information and component-level inventories when those existed. However, competing priorities and staff turnover made progress slow. In October 2019, CU Boulder Archives added Google Analytics to ArchivesSpace to track web use statistics. Adding Google Analytics is as easy as inserting a short string of code into the core code for our instance of ArchivesSpace. To do this, the code and where it should be inserted was sent to Lyrasis, the vendor that hosts CU Boulder's ArchivesSpace instance. Once they inserted the code so it would be found on all pages, Google could then track a variety of data about page views. Some of the more interesting data points include the number of times each page is visited, the number of unique users, user geographic locations, and bounce rate.

Google Analytics also tracks how users arrive at a website. They categorize the way people arrive to a site so that site owners can tell how people are finding their site. Users could find a site by searching on search engines, from a link on another site, from social media, or by directly typing the URL into the browser. In order for users to arrive from a search engine, such as Google, the site must be indexed. CU Boulder's ArchivesSpace is crawled and indexed by Google and can be found when completing a Google search. When Google indexes sites, they use characteristics of a page such as keywords and site freshness.<sup>29</sup>

In March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic closed the CU Boulder Archives to onsite work and services. This pivot to remote and virtual work forced the CU Boulder Archives to focus on data cleanup and migration projects that could be performed remotely. One of the main projects was the migration of legacy collection inventories from paper-based and XML formats to ArchivesSpace. During 2020 alone, approximately 140 legacy paper finding aids and 34 XML finding aids from RMOA were cleaned up and imported into ArchivesSpace. This means that of the 320 finding aids identified with existing inventories, 174 inventories (54%) were added to finding

29. "How Google Search Organizes Information," Google, accessed January 2023, <https://www.google.com/search/howsearchworks/how-search-works/organizing-information/>.

aids in ArchivesSpace in 2020. So, during 2021, only 146 collections with legacy finding aid inventories were left to migrate. Appendix B shows an example of a finding aid after its inventory was added to ArchivesSpace.

The first complete year tracked using Google Analytics for CU Boulder’s ArchivesSpace was 2020, which was the same year many of the improvements occurred to online description. Therefore, the Archives decided to compare site use logged by Google Analytics from 2020 to 2021 to determine if there had been an increase in site use after the description improvements.

### Results and Discussion in Finding Aid Discoverability

In 2020, CU Boulder’s ArchivesSpace had a total of 7,524 users engage in 12,074 total sessions. In 2021, CU Boulder’s ArchivesSpace had a total of 15,217 users engage in 21,146 total sessions. The data does not reveal whether patrons found what they were looking for using finding aids on ArchivesSpace. Usability studies similar to

