Beyond Efficiency: An Impact Assessment of the UC Guidelines for Efficient Processing

Laurel McPhee
University of California, San Diego, lmcphee@ucsd.edu

Kate Dundon
University of California, Santa Cruz, dundon@ucsc.edu

Courtney Dean
Yale University, courtney.dean@yale.edu

Elvia Arroyo-Ramírez
University of California, Irvine, elvia.ar@uci.edu

Audra Eagle Yun
University of California, Irvine, audra.yun@uci.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.usu.edu/westernarchives

Part of the Archival Science Commons

Utah State University
MERRILL-CAZIER LIBRARY

Beyond Efficiency: An Impact Assessment of the UC Guidelines for Efficient Processing

Beyond Efficiency: An Impact Assessment of the UC Guidelines for Efficient Processing

Laurel McPhee
Kate Dundon
Courtney Dean
Elvia Arroyo-Ramírez
Audra Eagle Yun

ABSTRACT

The *Guidelines for Efficient Archival Processing in the University of California Libraries* established shared principles and recommendations for increased processing efficiency in archives and special collections in the UC system. Since its publication in 2012, the Guidelines has become an influential resource for archival workflows nationwide. In this paper, the authors evaluate the Guidelines' impact over time on backlogs, collection management policy, and day-to-day archival practices across the UC libraries by assessing collections, processing practices, and staffing levels.

Introduction

The *Guidelines for Efficient Archival Processing in the University of California Libraries* (henceforth: the Guidelines) established shared principles and recommendations for increased processing efficiency in archives and special collections across University of California (UC) libraries when they were published in 2012.[1] Since their debut, the Guidelines have become an influential resource for archives nationwide and are cited frequently in archival collection management literature as an exemplar of practical guidance for archivists seeking to develop extensible archival collection management programs.

---

1. University of California Systemwide Libraries, *Guidelines for Efficient Archival Processing in the University of California Libraries* (UC Office of the President: University of California Systemwide Libraries, 2012), https://escholarship.org/uc/item/1sw157j3. A revised version was published in 2020: Dundon, et al., *Guidelines for Efficient Archival Processing in the University of California Libraries* (Version 4, 2020), https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4b81g01z.

The Guidelines were originally written by an appointed group of UC archivists and library professionals to help each campus implement the principles espoused in Mark Greene and Dennis Meissner's 2005 article "More Product, Less Process," and more specifically, "to accelerate processing of archival and manuscript collections" across the system.[2] A revision to the Guidelines published in 2020 was initiated by a group of UC archivists who identified archival collection management and born-digital archival processing practices as missing elements of the first publication. The Guidelines' original stated goal was to "change existing practices" in UC archival processing.[3] However, over the years, an evaluation of systemwide changes never occurred. Over a decade later, the Guidelines' impact on practices, backlogs, and workplace culture remained unexamined.

In 2020, a subset of the revision authors formed a research team and initiated a study to understand the long-term impact of the Guidelines across UC repositories by looking closely at current archival processing practices and staffing levels.[4] We wanted to assess how efficient strategies for managing unprocessed materials, accessioning, and processing at the ten major UC archival repositories have or have not been effective.[5] This research sought to answer the following questions: (1) What elements of the Guidelines have been successfully adopted in archival collections management at UC over the last ten years?; (2) Has a systemwide mandate for efficient processing helped UC libraries cope with significant historical backlogs?; and (3) If not, what are the practical barriers to implementation of efficient processing and successful collection management? The data was collected in the form of a mixed-methods survey targeting each major UC campus repository, as well as facilitated focus groups with archivists to further document attitudes and perspectives about archival collection management practices.

This study contributes to current scholarly conversations within the archival field about the effects of efficient processing on backlog reduction by examining the impact and implementation of a systemwide mandate for efficient processing across diverse archival repositories, as archives programs in UC libraries vary widely in size, scope, and funding. Based on our assessment, the authors conclude that while efficient processing practices are impactful, efficiency alone cannot eliminate backlogs of unprocessed archival collections. Archival functions such as accessioning and processing depend upon a visible and sustained commitment to intentional

---

2. Ibid., 5.

3. Ibid.

4. Research team members included Elvia Arroyo-Ramírez, Assistant University Archivist, UC Irvine; Courtney Dean, Head of the Center for Primary Research and Training, UCLA; Kate Dundon, Supervisory Archivist, UC Santa Cruz; Audra Eagle Yun, Head of Special Collections & Archives and University Archivist, UC Irvine; Laurel McPhee, Supervisory Archivist, UC San Diego; Shira Peltzman, Digital Archivist, UCLA.

5. Practices of library affiliate repositories were outside the scope of this project.

appraisal and acquisition strategies within a holistic stewardship and collection management program.

Literature Review

As we seek to measure the impact of the Guidelines across UC libraries since 2012, we must understand their origins and how they developed in the context of professional practice. This literature review outlines how the Guidelines emerged in response to specific discourse in the archival field in the first decade of the 2000s. Additionally, in order to determine where our assessment of the Guidelines fits into the professional literature, we sought out examples of how practitioners have measured the impact of changes in archival practice over time in specific institutional settings.

Origin of the Guidelines

The original version of the Guidelines was written as an internal recommendation for the UC library community, but it reflected broader trends in the archival profession, with roots in the transformative "hidden collection" concept. Hidden collections were the subject of an influential white paper compiled by Barbara M. Jones and published in 2003 for the Association of Research Libraries (ARL) Task Force on Special Collections.[6] Jones's "Hidden Collections, Scholarly Barriers" was a response to a 1998 ARL survey wherein respondents consistently identified unprocessed and growing backlogs as a major concern.[7] Subsequent conferences organized on this theme, such as the 2003 gathering at the Library of Congress entitled "Exposing Hidden Collections," secured the phrase in the professional vernacular. Jones's white paper analyzed the problem and made several early recommendations, including: streamline cataloging rules; consider various levels of cataloging and processing for all types of special collections materials; and strike a better balance between the resources committed to acquiring materials, and those resources committed to processing and cataloging them. However, the final recommendation was: "*Finally, the group developing the criteria for processing the backlogs should include in their mission an analysis of the reasons for the backlog in the first place*" (emphasis added).[8] In other words, it was not simply enough to recognize the problem, and to identify partial solutions—it was necessary to

---

6. ARL Task Force on Special Collections, compiled by Barbara M. Jones, "Hidden Collections, Scholarly Barriers: Creating Access to Unprocessed Special Collections Materials in North America's Research Libraries. A White Paper for the Association of Research Libraries Task Force on Special Collections," Association of Research Libraries compiled June 6, 2003, https://www.arl.org/wp-content/uploads/2003/06/hidden-colls-white-paper-jun03.pdf.

7. "Special Collections in ARL Libraries: Results of the 1998 Survey Sponsored by the ARL Research Collections Committee (2001)," accessed March 2024, https://rbms.info/committees/task_force/metrics_assessment/group-1/collections-arl-1998-survey/.

8. ARL Task Force, "Hidden Collections," 12.

understand the conditions that brought the backlogs into being. Tom Hyry's presentation at the 2004 Society of American Archivists annual meeting attempted just that, beginning his talk with concepts that are still relevant two decades later: collections are getting bigger and more complex; repositories collect more than they can process in any given year; archivists are busier than ever; budgets are not expanding; and (last, but not least), something has to give.[9] In fall 2004, Jones and Judith M. Pantich wrote an introduction to a volume of *RBM: A Journal of Rare Books, Manuscripts, and Cultural Heritage* that was entirely focused on the problem of hidden collections, further building the urgency in the field to act on backlogs.

Attempts to tackle archival backlogs were underpinned by three main approaches. First, a repository had to have intellectual and physical control over its holdings in order to quantify the backlog in data-driven terms, and if this control did not exist, a survey or inventory process could be developed to meet this need. Second, new workflows and strategies could be developed to introduce efficiencies in processing practices. Enter Mark A. Greene and Dennis Meissner, with the 2005 publication of their influential article, "More Product, Less Process" (MPLP).[10] Greene and Meissner's study and recommendations have been widely discussed and adopted within the archival field.[11] Greene and Meissner's criticism of traditionally intensive processing practices as a primary cause of backlogs was heard by archivists and department leaders at UC libraries, and is referenced specifically in the Guidelines' introduction. Third, one must, through assessment, attempt to understand the reasons for the development of untenable backlogs in order to conquer them, or reasonably co-exist.

