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Managing Processing Staff: Hiring, Training and Retaining Pam Hackbart-Dean

Chuck Tanner, left fielder and manager in Major League Baseball, noted “There are three secrets to managing. The first secret is have patience. The second is be patient. And the third most important secret is patience.” Effectively managing processing staff in an archives or special collections permits supervisors to marshal the strengths of staff to accomplish processing goals. Successful processing programs facilitate the hiring, development, and retention of top-notch staff. Henry Mintzberg, Cleghorn Professor of Management Studies at McGill University, states simply, “Management is, above all, a practice where art, science, and craft meet.”¹

As with any aspect of any archives program, you must carefully consider a number of issues when you set about to recruit, hire, train, and retain professional, staff, students, and volunteers. Even lone arrangers should strategize when they accept volunteers and interns to work with their collections. It is essential to begin by realistically determining the staffing and resource needs for your particular program.

Skill Sets and Responsibilities

Both the 2004 Archival Census and Education Needs (A*Census) survey and a 2009 Association of Research Libraries (ARL) survey on “Processing Decisions for Manuscripts & Archives” identified specific skill sets essential for those who process archival collections. The majority of those surveyed acknowledged the following competencies as crucial: organizational and analytical skills, strong technical writing,

¹ 21 Top Management Quotes, *Leadership With You website*, accessed July 10, 2012, <http://www.leadership-with-you.com/leadership-quotes.html>.

attention to detail, the ability to work independently and collaboratively, and patience. Other important aptitudes listed were time management, project management, goal-setting, and the capacity to adjust to change and modify priorities in a vibrant archival program.²

In 2004 Michelle Riggs also conducted a survey of those involved in hiring archivists. She found that institutions increasingly require applicants to have skills in organizing, describing, making accessible, and disseminating information. These objectives, in turn, increasingly require knowledge of and experience with Encoded Archival Description (EAD).³

Mark Puente suggests: “Technical skills in multimedia production software, data-literacy competencies, or fluency with metadata schema and standards will remain important in the modern research library workforce.”⁴ Other technical competencies include knowledge of intellectual property rights, database building, and web development.

According to the American Library Association’s *Competencies of Special Collections Professionals*, processing and cataloging staff “provide for the processing and cataloging of materials in all formats that are under their care. Those with direct responsibilities in these areas achieve high-level technical skills and strong working knowledge of standards, practices, and tools. They establish effective working relationships with curators, public services staff, and the library’s main technical services unit to ensure good communication and sound technical services policies for special collections. They advocate for best practices in the organization and description of primary resource materials.”⁵

For professional positions, the 2009 Association of Research Libraries survey respondents identified processing

² Pam Hackbart-Dean and Elizabeth Slomba, *Processing Decisions for Manuscripts & Archives*, SPEC Kit 314 (Washington, DC: Association of Research Libraries, 2009): 105–109.

³ Michelle Riggs, “The Correlation of Archival Education and Job Requirements,” *Journal of Archival Organization* 3 no. 1 (2005), 76.

⁴ Mark A. Puente, “Developing a Vital Research Library Workforce,” *Research Library Issues* 272 (October 2010): 4.

⁵ *Guidelines: Competencies for Special Collection Professionals*, ALA/ACRL, approved 2008., accessed December 17, 2012, <http://www.ala.org/acrl/standards/comp4specollect>.

experience and graduate-level coursework in archival theory as mandatory.⁶ A master's degree (MA or MLS/MLIS) is the basic credential for any type of professional archival work.⁷

Some positions may require additional certification, such as archival certification,⁸ records management certification, Document Imaging Architect certification or completion of the Fundamentals of Enterprise Content Management (ECM) System Architecture certificate program. As Riggs articulates, "Certification has the effect of enforcing a standard of experience and job knowledge on professionals in the field."⁹

A study of the job advertisements on the SAA Online Career Center website, the ALA jobLIST and the *Chronicle of Higher Education* from 2005 to 2012 suggests a clear pattern of required and preferred qualifications for processing archivists.¹⁰ These included the ability to: 1) establish priorities for arranging and describing collections; 2) develop, revise, and maintain written procedures and guidelines for archival processing; 3) develop work plans; 4) edit and oversee revisions of finding aids and catalog records; and 5) report processing statistics. Many times the processing archivist coordinates with other archives staff to determine the order of arrangement, specificity, and appropriate level of description and analysis for each collection. The processing archivist also creates and adjusts processing schedules, priorities, and assignments.