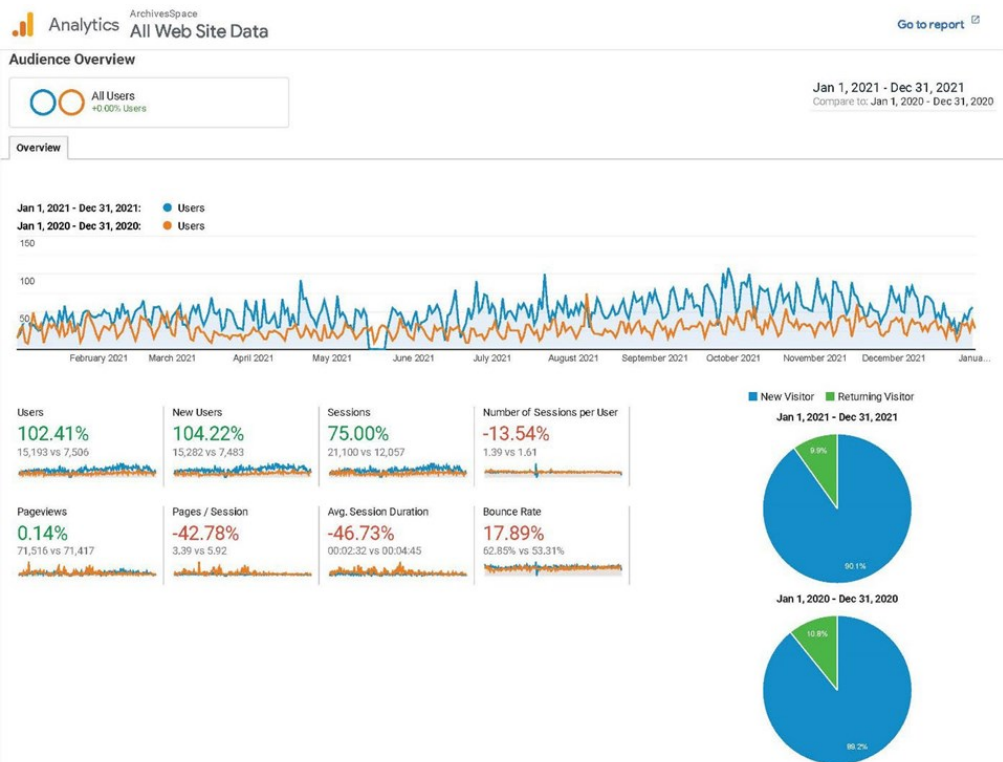


Figure 1. Google Analytics report of CU Boulder online finding aid users and sessions for 2020 and 2021.

those summarized in the Literature Review would have to be conducted to determine the effectiveness of the finding aids in facilitating searches. However, what is clear is that a non-trivial increase in users (102.41% increase) and website sessions (75% increase) occurred.

In addition to traffic, Google Analytics also provides information on how users arrive at the site. Google Analytics identifies the way that users arrive to a site as “Acquisitions” and the method by which they enter the site as “Sources/Mediums.” In 2020, of the total users those that arrived from Organic Searches, which are any Google or other search engine searches, numbered 4,896 (63.61%), while 2,138 (27.78%) were Direct, meaning Analytics could not determine where they came from.<sup>29</sup> In 2021, of the total users, 10,821 (69.58%) came from search engine searches and 2,981 (19.17%) were direct.

Table 1. CU Boulder ArchivesSpace Web traffic sources, 2020 and 2021.

Data from 2020		Data from 2021	
Source/Medium	Users	Source/Medium	Users
google/organic	4,896	google/organic	10,821
(direct)/(none)	2,138	(direct)/(none)	2,981
bing/organic	179	bing/organic	480
yahoo/organic	63	yahoo/organic	188
m.facebook.com/referral	63	duckduckgo/organic	165
researchworks.oclc.org/referral	45	m.facebook.com/referral	140
sfma.org/referral	43	aswemail/email	89
duckduckgo/organic	33	researchworks.oclc.org/referral	84
nsidc.org/referral	29	wired.com/referral	84
en.wikipedia.org/referral	13	baidu.com/organic	52

30. Tom Bennet, “The Complete Guide to Direct Traffic in Google Analytics,” published November 2017, accessed January 2023, <https://moz.com/blog/guide-to-direct-traffic-google-analytics>.

Data from 2020		Data from 2021	
Source/Medium	Users	Source/Medium	Users
mail.google.com/referral	13	sfma.org/referral	42
baidu.com/referral	11	en.wikipedia.org/referral	34
ecosia.org/organic	11	ecosia.org/organic	32
thedenverchannel.com/referral	9	l.facebook.com/referral	30
inkberrybooks.com/referral	8	wired.jp/referral	27
l.facebook.com/referral	8	search.aol.com/referral	19
r.search.aol.com/referral	8	mail.google.com/referral	17
uc-boulder.libapps.com/referral	8	nsidc.org/referral	15
t.co/referral	7	t.co/referral	14
facebook.com/referral	5	facebook.com/referral	13
sdp.org/referral	5	smartnews.com/referral	13

These top two sources match the user acquisition data results from Google Analytics found by Mark O’English in 2011.<sup>31</sup> He also found that the top two sites that directed traffic to Washington State University finding aids were also Google and direct searches. Other traffic-directing sites in top-20 positions across both years include search engines (such as Bing or Yahoo), social media sites (such as Facebook), and digital archives with links to our site (such as Silent Film Sound and Music Archives (sfsma.org) and the National Snow and Ice Data Center (NSIDC)).

Over half of users arrive at CU Boulder’s ArchivesSpace site by searching on Google, with the traffic received from Organic Searches (or search engine traffic) increasing by 6% and traffic from Direct access (no information on acquisition source) decreasing by 8.61% across 2020 to 2021.

Table 1 contains data from the top 20 sites where traffic to CU Boulder’s ArchivesSpace originated for both years.