The huge task of assessment at the UC libraries first began at the Bancroft Library at UC Berkeley, when it was awarded a three-year grant in June 2007 by The Andrew W. Mellon and The Rosalinde and Arthur Gilbert Foundations to survey its manuscript holdings. In 2009, with the Bancroft survey already underway, top UC library leadership launched, for the first time, two baseline assessments of archives and manuscripts holdings and related technical services activities across all the major campus special collections repositories. The assessment teams were referred to as Next Generation Technical Services (NGTS) task forces. NGTS Phase I (the Unique Resources Group) conducted a survey on archival and manuscript collections resources and processing practices in 2009, and NGTS Phase II (the New Modes for

9. Tom Hyry, "How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Backlog: Using Minimum Standards and Appraisal to Process Modern Collections," *Proceedings of the Society of American Archivists Annual Meeting* (New Haven, CT August 6, 2004), https://dash.harvard.edu/handle/1/40918993.

10. Mark A. Greene and Dennis Meissner, "More Product, Less Process: Revamping Traditional Archival Processing," *The American Archivist* 68 (Fall/Winter 2005): 208-63.

11. For a summary of the immediate impact of MPLP and its recommendations in context with the professional literature, see Matt Gorzalski, "Minimal Processing: Its Context and Influence in the Archival Community," *Journal of Archival Organization* 6, no. 3 (2008): 186-200, https://doi.org.10.1080/15332740802421915.

Access Group) developed a survey on MARC record creation and description.[12] The surveys were distributed to heads of major UC archival repositories and key staff in relevant functional areas. Through the survey instruments, the task forces collected baseline data on collection footprints, processing and descriptive practices, staffing levels, and unprocessed materials. The data was used to produce a report to the UC Council of University Librarians in 2010.[13] The authors of the report asked readers to imagine an unprocessed backlog of special collections and archives material owned by the UC "lining thirteen and a half miles from end to end... all of it invisible and inaccessible to users."[14]

The NGTS team made a series of recommendations based on data from the assessments. The number one recommendation was to "implement 'more product, less process' tactics for processing collections system-wide" with these desired outcomes: "Provide a record of all hidden collections by the end of 2012; eliminate the backlog of unprocessed manuscript collections, archival records, and university archives by 2020."[15] Based on the recommendations of the report, a new NGTS team, NGTS POT 3 (NGTS Power of Three Team III) was charged to "accelerate the processing of archival and manuscript collections. As part of this, a Lightning Team was tasked to develop a manual to guide the implementation of MPLP throughout the UC system."[16] The first edition of the Guidelines was the result of this work, and was published online in 2012.

The Guidelines and a Culture of Assessment

Evolving from the discourse on hidden collections in the early 2000s was an increased focus on managing collections more effectively through assessment and in turn, attempting to understand collections and rationalize decision-making with data. Efforts at UC libraries aligned with this new emphasis on assessment, which was recognized as a key finding in the 2010 OCLC report by Jackie M. Dooley and Katherine Luce, "Taking Our Pulse."[17] The theme of assessment was expanded upon

---

12. Original survey instruments and complete raw datasets gathered by these teams were not preserved. However, a set of raw data collected by NGTS from 11 repositories in 2009 and a survey results analysis from the NGTS Phase I were shared with the authors.

13. Harrison Dekker et al., *Next-Generation Technical Services (NGTS): New Modes for Organizing and Providing Access to Special Collections, Archive, and Digital Formats: Final Report* (UC Merced: Library, 2010), https://escholarship.org/uc/item/1sz1f058.

14. Ibid., 1.

15. Ibid.

16. University of California Systemwide Libraries, *Guidelines*, 4.

17. Jackie M. Dooley and Katherine Luce, *Taking Our Pulse: The OCLC Research Survey of Special Collections and Archives* (Dublin, OH: OCLC Research, 2010): 10, https://doi.org/10.25333/gj2r-8172.

and summarized by Martha O'Hara Conway and Merrilee Proffitt in 2011 with "Taking Stock and Making Hay: Archival Collections Assessment."[18] Conway and Proffitt define "archival collections assessment" as:

> ...the systematic, purposeful gathering of information about archival collections... Quantitative and qualitative data about collections makes possible the creation of adequate, consistent, collection-level descriptions... and informs important decisions regarding collection management.[19]

Conway and Proffitt drew a direct line from hidden collections to efficient processing to assessment, and they continued on this theme in additional writings.[20] Soon others began to discuss assessment as a mechanism to understand the causes of, and find answers to, myriad issues like shrinking budgets, space management, processing and preservation prioritization, and digitization readiness. Anna Dysert described a 2013 assessment at the Osler Library of the History of Medicine designed to promote holdings, increase the preparedness of the repository to plan and execute collection-based projects, and fine-tune collection development.[21] Lisa R. Carter described building a "culture of assessment" in special collections with several major foci, but states, "before we can articulate value, resource needs, or opportunities for impact, we need to know what we have," continuing that "collections assessment serves as the foundation for all other efforts."[22] Writings on assessment may present it as something that should be systematic, but it is often completed in one-shot projects. Assessment is resource-intensive, and can require the support of grants to fund temporary staffing for tasks such as shelf-checks and inventorying.[23] In order to make this resource investment worthwhile, information collected during an assessment is not an end in itself; it needs to be used for something.

18. Martha O'Hara Conway and Merrilee Proffitt, *Taking Stock and Making Hay: Archival Collections Assessment* (Dublin, Ohio: OCLC Research, 2011): 7, http://www.oclc.org/research/publications/library/2011/2011-07.pdf.

19. Ibid.

20. Martha O'Hara Conway and Merrilee Proffitt, "The Practice, Power, and Promise of Archival Collections Assessment," *RBM: A Journal of Rare Books, Manuscripts, & Cultural Heritage* 13, no. 2 (Fall 2012): 100-112; and Merrilee Proffitt, "Assessing Special Collections: From Where We Are, to Where We Need to Be," *Proceedings of the 2012 Library Assessment Conference: Building Effective, Sustainable, Practical Assessment* (Charlottesville, VA: ARL, 2012): 415-418, https://www.lib.berkeley.edu/sites/default/files/staff/uploads/pptx/Proffitt.pptx.

21. Anna Dysert, "Aims and Approaches in Special Collections Assessment: A Case Study from the Osler Library," *RBM: A Journal of Rare Books, Manuscripts, & Cultural Heritage* 16, no. 2 (2015): 104, http://dx.doi.org/10.5860/rbm.16.2.446.

22. Lisa R. Carter, "Articulating Value: Building a Culture of Assessment in Special Collections," *RBM: A Journal of Rare Books, Manuscripts, & Cultural Heritage* 13, no 2 (Fall 2012): 95.

23. Proffitt, "Assessing Special Collections," 419.

While the discourse on assessment was widespread in the 2010s, the literature largely focused on case studies rather than assessments of the long-term impact of efficient processing, as we seek to do here. In 2009, Stephanie Crowe and Karen Spilman undertook a field-wide study of the impact of MPLP strategies by conducting a broad survey of American archivists to determine if indeed backlogs had shrunk and access had grown in the years since the publication of Greene and Meissner's article.[24] A majority of respondents (65%) reported that their backlogs had decreased over the years since they had implemented MPLP processing techniques; 80% of these respondents were confident this difference was due to the new techniques focused on efficiency.[25] The survey also measured impacts on other areas, such as reference. In Canada, Jeremy Mohr wrote a thesis evaluating the efficiency and effectiveness of MPLP-style processing, with local modifications, over a period between 2009 and 2016 at the Provincial Archives of Saskatchewan.[26] Using both qualitative and quantitative methods, Mohr investigated if new processing policies helped the archives reach stated, measurable goals; he also interviewed reference staff and analyzed usage statistics to determine the full impact of the change. More recently, in 2019, Janet Hauck, Rose Sliger Krause, and Kyna Herzinger evaluated consortial application of MPLP principles within the Northwest Archival Processing Initiative (NWAPI), ten years after the conclusion of a NHPRC grant-funded project that explicitly trained archivists to use MPLP strategies.[27] The authors surveyed eight of the original consortial archivists who received the training and instruction under the grant, to learn about the impacts of practicing the same techniques at their repositories in the intervening decade. Hauck et al. show in their extensive literature review of MPLP adoption that the "literature shows a remarkable commitment to MPLP as it has evolved from a simple processing methodology focused on solving the problem of backlog to a guiding principle that has affected a wide array of practices" in archival management and administration. The survey revealed that these archivists strongly believed the early training they received was helpful and the strategies they used during the grant period, when MPLP was strictly adhered to, was effective. However, they reported varying levels of success and measurable impact in continuing the same strategies in the ensuing years at their work sites, including appraisal and acquisition, description, preservation, reference, and access. The Guidelines posed a similar opportunity for investigation—as a tool emerging from

24. Stephanie H. Crowe and Karen Spilman, "MPLP @ 5: More Access, Less Backlog?" *Journal of Archival Organization* 8 (2010): 110-133, https://doi.org/10.1080/15332748.2010.518079.