At the same time, a processing archivist must initiate and encourage creativity and experimentation in collaborative projects.¹¹ This archivist may also supervise staff, including other processing archivists, support staff, student assistants, and

⁶ Hackbart-Dean and Slomba, 105–109.

⁷ Victoria Irons Walch et al. "A*CENSUS (Archival Census and Education Needs Survey in the United States)," *American Archivist* 69, no. 2 (Fall/Winter 2006): 348.

⁸ The Academy of Certified Archivists (ACA), an independent, nonprofit certifying organization of professional archivists, offers a certification exam that covers both the skills and the knowledge of archival principles and theory required for a practicing archivist.

⁹ Riggs, 64.

¹⁰ This survey conducted by author for this article. The Archives and Archivists listserv and archival regional websites and listservs were also consulted.

¹¹ Puente, 4.

volunteers, as well as participate in hiring and training staff. Finally, processing archivists should monitor work progress and review and edit finding aids, guides, or catalog records. Whatever the type of archives or size of staff, duties may be shared by all of those involved, from professionals to volunteers.

In times of diminished budgets, it is challenging to justify allocations for extra staff. Before adding archives personnel or filling a vacant position, determine whether the position requires a professional or a paraprofessional. It is important to match the skill-set required with the needs of the program.

Recruiting and Hiring Professionals

Recruitment is essential to developing a strong archival program. Indeed, according to Ben Primer, “Hiring, retaining, and developing staff is the most important thing any administrator does.”¹² Staffing involves a number of steps: preparing a position description, advertising the position, screening the applicants, and making the final selection. When writing a position description, keep in mind the mission of the archives. Clearly state the duties and responsibilities of the position, as well as educational and other requirements. List the required skills and experience in concrete, quantifiable terms; this will help to eliminate unqualified candidates. Avoid jargon because it can be misleading, confusing, and even boring. Describe the department and explain where the position fits within the department or program hierarchy, including the administrative structure.¹³

Job announcements are traditionally posted both within and outside the institution through online or print advertisements and at job fairs. Appropriate outlets for print and online ads include *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, the Society of American Archivists' Online Career Center, and various listservs, such as the Archives & Archivists List. Some institutions send a representative or team of archivists to graduate archival programs or career fairs to recruit in person for specific positions or projects.

¹² Ben Primer, “Resources for Archives: Developing Collections, Constituents, Colleagues and Capital,” *Journal of Archival Organization* 7 (2009): 60.

¹³ David A. Baldwin, *Supervision of Student Employees in Academic Libraries* (Englewood, CO: Libraries Unlimited, 1991): 48.

Another idea is to hire a recruitment firm to identify the names of top archivists for you to consider. Networking with trusted professional colleagues can also be an effective means of identifying potential qualified candidates. Both approaches take more time, but ultimately may provide candidates who are truly interested in the position and have the required skills and qualifications. If possible, form a search committee. A search committee is a group of individuals selected to assist the responsible administrator in recruiting and screening candidates for a posted position. Think carefully about the membership composition of your committee, keeping in mind that a large committee might impact how quickly the search process may be completed. Choose committee members who have valued knowledge about the position to be filled. Including women, minorities, and individuals with disabilities in search committees will add a valuable dimension to committee discussions. If the duties of the position cross disciplines, specialties, or administrative units, consider representation on the committee from beyond your unit.¹⁴ You may also choose to invite students or volunteers to serve as committee members.

While initial screening is often done by human resources using the required qualifications, the search committee should also screen applicants against a checklist of important qualities or qualifications, experience, and education culled from the job description. This initial review can remove the unqualified applicants from consideration and provide a common tool for the committee to rank qualified candidates for further consideration.