Since most users found the site using a search engine, or what Google Analytics calls “Organic Search,” examining the Organic search terms used may provide

31. O’English, “Applying Web Analytics to Online Finding Aids,” 4-6.

additional insight into the increase in web traffic. These are the keywords Google Analytics found users searched to find indexed pages on ArchivesSpace during Organic Searches. Many of the Organic search terms for CU’s ArchivesSpace appear to be people’s names such as “Edward G. Seidensticker”, “Clifford P. Westermeier”, “Florence Becker Lennon”, and “James Terrill Ream architect”. These names are either people whose collections are housed at CU Boulder Archives or who have material related to them in the archives. Other search terms such as “Grannies of Colorado”, “mesa tower Pueblo Colorado”, “China Burma India vets magazine” reflect topics that may covered by collections at CU Boulder Archives. Others seem to be seeking information about the CU Boulder Archives or archival resources in general with search terms like “geneology.com”, “archival science”, and “CU Archives.”

In 2020, the search terms that resulted in views on ArchivesSpace seem to be

Table 2. CU Boulder ArchivesSpace Google search terms (Top 20), 2020 and 2021.

Data from 2020		Data from 2021	
Keyword	Users	Keyword	Users
colorado archives	3	Joseph T. Wilson	9
howard life insurance company colorado	2	cbiva	2
university of colorado archives	2	<a href="https://archives.colorado.edu/">https://archives.colorado.edu/</a>	2
Edward G. Seidensticker	1	memorabilia	2
“Lynn Irwin Perrigo” (1901-1992)	1	reading of david brose all songs	2
1968 PHOTOGRAPHS OF DENVER GENERAL HOSPITAL DEN COLO	1	university of colorado archives	2
african american women composers	1	+Jeanette madonald memorabilia	1
Agostina Ntow	1	abe anhang	1
alan shapley boulder	1	Academic biography of Timmerhaus Klaus	1
alan shapley boulder death	1	Alois Gutfelder, 1819	1

Data from 2020		Data from 2021	
Keyword	Users	Keyword	Users
aleph 1978-2018	1	Archives and Library on Disability at the University of Colorado	1
American Music university of colorado special collections	1	Brian s wirth statement	1
Anderson Barker Rinker	1	carrie Beatrice collins	1
archival science colorado	1	coloradado university boyulder 3100	1
archive albert kane	1	colorado national bank Denver 17th & champa	1
archive space university of colorado	1	colorado repository	1
archives.colorado.edu	1	columbine mine massacre	1
archivesspace cu boulder	1	cu world citizens	1
arthur olaf andersen	1	denver typographical union	1
berton coffin biography	1	department of intercollegiate athletics	1
carl groos architect	1	Dwight Lavender	1

known-name searches like the names of Westermeier, Seidensticker and Lennon who have collections with titles reflecting the names of those creators. However, in 2021 there seems to be more variety in the keywords that resulted in page views with search terms such as “roof description of the sullivan student center, trinidad, co”, “plutonium files”, “memorabilia”, and “pinkerton records”. For that year, the search terms also included the titles of organizations such as “United Mexican American Students”, “CU World Citizens”, and “Denver Typographic Union”.

Though many of these keywords still appear in the titles of collections, they also appear elsewhere in the collection descriptions. As explained in the “Background and Methods” section above, migration and data cleanup of legacy inventories, either

paper or XML, was a priority throughout 2020. These search terms, and the increase in users and sessions, indicate that enhanced online description resulted in more traffic directed to finding aids on CU Boulder's ArchivesSpace.

During the period examined by this study, no additional promotion or outreach of ArchivesSpace finding aids was conducted beyond what had been performed in previous years. Even before 2019, ArchivesSpace links appeared on University Libraries website, and library instruction with undergraduate and graduate students included teaching about finding aids. Additionally, we did not significantly increase the number of collections described through the University Libraries catalog and not all archival collections have MARC records in the catalog.