25. Ibid., 119.

26. Jeremy Mohr, "An Evaluation of More Product Less Process (MPLP) Processing Methods at the Provincial Archives of Saskatchewan" (Master's thesis, University of Victoria, 2016), https://dspace.library.uvic.ca/handle/1828/7715.

27. Janet Hauck, Rose Sliger Krause, and Kyna Herzinger, "MPLP Ten Years Later: the Adventure of Being among the First," *Provenance, Journal of the Society of Georgia Archivists* 35 no. 2 (2019), https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/provenance/vol35/iss2/5.

conversations around backlogs, collection assessment, and efficiency—with widespread use by UC archivists, the time was right to evaluate its adoption.

Methodology

We began our inquiry into the impact of the Guidelines by gathering information about current collection extents, practices, and attitudes across UC repositories, and comparing them to data captured in 2009. We utilized a mixed-methods approach that consisted of two phases: a survey sent to representatives of each major special collections repository at all ten UC libraries, and a series of facilitated focus groups with UC archival workers to further assess attitudes and perspectives toward collection management practices in UC libraries.

We developed a survey instrument using Qualtrics to gather quantitative data about the current size of archival collections and backlogs, as well as the processing policy and practices, in major manuscripts and archives repositories in UC libraries. Participants were selected based on their job title and responsibility for overseeing archival processing at their organization. A member from the research team emailed individual participants directly. Ten participants were selected as representatives for their campus to prevent duplicative or potentially conflicting data about collection extents. However, they were encouraged to consult with colleagues from their department and gather statistical information through reports and collection management systems. All data was anonymized and participants were informed that the research team would not be able to link their answers to their email address, campus, or other identifying information.

After the survey closed, we conducted preliminary data analysis. We looked for significant patterns to see where changes in processing techniques and impact on backlogs may have occurred over time, or where the data challenged our assumptions. We compared collection extent statistics gathered in our survey to publicly available UC library annual statistics from 2010 and 2022, as well as 2010 staffing and backlog statistics reported in the NGTS survey and final reports.[28] To confirm present-day staffing numbers, we made a direct information request to all heads of Special Collections programs in August 2023.

Following this data gathering, the second phase consisted of focus group discussions. Participants were recruited via an email sent to relevant UC library staff listservs, inviting members to contact the research team if they were interested in participating.[29] Participants were selected based on whether they had been an

---

28. UC libraries collect and publicly report collection statistics on an annual basis, including linear feet of archival collections (expressed as "manuscript units"). These reports are available online: "Facts and Figures," UC Libraries, https://libraries.universityofcalifornia.edu/about/facts-and-figures/.

29. Listservs sent to UC Libraries Common Knowledge Groups (CKGs), which are "standing groups of experts in the functional areas of work for the University of California Libraries." Source: https://libraries.universityofcalifornia.edu/ckg/.

employee of a UC library for at least three years and if their primary job function involved processing archival collections. In total, we received 14 respondents who were placed in one of four focus groups. Each campus had no more than one representative in each focus group, plus a facilitator and notetaker from the research team. To avoid any conflict of interest, participation was completely voluntary and no compensation was offered. In the event that an individual reported to a member of the research team, the focus groups were designed to exclude that member of the research team from participating in the facilitation. Focus groups were conducted remotely via Zoom, and the audio and video were recorded for transcription purposes. Participants had the opportunity to review and edit the transcripts, and identifying information was removed.

To analyze the focus group data, we applied a qualitative analysis approach to the transcripts and drew conclusions about emergent themes among participants' experience. We used Taguette, a free and open-source qualitative research tool to facilitate tagging of the focus group transcripts. Tags were created collectively by the research team during and after the transcription process using an inductive method. Each transcript was tagged by two people in the research team to ensure no single perspective gained dominance in tagging. We employed two complementary methodologies for the focus group analysis: content analysis and ethnographic summary. These two methodologies are complimentary; combining them produced a stronger analysis.[30] Content analysis allowed us to see which patterns and themes emerged throughout the conversations the most by tallying their mentions as tags (e.g. access, capacity, etc.) to create thematic and numerical interpretations of the data. Ethnographic summary was then applied to make summary statements that illustrate the essence of participants' responses.

At the conclusion of the study, the focus group recordings were destroyed, and the survey data was exported from Qualtrics. The edited focus group transcripts and anonymized survey results were deposited in an open data repository.[31]

Findings

What Elements of the Guidelines Have Been Successfully Adopted in Archival Collections Management at UC Over the Last Ten Years?

The first version of the Guidelines recommended five core principles for archival management: (1) Aim to provide access to all holdings; (2) Always look for the "golden minimum"; (3) Analyze the work necessary for every collection and be

---

30. Lynn Silipigni Connaway and Marie L. Radford, "Individual and Focus Group Interviews," in *Research Methods in Library and Information Science*, 7th edition (Santa Barbara, CA: Libraries Unlimited, 2021): 364.

31. "Data from: Beyond Efficiency: An Impact Assessment of the UC Guidelines for Efficient Processing," UC San Diego Library Digital Collections, https://doi.org/10.6075/J0Z038CH.

flexible in the amount of work applied; (4) Arrange, describe, and preserve materials in harmony; and (5) Measure and compare processing rates to ensure processing is carried out efficiently.[32] There is evidence that archivists across the system have made truly meaningful progress on the first core recommendation, both in terms of increasing discoverability and providing access to unprocessed collections. The other principles remain more difficult to document and practice, although archivists are clearly actively considering these themes in their work. We assess the adoption of each of the recommendations, below.

Recommendation 1: Aim to Provide Access to All Holdings

At a systemwide level, UC libraries have succeeded in a commitment to provide improved access to all archival holdings. Access is supported through ensuring discoverability of collections via cataloging and archival description, as well as in the development of policies that allow users to request and view unprocessed materials. Eight out of ten survey respondents agreed that baseline collection-level description is the number one processing priority at their repositories. In 2010, it was reported that approximately 4,856 collections in UC libraries were not discoverable via collection-level MARC catalog records (about 10% of the total number of reported collections), and were therefore "for all practical purposes, invisible and inaccessible to end users."[33] This statistic was cited as a major symptom of problematic workflows at the time. In our 2022 survey, campuses were asked again how many total collections were in their repository, and how many of those collections were not represented with at least a collection-level catalog record. Our analysis indicates that approximately 645 out of a total of 28,767 collections did not have an online catalog record, which represents approximately 2% of all collections.[34,35] This shows an 8% increase in baseline collection discoverability since 2009.

Most repositories shared that their workflows lean towards collection-level catalog record creation as the first discovery point, prior to finding aid publication. This aligns with recommendations in the Guidelines for libraries that have not yet represented all their holdings online to "refocus staff energies on creating brief, collection-level records for all holdings," and "create brief collection-level descriptions as part of the accessioning process."[36] With all University of California

32. University of California Systemwide Libraries, *Guidelines*, 5.

33. Dekker, *Next-Generation Technical Services* (NGTS), 10.

34. Survey participants were asked to estimate the number of collections not represented with collection-level catalog records by selecting multiple choice ranges such as 0-20. We averaged the responses and arrived at 645.

35. Note that two campuses reported that they could not estimate this number at all. One was currently midstream in efforts to increase intellectual control over collections, and another stated that there had been changes over time in levels of cataloging support and practices, so the number of collections without a public access point may be higher.

36. University of California Systemwide Libraries, *Guidelines*, 10.

libraries recently joining a systemwide shared catalog, this recommendation remains highly relevant today.[37]

Year	Total number of collections	Estimated number of collections represented with at least a collection-level	Approximate percentage of collections
2010	46,662[38]	41,806[39]	90%
2022	28,767[40]	28,122	98%

One unexpected discovery our research revealed was the drastic difference between the total number of collections reported in 2010 and 2022 (see table above, column 2). As we will discuss below, the overall footprint size of archival collections in UC libraries has grown over the past decade, presumably leading to more collections under stewardship. However, there is clearly a difference between how repositories calculated the total number of collections in 2010 and how they count them now. While this discrepancy remains unexplained, we may attempt to theorize about this difference. First, our research revealed that no repository has undertaken a major or concentrated deaccessioning effort, so we know that deaccessioning is not the reason for this difference. Second, we suspect that the rigorous survey and inventory activities undertaken beginning in 2009 and continued through the early 2010s, followed by a migration to ArchivesSpace, may have prompted a major clean-up of record-keeping and impacted the style of determining what is a "collection" as opposed to a single manuscript or unique item, like a scrapbook or pictorial resource. One research team member notes that at their library in the past, single items were given collection numbers, and that is no longer the practice. A count of collections based on "collection numbers assigned" would have greatly inflated any report of how many the repository held. Along these lines, it is a possibility that many individual

---

37. In 2022, a systemwide integrated library system (SILS) was adopted across all ten UC campuses, two regional library facilities, and the California Digital Library; see https://libraries.universityofcalifornia.edu/sils/.