It is unclear how many web visits to ArchivesSpace resulted in follow-up reference requests by email, phone, or in-person. According to our statistics for those years, we experienced 6,243 reference requests in 2020 and 573 reference requests in 2021. Across both years, there was a total of 6,816 reference requests and 33,220 sessions on ArchivesSpace, which is roughly one reference request for every five users in ArchivesSpace across both years. The significant decrease in reference requests during 2021 is likely a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, which greatly reduced the number of requests received. CU Boulder Archives website and ArchivesSpace language communicated the closure of the Reading Room to in-person visits. Despite this decrease in reference requests, page visits to ArchivesSpace increased during the same period. As O'English explains, more detailed study would be required to determine if ArchivesSpace visits encouraged or discouraged patrons to contact CU Boulder Archives with reference questions.<sup>32</sup>

## Limitations

Besides the explanations presented within this article, there may be other factors contributing to increase use of ArchivesSpace finding aids. Concurrently with improved finding aid descriptions made in 2020, the CU Archives also made several usability changes to the ArchivesSpace PUI which should have improved navigability. Some of these changes were similar to those made by Yale University, described at the 2018 ArchivesSpace Users Forum, including changing button labels (e.g. changing the "Collection Organization" tab to "Finding Aid View") and making navigational "breadcrumbs" within resource records more prominent to aid in contextualizing series, files, and items within the collection organization.<sup>33</sup> However, none of these changes would have necessarily attracted new users to CU's ArchivesSpace site; only that the changes improved ease of use once there.

32. O'English, "Applying Web Analytics to Online Finding Aids," 6.

33. Stephanie Bredbenner, Eve Neiger, and Alison Clemens, "Asking The User: Incorporating User-Centered Customizations and Features into Yale's ArchivesSpace PUI" (presentation, ArchivesSpace Annual Member Forum, Washington, D.C. August 14, 2018), accessed January 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ox2xDS-rG2g>.

In addition to those changes, the COVID-19 pandemic began in 2020, which may have affected use behaviors captured by Google Analytics during that year. Since CU Boulder Archives did not begin using Google Analytics until October 2019, we do not have a complete year of statistics to compare from before the pandemic. However, looking at pandemic behavior across other University Libraries web platforms may provide a point of reference to compare whether the increased traffic for ArchivesSpace in 2021 was unusual. Across the University Libraries web services, traffic varied after March 2020 compared to the previous year. For some sites, the number of users and sessions went up, and for others, it decreased. For example, the University Libraries website saw approximately a 25% decrease from 2019 to 2020, with 207,696 users in 2019 versus 154,250 users in 2020 and 565,018 sessions in 2019 versus 449,652 sessions in 2020. In contrast, the traffic to the CU Digital Library (CUDL), the public platform for digitized Libraries resources, such as material from Rare and Distinctive collections, increased by around 5%. In 2019, the CUDL had 11,749 users in 2019 versus 12,287 users in 2020, and 17,251 sessions in 2019 versus 18,653 sessions in 2020. Of course it is possible that the pandemic affected the results found in this study, especially without use statistics from before March 2020. However, the 102.41% increase in traffic to ArchivesSpace across 2020 and 2021 is much higher than the changes in traffic experienced by University Libraries sites during the pandemic. Since the percent change is much higher, it indicates that something other than the pandemic affected site use during the period explored.

Interestingly, for the CUDL, direct traffic surpassed organic searches in 2020, where 5,739 users (46.2% of total traffic) was from direct sources and only 3,322 users (26.8% of total traffic) was from organic searches. This contrasts traffic reported above to ArchivesSpace, which had more traffic from organic searches across both 2020 and 2021 indicating that users were finding the site from Google more than direct traffic to the site using the URL. This further supports the results of this study since an increase in keywords on ArchivesSpace would have improved Google indexing of those pages. The more keywords are indexed, the more searches will return results that include CU Boulder's ArchivesSpace. For these reasons and the reasons explained in the previous section, the most likely explanation for the increased number of users and sessions in 2021 is improved finding aid descriptions.