38. Dekker, *Next-Generation Technical Services* (NGTS), 10.

39. Ibid.

40. We asked survey respondents to report the total number of collections in their repository, which are summed here.

unique items, as opposed to true collections, were counted in 2010 and those have now been cataloged or shifted to other queues, reflecting a new approach to managing those resources.

Beyond cataloging and description, our study reveals that attitudes and policies are generally in favor of providing access to all collections, regardless of processing status. In our survey, only one repository reported that they "definitely do not" allow access to unprocessed collections; all others allowed some degree of access. Focus group discussions supported survey results, indicating that most libraries do provide access regardless of processing status, which aligns with the Guidelines' recommendation that "unprocessed collections should be presumed open to researchers."[41] In our focus groups, participants generally felt positively about this expansion of discoverability and access. One person noted, "that makes me really happy, that we can provide access to a majority of our collections, even things that are technically in our backlog."

Yet, our analysis indicates that infrastructure to manage access to unprocessed collections is still developing for many libraries. While eight out of ten campuses transparently communicate the processing status of materials to the public in collection-level records with standardized language, survey results show that most libraries (seven out of ten) still do not have written policies that govern access to unprocessed collections. Permission to access these types of collections is typically granted in an informal, ad hoc manner, relying on inquiries to the repository or individual staff, rather than straightforward guidance shared with the public. It is notable that this policy gap persists nearly a dozen years after the publication of the Guidelines, which recommended that "UC special collections and archives revise their access policies to promote access to unprocessed materials."[42] We also found that the practice of providing access to unprocessed collections impacts public services functions. Focus group participants noted that serving unprocessed collections requires additional staffing in reading rooms that is often not available. Sometimes, processing staff are asked to assist researchers with unprocessed collections in the reading room, which takes them away from their primary tasks. One participant noted, "We are serving a very different kind of [higher] access demand than we are structurally built to serve." While archivists are readily complying with the guidance to allow access to all collections, policy remains lacking or opaque, and challenges may await users who seek to consult unprocessed materials onsite.

Recommendation 2: Always Look for the "Golden Minimum"

The phrase "golden minimum" was used by Greene and Meissner to refer to a level of processing that meets the requirements of current and future users at the most basic, or minimal, level. The Guidelines recommend, "for each collection,

---

41.   University of California Systemwide Libraries, *Guidelines*, 5.

42.   Ibid., 11.

perform the minimum amount of work necessary to make a collection usable."[43] Our assessment indicates that UC archivists understand the spirit behind the golden minimum, but apply this dictum unevenly in practice. The Guidelines suggest that after collection-level records have been created, "When collections are identified for further processing, *we recommend that institutions use low or moderate effort processing levels most often*" (emphasis original to the text).[44] When surveyed on how often various levels of processing effort are applied, we found that five out of ten libraries apply low-level processing (series or subseries) only occasionally, and seven out of ten libraries apply moderate-level processing (expedited folder level) frequently, more than half the time.[45] Additionally, at least five out of ten libraries apply intensive (traditional folder level) and highly intensive (item level) processing occasionally. This suggests that most UC libraries are processing at the moderate folder level most of the time, and occasionally using low, intensive, and highly intensive methods when deemed appropriate. It follows that if one is occasionally performing intensive levels of processing, this necessarily takes time away from treating more collections broadly with minimal strategies. Yet for the most part, we infer that UC archivists are aware of this recommendation and understand the urgent intent behind it: to maximize professionals' time and minimize backlogs.

Additionally, several focus group participants reported that in the face of insufficient staffing, their libraries developed new strategies for managing unprocessed materials, acknowledging that traditional processing is no longer the only path to access. An example of this is the "accessioning as processing" approach, which according to our survey, is consistently applied at six UC libraries as an integral part of their collection management programs.[46] One survey respondent noted, "We are steadily moving in this direction… recommending this in many more instances than in the past. File/folder-level processing has been a long-standing practice/habit, and it is now generally conceded that processing to this level of intensity has not been necessary in many instances, and that it has contributed to our backlog of unprocessed collections." This indicates that most UC libraries have

---

43. Ibid., 5.

44. Ibid., 20.

45. Moderate processing is defined by the Guidelines as: "Succinct finding aid with abbreviated folder lists or simple inventories. Existing description repurposed. Put folders in rough order. Preserve original order when usable. Perform rough sort of loose items. Replace boxes. Retain existing folders and labels when in good shape. Appraise at the folder level; avoid finer levels of weeding. Segregate folders with privacy concerns." University of California Systemwide Libraries, *Guidelines*, 16.

46. "Accessioning as processing" was coined by Christine Weideman, "Accessioning as Processing," *The American Archivist* 69 (Fall/Winter 2006): 274-83. It describes the idea that some collections can effectively be processed during the accessioning phase. Weideman states, "During the accessioning process, whenever possible, we arrange and describe the materials, including the creation of the finding aid, so that they are ready for research use and never enter our backlog," p. 276.

adopted the Guidelines' recommendation to "perform some processing during accessioning,"[47] which is in line with the golden minimum ethos.

Recommendation 3 & 4: Analyze the Work Necessary for Every Collection and Be Flexible in the Amount of Work Applied

The third and fourth recommendations urged archivists to be discerning and strategic with the level of effort and intervention applied to each collection during processing.[48] Our assessment shows that while this recommendation is not always followed in a rigorous manner, many UC libraries have developed a culture that welcomes flexibility in the application of processing levels. Achieving the golden minimum usually requires an archivist to conduct a pre-processing survey and analysis, plan a customized approach, and generally approach processing work with a spirit of flexibility rather than a "one size fits all" standard of arrangement and description. To accomplish this, the Guidelines recommend first assigning a value score to an unprocessed collection, and using this score, among other factors, to dictate the level of processing required to make the collection usable.[49] Yet survey results show that only two libraries regularly assign value scores to collections in the pre-processing assessment phase. Most participants tend to rely on a "gut feeling" perception of value when determining the level of processing effort.

In a system with nearly half a million linear feet of archival collections and relatively few employees responsible for processing, it became apparent in the focus groups that UC archivists sometimes struggle to focus on planning for processing. With so many other tasks at hand, such as collection management, acquisitions, appraisal, providing public services support, digital projects, and more, claiming time to appropriately plan for and scope each processing project is a challenge that does not always offer a good return on investment. One participant noted with honesty, "processing plans often don't end up being accurate for the amount of time that it actually takes."

Yet despite these challenges, there is evidence that UC archivists are working in alignment with the Guidelines' advice to "be more flexible in determining when a collection is 'processed,'" and are actively redefining and interrogating what processing means.[50] Determining whether a collection is "processed" is no longer necessarily defined by traditional rehousing and arrangement. Several focus group participants articulated that "processed" is now more commonly defined by whether

---

47. University of California Systemwide Libraries, *Guidelines*, 13.

48. Recommendation 4 in the Guidelines: "Arrange, describe, and preserve materials in harmony" (i.e. arrangement, description, and preservation work match within the same hierarchical level) was not separately assessed by the research team.

49. University of California Systemwide Libraries, *Guidelines*, 19-20.

50. Ibid., 5.

or not the collection is discoverable and usable. One participant shared, "I think I'm at the point where I hate the word 'processed'… What do people think when something's processed? So I just say, 'Is it usable?'… it's [not] like this black and white thing… in fact, almost everything is pretty gray if you really were to look at it." In a separate focus group session, another participant drew a similar conclusion using the same coloration metaphor: "I just feel like there's a lot of components to what makes the collection accessible, and then it's like this really big picture that I feel like is a little gray, but everyone expects it to black or white."

Recommendation 5: Measure and Compare Processing Rates to Ensure Processing is Carried Out Efficiently

Our study found the greatest divergence from the Guidelines in recommendation 5, which urges repositories to carefully track statistics of processing work and activity. Specifically, the Guidelines state:

> *Tracking processing is recommended as a programmatic activity that is incorporated into the processing workflow for all staff performing processing tasks. Measuring time spent on certain activities can provide more accurate and meaningful data on processing rates at the local level. At the UC systemwide level, sharing of data points can facilitate for a set of common benchmarks for efficient processing…*[51]

While we found many UC archivists collect a variety of statistics, processing metrics are not being captured across the system in a way that meaningfully increases visibility or assesses capacity of professional processing labor. Survey results indicate that tracking employee hours spent on processing regularly occurs at only three out of ten libraries. In fact, evidence of a level of resentment and possibly confusion towards processing metrics and their association with essentialization of archival labor emerged in our focus group conversations. There was a notable difference in reporting between the survey tool and the focus groups.