## Conclusions

This case study provides evidence for what many archivists have long believed to be true: that improving online collection description correlates with improved discoverability of primary sources in archival collections. This finding reveals the impact including keywords in online finding aids has on discoverability of collections, which replicates the findings of Daybell et al., who also found that improved component descriptions (in their case item-level descriptions) increase traffic to finding aids.<sup>34</sup> The increase in users over the course of one year indicates that

34. Daybell et al., "A Tale of Two Levels," 101-129.



enhancing finding aid descriptions indexed by Google and other search engines attracts views and increases site use. Therefore, archives should carefully consider the level of description when processing collections and choose keywords to include in collection descriptions that allow patrons with a variety of backgrounds to discover material within collections. It also provides the case for enhancing descriptions when possible and carefully considering what level of description will be sufficient when implementing a More Product, Less Process approach.<sup>35</sup>

Additionally, for finding aids with outdated or potentially harmful language, our findings point to the importance of updating language through reparative description when possible. If users search for resources using current language to describe historically marginalized or underrepresented groups, then collections with primary sources about or by those groups may not be discovered. An important note is that, though CU Boulder Archives strives to update outdated language when it is discovered, it did not necessarily always occur as part of the data cleanup and legacy finding aid migration conducted in 2020.<sup>36</sup> And so, it was not examined as part of this study's scope. More specific research exploring the effect of search engine indexing on these types of searches would be needed in order to examine language and its impact on discoverability for those searches.

Overall, this case study supports archivists and processors working to improve the quality and detail of online finding aids, and provides evidence for the positive impact that online finding aids have on discoverability of collections. Once the CU Boulder Archives returned to onsite operations, staff and students resumed the processing of physical collections, including the creation of new inventories. Though we continue to make progress on the cleanup and migration of legacy finding aid inventories, it is again one of many competing priorities for staff and student time. Therefore, progress has been much slower. Currently, 75% of existing inventories have been added to finding aids, with 25% left to migrate. However, the finding in this study could be used as further justification for the importance of adding finding aid component-level description where it exists. Archives, including CU Boulder Archives, should carefully weigh the impacts of both processing and data cleanup projects to determine value of each project.

Considering that one of the profession's core values is access, these findings justify the work provided to make finding aids available online over the last twenty-five years. Collection management tools, like ArchivesSpace, further lower the barrier for the creation of detailed online finding aids. Even at an archive the size of CU Boulder Archives, online access to finding aids was not possible without a tool like ArchivesSpace. Therefore, this study provides evidence for the importance of

35. Greene and Meissner, "More Product, Less Process," 208-263.

36. "Statement on Potentially Harmful Language in Archival Description," CU Boulder University Libraries, accessed January 2023, <https://www.colorado.edu/libraries/libraries-collections/rare-distinctive/archives/statement-potentially-harmful-language>.

collection management software, like ArchivesSpace, in creating finding aids online for improved collection discoverability, especially for archives with limited staff resources or technological expertise.

## Appendix A: Finding Aid Example Before Legacy Component-Level Description Added

University of Colorado President's Office records

Collection Identifier: COU-2283

University of Colorado Boulder Libraries, Rare and Distinctive Collections University of Colorado President's Office records

Collection Overview Finding Aid View Container List

### Scope and Contents

The President's Office Archive includes the papers generated by University Presidencies of Livingston Farrand (1914-1919) through Judith Albino (1991-1996), and are divided into ten series. The first series, Series I, TOPICAL FILES, makes up the bulk of the archive. Series I is broken down into six time periods within which topics are filed alphabetically: 1913-1919, 1917-1923, 1919-1969, 1970-1995, 1965-1991, and 1991-1996. The vast quantity of...

See more >

### Dates

1913 - 1995

### Conditions Governing Access

This collection contains or may contain private and personally identifiable information (PII). Researchers must sign the University Libraries' Private and Personally Identifiable Information Agreement in advance of access to collection materials. Contact sca@colorado.edu for more information.

Researchers may also be asked to submit an access request for these records to the President's Office. Please contact sca@colorado.edu for more details.

### Copyright Statement

The University Libraries may not own the copyright to all materials in this collection. Researchers are responsible for contacting the copyright holder(s) for this material and obtaining permission to publish or broadcast. The University Libraries will not grant permission to publish or broadcast this material and are not responsible for copyright violations resulting from such use.

### Conditions Governing Use

Researchers may not make notes, reproductions (including photographs), or other record of any private and personally identifiable information (PII) located in this collection and may not publish, publicize, or disclose that PII to any other party for any purpose. Exclusions may apply to researchers who have obtained authorization from the University of Colorado Institutional Review Board to produce human subject research records in de-identified.

See more >

This finding aid example demonstrates what a finding aid looked like prior to 2020 before legacy finding aid component level inventories were added. This finding aid has some collection level description notes, such as the Scope and Contents. However, there is no navigation for the inventory because it has not been added to this collection. In this case, the finding aid inventory for the University of Colorado President's Office exists as a PDF. If a user tried to use the "Finding Aid View" tab, it would not take them anywhere. To view the entire finding aid please visit the [University of Colorado President's Office papers](#). Please note that we may have updated the collection since publication of this article. In progress improvements include the addition of the collection inventory not pictured in this screen shot.

## Appendix B. Finding Aid Example Before Legacy Component-Level Description Added

**University of Colorado Joint Board System**  
 Collection Identifier: COU:2957  
 University of Colorado Boulder Libraries, Rare and Distinctive Collections  
 University of Colorado Joint Board System

Collection Overview | **Finding Aid View** | Container List

**Abstract**  
 This collection contains working files of the University of Colorado Joint Board system, including the Finance Board, Publications Board, Cultural Events Board, Environmental Board, UMAC Board, Health Board, Programming Board (enhanced Access in Radio in 1979), Recreation Board, Library Board, and Religious Programming Board. Files include meeting minutes and recordings, correspondence, budget information, funding and programming applications and documents...

**Dates**  
 1960 - 1988

**Conditions Governing Access**  
 This collection may contain private and personally identifiable information (PII). Researchers must sign the University Libraries' Private and Personally Identifiable Information Agreement in advance of access to collection materials. Contact scraig@colorado.edu for more information.

**Extent**  
 63 linear feet (63 records boxes)

**Language of Materials**  
 English

**Navigate the collection**  
 University of Colorado Joint Board System  
 > Series 1: Joint Board operations  
 > Series 2: Finance Board, 1961-1988  
 > Series 3: Publications Board, 1923-1971  
 > Series 4: Cultural Events Board, 1970-2001  
 > Series 5: Environmental Board, 1973-1988  
 > Series 6: UMAC (University Memorial Center) Board, 1950-1988  
 > Series 7: Health Board, 1960-1988  
 > Series 8: Programming Board/Access in Radio, 1969-1987  
 > Series 9: Recreation Board, 1967-1988  
 > Series 10: Other Boards

This finding aid example demonstrates what a finding aid looked like after migration of legacy inventory in 2020. This finding aid has collection-level description notes, such as the Abstract, but also includes a collection navigation on the right-hand side. Users can expand the Series to examine file lists. If a user tried to use the “Finding Aid View” tab, it takes them to an expanded view of the collection list including box numbers. A view of this list can be seen below. To view the entire finding aid please visit the [University of Colorado Joint Board System records](#). Please note that we may have updated collection description since publication of this article.

**University of Colorado Joint Board System**  
 Collection Identifier: COU:2957  
 University of Colorado Boulder Libraries, Rare and Distinctive Collections  
 University of Colorado Joint Board System

Collection Overview | **Finding Aid View** | Container List

**Series 1: Joint Board operations**  
 Series  
 Extent: 1 boxes

- Student - Faculty Store  
 File - Box 1.1
- Student Fee Recommendation  
 File - Box 1.1
- Student Fee Recommendation-Working Papers  
 File - Box 1.1
- Study of Paid Positions at University  
 File - Box 1.1
- University Budget  
 File - Box 1.1

**Series 2: Finance Board, 1961 - 1988**  
 Series  
 This series includes correspondence, membership records, meeting minutes, operating records, and budget information, including information related to student fees, athletics, the Wadsworth health center, and special budget requests. Also includes sound recordings of board meetings, 1961-1988.

**Navigate the collection**  
 University of Colorado Joint Board System  
 > Series 1: Joint Board operations  
 Student - Faculty Store  
 Student Fee Recommendation  
 Student Fee Recommendation-Working Papers  
 Study of Paid Positions at University  
 University Budget  
 > Series 2: Finance Board, 1961-1988  
 > Series 3: Publications Board, 1923-1971  
 > Series 4: Cultural Events Board, 1970-2001  
 > Series 5: Environmental Board, 1973-1988  
 > Series 6: UMAC (University Memorial Center) Board, 1950-1988  
 > Series 7: Health Board, 1960-1988  
 > Series 8: Programming Board/Access in Radio, 1969-1987  
 > Series 9: Recreation Board, 1967-1988  
 > Series 10: Other Boards