Survey respondents reported collecting a wide variety of statistics. Nine out of ten repositories reported they collect data on the starting and end dates for individual processing projects; a majority also reported tracking student processing hours. Some repositories track time spent on more specific activities, such as work pertaining to born-digital, or accessioning. In the survey, nearly all respondents stated they use this data to support functions primarily relating to planning projects and determining realistic capacity, including communicating with donors and administrators. In these areas, focus group participants shared correlating positive perspectives on the utility of metrics:

> *I had to… revamp that whole approach to [metrics], not counting widgets, but trying to get a sense of, what are we capable of doing?*

---

51. University of California Systemwide Libraries, *Guidelines*, 25.

From an administrative point of view these are critical numbers for understanding how to scope a project, how to staff the work that needs to get done. Without metrics we are flying blind.

I've noticed a shift in my thinking about metrics… That shift has been helped by things like the Guidelines…it's really not about your own productivity. It's more about showing the capacity. It's not about your own individual worth as an archivist… it's meant to be used in an aggregate to show administrators the cost and the time that this work takes…

In this light, participants generally agreed that statistics can be useful for planning for and communicating about processing initiatives.

We also found that four out of ten repositories reportedly never use processing statistics data to inform performance reviews or acquisitions decisions. The survey data told us that the gathering of processing metrics across most UC repositories is fairly robust and purposeful, leveraged for planning and capacity building within local environments, but falls short of intentionally increasing visibility of processing labor through the tracking of employee processing time. We found this to be in alignment with professional practice, as documented in a 2020 national survey that found "most archival repositories do not routinely collect metrics."[52]

Focus group discussions, however, revealed a greater weariness and distrust towards processing metrics. They also mentioned a wide variety of tools and tracking devices, from spreadsheets to Trello and Airtable, and difficulty reporting with ArchivesSpace. One person stated, "We don't track metrics in any kind of systemic way." Representative comments include:

There's so many other things that it's just not worth the amount of time it takes to really keep track of it.

I think those metrics would just never account for whatever problem is in some of these collections.

I'm not even sure how meaningful or accurate those are at this point…It was a phase in the profession, and we're moving away from it.

As soon as you put a metric out there, someone is going to do a report and use it the wrong way… If you're counting your processing from the point of view of work that staff are accomplishing, versus the amount of stuff that's getting done… like the amount of 'hours' versus the amount of 'achievement'… there are just different ways to look at every number like that.

---

52. Cyndi Shein, Sarah R. Jones, Tammi Kim, and Karla Irwin, "Perspectives and Practices: Archival Processing Metrics Survey Findings," *Journal of Contemporary Archival Studies* 7 (2020): 6, https://elischolar.library.yale.edu/jcas/vol7/iss1/16.

One participant expressed that the Guidelines' focus on efficiency and measuring output had roots in and perpetuated white supremacist and capitalistic culture in libraries. In response, they were actively "putting our energy elsewhere... reflect, and move forward, and see what we can do with our collection management." This observation reflects a larger movement to complicate and enhance efficient processing programs by incorporating more holistic and mindful collection stewardship practices. Examples of this shift include extensible processing programs that expand MPLP into a broader operational approach to stewardship, collection management frameworks that prioritize accessioning, reparative description projects, and slow archiving efforts that are grounded in care for documented communities.[53,54,55,56]

Overall, the UC libraries' ability to provide access to and manage collections has inarguably improved since the publication of the Guidelines in 2012. Our study shows that UC archivists have been engaged with all the major core principles of the original Guidelines. However, there are nuances in the details of the actual practices supporting the recommendations. Eight out of ten survey respondents state the first priority of their repository "is baseline (minimal) collection-level control and description," defined in the Guidelines as a collection-level catalog record (and the remaining two "somewhat agree"). Yet, we know at least several hundred (down from several thousand) collections may not be represented in the catalog, and it can be a challenge to account for what is missing from primary databases of record. Policy and staffing lag behind an otherwise strong belief in and practice of providing access to unprocessed collections. In addition to practicing minimal or low-level description, many archivists complete more intensive levels of processing frequently—and they generally do not use value scores as urged in the Guidelines to direct these decisions. Finally, the general pessimism towards statistics and metrics shows that UC archivists are ready for their numbers to tell a story beyond efficiency and processing rates. As a system, we may benefit from greater communication and collaboration that helps us redefine what that story should be.

Has a Mandate for Efficient Processing Helped UC Libraries Cope with Significant Backlogs?

Our study shows that across UC library repositories, the backlog of totally unprocessed collections was significantly reduced both in size and as a percentage of

53. Daniel A. Santamaria, *Extensible Processing for Archives and Special Collections: Reducing Processing Backlogs* (Chicago: American Library Association/ Neal-Schuman, 2015).

54. Audra Eagle Yun, *Archival Accessioning* (Chicago, Illinois: Society of American Archivists, 2021).

55. Kate Dundon and Alix Norton, Reparative Archival Description Project Assessment Report (UC Santa Cruz: University Library, 2022), https://escholarship.org/uc/item/1h61j5pq.

56. Kimberly Christen and Jane Anderson, "Toward Slow Archives," *Archival Science* 19, no. 2 (June 1, 2019): 87-116, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10502-019-09307-x.

the collection footprint from 2010-2022. We believe that the application of efficient processing practices and other recommendations articulated in the Guidelines was a strong influence on this progress. Our analysis also reveals that despite this improvement, UC libraries continue to face a significant backlog that cannot be mitigated by efficient processing alone.

To undertake this analysis, we compared publicly available UC library annual statistics from 2010 and 2022, to estimated backlog extents reported in the 2010 NGTS Final Report and this study's 2022 survey.[57,58]

Year	Total collection footprint	Estimated unprocessed backlog	Percentage of footprint that is unprocessed
2009-2010	247,346 linear feet[59]	71,605 linear feet[60]	29%
2021-2022	484,228 linear feet[61] 81.4 TB[62]	54,713 linear feet 13.7 TB	11% of paper 17% of digital

The table above shows that collectively, UC libraries reported an archival collections footprint of 247,347 linear feet in fiscal year 2009-2010. This figure grew over time, resulting in a footprint of 484,228 linear feet in fiscal year 2021-2022. Working with these numbers, the total archival collections footprint at UC libraries increased by 236,881 linear feet over the span of 12 years, a 95% increase. In short, *the total extent of archival collections nearly doubled* from 2010 to 2022, with an average increase of about 19,740 linear feet per year.

57. "Facts and Figures," UC Libraries, accessed March 2024, https://libraries.universityofcalifornia.edu/about/facts-and-figures/.

58. Dekker, *Next-Generation Technical Services* (NGTS), 10.

59. "University of California Library Statistics, July 2010," UC Libraries, accessed March 2024, https://libraries.universityofcalifornia.edu/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/09-10.pdf.

60. Dekker, *Next-Generation Technical Services* (NGTS), 10. Note that the authors of this report speculate that the total linear feet of unprocessed collections is likely higher than the reported 71,605 linear feet.

61. "University of California Library Statistics, July 2022," UC Libraries, accessed March 2024, https://libraries.universityofcalifornia.edu/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/Library_Statistics_21-22_v3.pdf.

62. Terabyte amounts, as reported in the survey conducted by the authors in 2022. Note that not all survey respondents reported born-digital holdings information. Some reported challenges in estimating the amounts, hence, we believe the total extent of processed and unprocessed born-digital collections is likely much higher.

The 2010 estimated backlog of 71,605 linear feet represented about 29% of all archival holdings that year. In comparison, our survey responses indicate the estimated backlog in 2022 was 54,713 linear feet, about 11% of all current archival holdings. This suggests a 16,892 linear foot reduction in the systemwide backlog over 12 years, and also a reduction of the backlog in proportion to the systemwide footprint during this time. This is significant progress, which we attribute to a likely combination of skilled application of efficient processing practices and adoption of some extensible collection management principles, which were recommended in the Guidelines.

This progress is particularly impressive when taking into account that systemwide, the collection size nearly doubled during this time. In other words, over a dozen years, UC archivists managed to reduce the backlog while simultaneously intaking an average of nearly 20,000 incoming linear feet per year. Measurements of linear footage do not count the thousands of gigabytes of digital material entering repositories; nor do they include the work of reformatting projects to digitize fragile or high-demand photographic collections and audiovisual recordings that typically extract labor from the same personnel. This is remarkable progress in managing collections and description. Although, some repositories noted they now have a new type of backlog that was not acknowledged in 2010, which is the queue of materials waiting to be accessioned. Survey results indicate that as of 2022, all ten libraries maintain an archival accessioning backlog of some size.[63] Four libraries have large accessioning backlogs of 250-500 linear feet; and one library reports an accessioning backlog of over 500 linear feet. These accessioning backlogs are typically not reflected in publicly available UC Library annual statistics. Our analysis therefore indicates that while the application of efficient processing practices has helped UC libraries contend with its backlog, efficient processing alone cannot eliminate the backlog.

What are the Practical Barriers to Implementation of Efficient Processing and Successful Collection Management?

Our analysis shows that application of the Guidelines played an important role in reducing backlogs in UC libraries. However, we discovered additional findings that call into question the very logic of our final research question: What are the practical barriers to implementation of efficient processing and, ultimately, successful collection management? This question assumes that efficient processing necessarily functions as the lynchpin of a successful program. Yet, we found that other factors can impact an institution's stewardship. Our research surfaced three underlying barriers to reducing backlogs and making collections accessible that are experienced across the UC library system: (1) Insufficient staffing, including evidence of a systemwide reduction in employees responsible for processing; (2) A systemic imbalance of resources that favors acquisition over access; and (3) A capacity gap for

---

63. An accessioning backlog is a grouping of collection material that has not been formally accessioned, which means it lacks baseline physical and intellectual control that is ideally accomplished shortly after the material is acquired, according to professional best practices.

building and sustaining collection management infrastructure. These barriers reveal that effectively managing backlogs and making collections discoverable requires deeper and more sustained institutional commitments from library leadership at all levels than is currently in place.

Evidence of a Systemwide Reduction in Employees Responsible for Processing

Our research reveals that a substantial cut to the number of employees with responsibility for archival processing has occurred since the original publication of the Guidelines, especially when viewed in juxtaposition to the growth of collections. In late 2009, UC libraries reported having the equivalent of a total of 55 full time employee (FTE) positions with processing responsibilities.[64] Of this number, approximately 31.5 of these employees were classified as Librarians, and 23.5 were classified as Library Assistants.[65] In 2010, UC libraries reported an equivalent of 50 FTE positions with processing responsibilities across system libraries—this report did not distinguish between classifications. To analyze staffing changes over time, in addition to the 2009 and 2010 statistics mentioned above, the authors analyzed organizational charts and staff directories gathered from the Internet Archive's Wayback Machine from the UC libraries' major special collections repositories dating to 2012, the year the Guidelines were published. Then for this study, we requested 2023 staffing numbers from the directors of each repository.

In 2023, there were 13.5 fewer employees performing processing than in 2009, prior to the publication of the Guidelines. This represents *a startling 24.5% reduction* in staff with processing comprising at least one of their defined job functions. In focus groups, some participants observed their repositories are not currently staffed to accomplish processing in a meaningful way, and have recently reached full work stoppages in certain areas. Some representative comments include:

> *We're doing virtually no processing of new collections. Now we're really concentrating on handling the backlog...*

> *Processing kind of ground to a halt, other than... student workers who are basically doing processing work, guided by us.*

> *Our processing archivist does what [they] can, but [they're] also doing a lot of collection development and other things.*

---

64. NGTS Phase 1 UC Unique Collections Team, "Survey Results & Analysis for Next Generation Technical Services: Special Collections/Archives" (UC Libraries: November 3, 2009). The survey asked respondents to report any percentage of a FTE that was dedicated to archival processing, i.e., a full-time employee who processed 50% of the time was reported as a .5 position, and all the percentages were added so that "1" equals an FTE. Accordingly, more than 55 people were involved in processing, but not as a full percentage of their time.

65. Library assistant and library professional positions are distinct from the UC human resources classification of Librarian, which is an academic exempt role typically associated with the job title of Archivist.

A lot has changed for us in terms of processing, in the sense that we don't do it right now. Processing has not been a priority.

Despite this sharp reduction, archival workers somehow managed to eliminate 16,892 linear feet of backlog while intaking an additional average of nearly 20,000 linear feet per year. From these numbers, we can infer that over the last decade, UC archivists accomplished a massive amount of work with decreasing staff levels. We believe the strategies in the Guidelines must be undergirding these statistics. However, doing more with less eventually reaches a point of diminishing returns, in terms of staff retention and morale, reliance on grant-funded and temporary workers, and burgeoning backlogs of born-digital content and non-accessioned acquisitions.

Year	Source	Librarian	Library Assistant/ Library	Total FTE
2009	NGTS Survey Report[66]	31.5	23.5	55
2010	NGTS Final Report[67]	N/A	N/A	50
2012	Org charts & directories analysis	N/A	N/A	48
2023	Heads of Special Collections[68]	22	19.5	41.5

66. NGTS Phase 1 UC Unique Collections Team, "Survey Results & Analysis for Next Generation Technical Services: Special Collections/Archives" (UC Libraries: November 3, 2009), accessed March 2024, https://libraries.universityofcalifornia.edu/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/ngts3_spcoll-arch_survey_report_no_ID.pdf, via: "NGTS Phase 1: August 2009 – February 2010," UC Libraries, https://libraries.universityofcalifornia.edu/ngts/ngts-phase-1-august-2009-february-2010/.

67. Dekker, *Next-Generation Technical Services* (NGTS), 11-12.

68. This figure includes five temporary employees. Some campuses in the UC system have struggled in the past with the issue of over-reliance on temporary hires to support ongoing workflows. See Society of California Archivists, "Statement of Support for Temporary Archivists at UCLA," published November 2018, accessed March 2024, https://calarchivists.org/resources/Documents/Board%20Statement_2018.pdf.

The staffing reduction hit across job titles and classifications, impacting both library assistant/library professional positions and librarians. Library assistant positions decreased by four, whereas professional librarian positions with processing responsibilities decreased by nine and a half FTE. Two focus group participants indicated that there was a common practice of allowing employee attrition through non-replacement of retiring or departing library assistants; this observation is shared by study authors. And, while we did not ask department heads to report their numbers of special collections cataloging staff, several focus group participants shared that the number of catalogers has also decreased in recent years. This trend limits libraries' ability to make collections quickly discoverable through the shared UC catalog. Likewise, several focus group participants said their libraries were severely understaffed in the specific area of born-digital (despite digital archivists being a strong new hire category in the Librarian classification in our survey). Yet, libraries continue to ambitiously collect born-digital records that are highly work-intensive to migrate, appraise, make accessible, and preserve.

Focus group discussions revealed that a "do more with less" mentality is prevalent across the system, exposing a tension between balancing routine processing and accessioning responsibilities with large-scale efforts such as surveys, digitization, retrospective accessioning projects, metadata remediation, and building born-digital and audiovisual stewardship programs. Understaffing in processing, particularly in repositories with high-volume collecting practices, damages morale. Focus group participants described unmanageable workloads. One participant noted, "It's very frustrating being asked to do something that you don't feel like you have the capacity or the equipment or the tools to do, and for [the work] to always be somewhat invisible." Another participant shared, "In the last two years in particular, it's become really overwhelming—to just have so many things that need work where I'm the only person that does the processing." Staff morale is further eroded when turnover and attrition in library assistant positions occurs while there are active recruitments for curators and upper management, which fosters a sentiment that front-line work and workers are not valued or needed. A focus group participant noted, "We're hiring all these people to create work. But we're not actually hiring anyone to do the work that is being created." Finally, survey participants reported an increase of about twelve new curator positions over the past ten years, which speaks to a larger issue of resource imbalance (discussed in the next section).

Understaffing is a major issue felt across the archival profession—not unique to UC libraries—nor are the work-arounds that managers and administrators commonly employ to cope with this systemic problem.[69] Focus group participants shared that

---

69. Respondents to the 2010 NGTS survey expressed the need for more staff to dedicate to processing collections (Dekker, *Next-Generation Technical Services* (NGTS), 31). The National Finding Aid Network Project found that insufficient staffing impacted archival repositories at the national level. "Related to issues of staffing, many organizations rely on contingent labor, student workers, volunteers, or other temporary or non-specialist staff who do not work on a full-time basis." Chela Scott Weber et al., *Summary of Research: Findings from the Building a National Finding Aid Network Project* (Dublin, OH: OCLC Research, 2023): 14, https://doi.org/10.25333/7a4c-0r03.

efforts to fill gaps in processing capacity routinely relied on temporary project archivists and undergraduate and graduate students to perform processing work. Participants reported varying levels of success in employing students and temporary employees, but all noted that they do not have adequate time to constantly train and manage short-term staff. One participant saliently observed:

> *You need to hire staff who build institutional knowledge, who understand our workflows, who are invested in the organization, who are invested in the collections, who build relationships with the curators and work a reference desk shift here and there. Those are the kinds of people that help make an institution better.*

It may be a common complaint that there are not enough people to do the work. However, our investigation, which showed *an actual decrease in staffing juxtaposed with an increase in collecting*, indicates that chronic understaffing in processing, including the growing area of born-digital, is a primary systemic barrier to increasing access to archival collections in UC libraries. Without adequate staff to undertake foundational collection care work, additional barriers to achieving physical and intellectual control of collections arise. This creates a cascading series of detrimental backlog queues (accessioning, born-digital, audiovisual, etc.) that intensify the burden of traditional paper-based processing work. UC archival workers are producing more than ever, but as paper and digital collections grow, so do the task lists to responsibly steward them: creating catalog records and finding aids, securing space, meeting basic preservation standards, migrating files off media and doing file normalization, providing access, and special projects such as exhibitions and reformatting. Prior to this research, archival processing labor cuts at the UC had not been explicitly recognized as a critical barrier. With this data we intend to bring this issue to light.

A Systemic Culture that Favors Acquisition Over Access

Focus group discussions and survey data suggest a clear disconnect between acquisition volume and processing capacity on a systemwide level. Our analysis shows this disconnect stems from a systemic imbalance of resource investment across the system that prioritizes acquisition over access. We learned that for many UC libraries, the pace and culture surrounding acquisitions has not changed in a meaningful way over the past decade, and that staffing, resources, and backlogs do not meaningfully influence the rate and volume of collecting in practice. One participant summarized a common sentiment, "We need to either hire enough archivists to deal with the incoming materials, or we need to adjust our incoming materials to match the staffing that we have." Speaking to the practice of relying on temporary processing positions to make collections accessible, a participant noted, "We've realized that didn't help us, partly because we didn't balance our collecting with our capacity."

Survey respondents reported a strong practice of aligning acquisition decisions with collection development priorities across the system, which indicates a successful

adoption of the Guidelines' recommendation to "rely on well-defined collecting policies to guide all collecting decisions."[70,71] Focus group participants looked at this a little differently, describing acquisitions as made to benefit donor relationships, or that do not fit stated collecting priorities. Regardless, our research indicates that the majority of UC libraries are not systematically factoring basic resource availability into their acquisition programs, and the growth of collections continues unimpeded. Survey results show that processing staff capacity, financial resources, existing backlogs, and storage space *rarely or never* inform acquisitions decisions in the majority of UC libraries. This disconnect suggests an imbalanced approach that privileges collection growth at the expense of employee workload and operations. There is a clear opportunity to return to the recommendations in the Guidelines for selectors and curators to "do their part in reducing backlogs" and "collect responsibly. Do not collect more than your institution can reasonably make available… Make appraisal decisions before material is accessioned into the repository."[72] We believe the most realistic path to adopting these curatorial recommendations is for library leadership to incentivize a widespread transformation in collecting practices, which begins with acknowledging this resource imbalance that is chronically embedded in the workplace norms of academic libraries.

There is a Capacity Gap for Building and Sustaining Collection Management Infrastructure

Focus group participants noted that the general invisibility of archival work within UC libraries creates an environment of insufficient investment in collection management infrastructure (the technology, staffing, storage, policies and procedures that support archival stewardship activities). A participant specifically noted that compared to the recent multi-year UC libraries Systemwide Integrated Library System (SILS) project that illuminated the complexity of the ILS and the labor required to support it, "the infrastructure around processing and accessioning is both invisible and not particularly well supported," as seen in the patchy deployment of ArchivesSpace. Participants shared that decades-long reliance on a grant-funded temporary project archivist employment model has created a vacuum in collection management infrastructure and planning, as well as a detrimental loss of institutional knowledge. A common sentiment was that management's focus on acquiring grants, as well as hiring and onboarding staff that "churn," could be better spent on long-term collection management planning. We also found that while some institutions have made strides in developing infrastructure for born-digital and audiovisual media care, staff turnover and insufficient staffing has slowed momentum and limited capacity in these areas.

---

70. Survey results show 9 out of 10 UC libraries always (7) or frequently (2) take into consideration the value and appropriateness of the collection to the repository.

71. University of California Systemwide Libraries, *Guidelines*, 8.

72. Ibid.

Participants expressed a desire to strengthen collection management programs with more sophisticated collection reporting and assessment capabilities, but struggle with current systems to achieve this. Multiple participants shared that they are not able to effectively use ArchivesSpace to report on basic information about their collections, such as backlog extents. Additionally, reporting on born-digital holdings is a pain point felt systemwide. Born-digital archival holdings within the UC system have increased steadily, but the extent of acquisitions (in gigabytes) has not been incorporated into the required statistics template by the University of California Office of the President, which still relies on linear feet. Survey respondents indicated inadequate infrastructure to accurately report on the born-digital footprint of most repositories, and identifying the extent of unprocessed born-digital is even more challenging. One respondent's comment reflected a common experience, "We do not currently have the capability to access and manage our born-digital content housed on physical media, which is how we have received the vast majority of our born-digital materials." As with paper-based acquisitions, we hypothesize that the accessioning backlogs for born-digital holdings in the UC system are underreported, significant, and growing.

Despite these challenges, several participants expressed that there is an emerging awareness in UC libraries that better collection management infrastructure, linked to strategic planning, is necessary. This is in line with current professional discourse around what it means to steward ethically and responsibly with tools such as OCLC's *Total Cost of Stewardship Framework*.[73] Participants reported an increased interest in quantifying organizational capacity, particularly in the context of understanding the full operational costs of making collections accessible. One participant shared, "It's just encouraging to see people throughout the library getting into that mindset of what is not just our capacity space-wise, but our capacity tools-wise, infrastructure-wise, staffing-wise. It's a good trend I hope to continue." Other focus group participants observed the need for greater organizational infrastructure and support, remarking, "The focus on only processing and accessioning as solutions is not sustainable." Another stated:

> *I think our infrastructure doesn't support the work that we do, either in the physical sense or in our technical frameworks… [Solving] the backlog would be a huge effort, with a lot of staffing and a strategy that's outlined and documented and agreed upon through the entire organization. I think it has to be from the top-down, a concentrated effort that everyone's on board on, from our UL [University Librarian], down to our processing archivists. Because it's demoralizing when you feel like your work is not part of a bigger strategy, is not understood… It would have to be more than just adding archivists, because it'd be a huge effort, and it would have to have so much buy in.*

---

73.   Chela Scott Weber, et al., *Total Cost of Stewardship: Responsible Collection Building in Archives and Special Collections* (Dublin, OH: OCLC Research, 2021), https://doi.org/10.25333/zbh0-a044.

Our research makes evident that backlog reduction and responsible stewardship can only be successful if there is enterprise-wide commitment. Indeed, the UC libraries are poised to enter a moment of deep examination of our practices and a reinvestment in essential collection management infrastructure.

Future Research

Our research was designed to create a current snapshot of backlog extents, staffing levels, and the impact of implementation of the recommendations put forth in the Guidelines across the UC libraries. We set out to see if backlogs were reduced, and while we confirmed they were, the results made us curious. How, specifically, have the various UC repositories successfully reduced backlogs—what strategy, change, or workflow was most effective? In addition to facilitating more discussion and cross-training, one approach to answering these questions could be to track processing output, along with corresponding processing levels at each repository. A systemwide dataset of this nature could shed more light on routine decision-making and project execution. Our survey also showed that some repositories still face difficulties in assessing their holdings and measuring their backlogs. Archivists need training and support to gain better control over their statistical reporting.

We became curious about the long-term effects of employing temporary archivists. Across the archives profession, a popular solution to addressing backlogs has been to rely on project archivists to complete this work. Given the increasingly critical lens focused on this staffing model in recent years, further study into the correlation between backlogs and temporary staff could be a fruitful line of inquiry.[74] Does reliance on temporary labor help repositories reduce backlogs? Or do unfinished projects, staff turnover, and the loss of institutional knowledge endemic of term labor decrease the effectiveness of processing programs?

While the revised Guidelines (2020) reflect a more holistic approach to collection management that considers tasks beyond processing, the authors did not explicitly address the elephant in the room: the volume of acquisitions across the UC system. Our research surfaced a resource imbalance between acquisitions and processing, including a significant growth in acquisitions and the creation of new curatorial positions while processing staff decreased. Over-collecting burdens archivists and has a ripple effect on public services, digital projects, instruction, and other areas. Further research into the rate of acquisitions across the system would undoubtedly be instructive when considering not only backlog mitigation, but overall system capacity, including logistics like shared storage space. This research would be

---

74. Ruth Kitchin Tillman, et al. "Collective Responsibility: Seeking Equity for Contingent Labor in Libraries, Archives, and Museums," Pennsylvania State University Libraries, published September 2019, accessed March 2024, https://scholarsphere.psu.edu/resources/9e973111-f989-40ad-8219-b1afc035af24; and Alison Clemens, et al., "Best Practices for Archival Term Positions," published January 2022, accessed March 2024 https://doi:10.17605/OSF.IO/A4ZC8.

supported by recent professional discourse on the operational impact of collection stewardship.[75]

Our findings show that reporting mechanisms across the system for born-digital acquisitions need improvement, which is reflective of a larger need for resources and assessment in the digital sphere. There has not yet been an assessment of the use of *UC Guidelines for Born-Digital Description*, a separate set of recommendations created by a systemwide group in 2017.[76] A study of the application of these 2017 guidelines might reveal further evidence of capacity challenges and gaps in effective stewardship across digital and hybrid collections.

Finally, the very concept of efficiency has been challenged in light of the dedicated time and resources needed to perform reparative archival work and commit to anti-oppressive descriptive and collecting practices going forward. For example, Dorothy Berry argues that efficient processing methodologies, including those articulated in the Guidelines, have "led to workflows around describing digital objects that build up barriers around access," which hamstring efforts to make Black subjects and history discoverable in digital environments.[77] Likewise, in a statement, the UC Heads of Special Collections writes, "Metadata, digital exhibits, and archival descriptions in particular have disadvantaged communities of color, limited points of subject-based access, and contributed to a culture of exclusivity and inequity."[78] Moreover, an understanding that archival description is not a "one and done" undertaking is explicitly articulated in the revised DACS principles, which state:

> *Archival description is a continuous intellectual endeavor. Description must be iterative. It continually reflects deeper understandings of agents, records, activities, and the relationships between them. It is responsive to users. It is flexible, reflecting changes in knowledge, practice, and values.*[79]

75. Chela Scott Weber, et al., *Total Cost of Stewardship*.

76. Annalise Berdini, et al., *UC Guidelines for Born-Digital Archival Description, University of California Systemwide Libraries*, published October 2017, accessed March 2024, https://escholarship.org/uc/item/9cg222jc.

77. Dorothy Berry, "Take Me into the Library and Show Me Myself: Toward Authentic Accessibility in Digital Libraries," *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society* 110, no. 3 (2022), 111-26, http://www.jstor.org/stable/45420503.

78. Elaine Tennant et al., *Statement on Inclusion and Equity in Special Collections, Archives, and Distinctive Collections in the University of California Libraries*, University of California San Francisco Library, published 2021, accessed March 2024, https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4mq1461d.

79. "Statement of Principles" from Describing Archives: A Content Standard, published 2022, accessed March 2024, https://saa-ts-dacs.github.io/dacs/04_statement_of_principles.html.

Some UC libraries have embraced this iterative approach in public-facing statements and workflows.[80] Our focus group participants confirmed this when they expressed that the UC libraries are past the "MPLP era" and are moving into an iterative or extensible processing era that takes a more rounded view of archival stewardship. However, more research is needed to find ways of balancing efficient processing ethos with emergent anti-oppressive and iterative description practices.

Conclusion: Implications for University of California Libraries

Some elements from the Guidelines have not been universally adopted and put to use systemwide, and our focus groups revealed pain points in many repositories, such as: consistent gathering and use of processing metrics; employing value scores to judiciously apply variable levels of processing; and concentrated appraisal in the acquisition process that takes into account the repository's ability to steward the material. We also found that growing accessioning backlogs have emerged as a particularly challenging issue. UC archivists could re-focus on these areas to create procedures and policies to help them advocate for the larger systemic changes so urgently needed.

Data collection, if deployed as a way to communicate capacity rather than track productivity, can be a powerful tool to increase visibility of archival labor. Our research indicates all UC archivists are engaged on some level with regular tracking of processing metrics, but many struggle with the tools and strategy to do so. Furthermore, basic reporting procedures around holdings and acquisitions are not clear or standardized across the system. With unreliable data, it is challenging to report on unprocessed and born-digital holdings, and accessioning backlogs are particularly vexing as there is typically little physical or intellectual control over these materials. Improved means of reporting and sharing systemwide data would allow archivists and collection managers to plan for growth and manage work more transparently and effectively.

The routine use of value scores is another recommendation from the Guidelines that has not gained traction across the system. Scoring criteria such as user interest, subject relevance, and access restrictions can help archivists and managers prioritize acquisitions and plan for the appropriate level of effort needed to make each collection usable for researchers. Survey results indicate that archival processors are engaging in minimal processing work on a regular basis; however, they are also performing intensive, folder level (traditional) processing about half of the time. Including quantifiable value scores and corresponding levels of effort in a processing plan helps keep archival workers on track and avoid defaulting to intensive

---

80. UCLA Library Special Collections acknowledged "description is a continuous and necessarily iterative endeavor." See: Shira Peltzman and Kelly Besser, "Toward Ethical and Inclusive Descriptive Practices," *Journal of Critical Digital Librarianship* 2, no. 1 (Winter 2022): 11-39, accessed March 2024, https://repository.lsu.edu/jcdl/vol2/iss1/2/

processing efforts. Moreover, this juxtaposition of high collections care and effort, against the reality of extremely low staffing, requires examination.

We found conflicting evidence on the application of appraisal that reveals an opportunity for change and improvement. Survey results show that the value and appropriateness of collections are often taken into consideration during the selection process at most repositories, so we can infer pre-custodial appraisal is happening at the collection level. However, once the decision is made to acquire a collection, interest in appraisal drops, creating space and labor challenges for those responsible for accessioning and processing. This pattern contributes to a sense of invisibility amongst processing staff. Participants noted that the "bring it all in and deal with it later" approach is demoralizing, and places an ongoing burden of appraisal on processing staff. In light of this feedback, an increased focus on selectors and curators collecting responsibly and following the appraisal and value-scoring guidance put forth in the Guidelines would reap many benefits. Adopting these curatorial recommendations at a systemwide level requires genuine commitment from library leadership to address the privileging of acquisition that is ingrained in the culture of UC libraries.

Fortunately, focus group participants recognize a growing awareness at higher leadership levels of the operational importance of appraisal and acquisition strategy. One participant noted, "For ages, we have acquired more than our archivists and catalogers can keep up with. That is a huge problem that is very much acknowledged by our administration now." We found that some repositories are reviewing their collection development policies, in response to backlogs and space constraints, to collect less volume and focus on materials of higher research value. Thus, appraisal is increasingly recognized as an important task, and we would like to see this trend become codified in systemwide institutional practice.

Finally, our research surfaced an issue at UC libraries that has long been discussed informally but has not been directly studied: the problem of accessioning backlogs, or acquisitions awaiting accessioning. While attention has historically focused on processing backlogs across the system, survey results indicate that accessioning backlogs now exist at all ten campuses, with one campus reporting an accessioning backlog of over 500 linear feet. Since accessioning establishes physical, intellectual, and legal control over material, and is where baseline description usually occurs, these backlogs are often doubly hidden: over time, they become unfamiliar to staff, and remain undiscoverable to people who might want to access them. Accessioning backlogs cannot be tracked in collection management systems such as ArchivesSpace, so these queues are not typically reported. Some campuses track accessioning backlogs using spreadsheets and project management tools such as Airtable, but there are no best practices in place yet for these methods. Accessioning backlogs typically include both recently acquired materials as well as old accruals that warrant retrospective accessioning or reappraisal. The very existence of accessioning backlogs is in direct opposition to the Guidelines' recommendation to achieve

collection-level control over all holdings. As a system, we need to acknowledge this problem and support the work of mitigating it.

Our research shows that the Guidelines are likely to have made a significant impact on processing practices and culture at UC archival repositories since 2012. We do not know where we would be today had they never been written, but it is clear that systemwide, the total backlog was significantly reduced, while the amount of archival holdings nearly doubled. We found UC archivists are in line with the spirit (if not the letter) of the top recommendations provided by the Guidelines, but there are systemic issues at play which impact their ability to make material available. We found the primary barriers to improved collection management systemwide include: a reduction in employees responsible for processing; a systemic resource imbalance that privileges acquisition over access; and a capacity gap for deep, collaborative collection management infrastructure planning. In other words, the Guidelines alone have not, and cannot, solve the UC libraries' ongoing backlog problem. Efficient processing is only one part of a complex equation for effective stewardship, regardless of the size of the system, or individual repository.