The committee should also prepare a list of screening questions, and as Michael Kurtz reminds us, “All applicants should be asked the same questions.”¹⁵ Ideally, the questions will assess the candidates’ different areas of qualification, such as technical skills, experience, and communication skills. Open-ended questions allow a candidate to address a particular scenario, such as solving a complex problem or improving a work process. Avoid

¹⁴ “Getting the Most from Search Committees,” University of Minnesota, 2009, accessed December 17, 2012,

http://policy.umn.edu/Policies/hr/Hiring/RECRUITFACPA_APPD.html.

¹⁵ Michael J. Kurtz, *Managing Archival and Manuscript Repositories* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2004): 124.

questions with obvious preferred answers, such as asking a candidate for a public service position if he or she enjoys working with people.

Example of a candidate checklist

Name of Candidate: _____

Education/training: _____

Work-related experience: _____

Specific training: _____

Communication skills: _____

Overall assessment: _____

Another interview technique is to bring in items from various collections and ask questions regarding the materials from the reference, processing, and preservation perspectives. Have the candidate prepare a catalog entry based on an analysis of the materials. This allows the candidate to demonstrate his or her level of knowledge and experience. An interview might also include a seminar or formal presentation by the candidate with sufficient time for comments, questions, and discussion. This provides the hiring institution another way to assess their candidate's communication skills.

Finally, carefully review all references provided by the candidates. Once these steps have been completed, choose the candidate who best meets the selection criteria established in the job advertisement.

Recruiting and Hiring Paraprofessionals

A paraprofessional is defined as "a member of the library support staff, usually someone who holds at least the baccalaureate degree, trained to understand specific procedures and apply them according to pre-established rules under normal circumstances without exercising professional judgment. Library paraprofessionals are usually assigned high-level technical support

duties.”¹⁶ Paraprofessionals occupy a distinct position between archivists, who come to an institution with solid training in working in an archival setting, and students, interns, and volunteers, who have varied levels of experience and are usually short-term help. Recruiting long-term, dedicated support staff benefits any institution and provides stability and experience to the program.

When recruiting paraprofessionals, clearly identify expectations of what they will do and learn. This will vary widely depending on their level of interest and prior experience, the local situation (for instance, union representation or civil service classification), the overall size of your program, and desired ratio of professional to non-professional staff.

A review of online archival job ads¹⁷ yields the following skills sought for paraprofessional positions: attention to detail, ability to work independently with a high degree of accuracy, the temperament to work well with others, and a demonstrated interest in archives work. Creativity, adaptability, and cooperation are vital traits in the face of ever-changing technology. Susanne Nevin puts it simply: “The basic rule is to hire the person who will best fit into a library’s particular setting.”¹⁸ Allow time for background checks, both financial and criminal, before hiring anyone (professional or paraprofessional) to work in the archives.

New hires should receive a basic orientation to the department and introduction or review of procedures in processing a collection. Begin with a checklist of steps for processing a collection, then instruct paraprofessionals in the “how” (mechanics) and the “why” (theory) of archival processing. Train those new to archives and processing in the skills these positions require, and advise them that they must stay current with processing and technology training. It is the supervisor’s

¹⁶ Joan M. Reitz, *Online Dictionary for Library and Information Science* (Santa Barbara, CA: Libraries Unlimited, 2004), accessed December 17, 2012, http://lu.com/odlis/odlis_p.cfm#paraprofessional.

¹⁷ This informal survey conducted by the author for this article. The Library Job Postings on the Internet website, the Archives and Archivists Listserv, archival regional websites and listservs were consulted.

¹⁸ Susanne Nevin, “Recruiting and Training Paraprofessional Catalogers,” *College and Undergraduate Libraries* 4, no. 2 (1997): 68.

responsibility to provide access to the tools and resources their staff require to stay up to date on archival theory and practice.

Recruiting and Hiring Students, Interns, and Volunteers

Students, interns, and volunteers can provide much needed assistance to the everyday work of an archives. They also bring life to any archives. But what do we need from this group? Aptitude required may range from the physical—the ability to lift heavy boxes or climb ladders and a willingness to work with dusty materials—to the analytical—a familiarity with online library catalogs and software programs, attention to detail and accuracy, and reliability. Basic tasks often include photocopying, data entry, assisting with reference requests, stack maintenance, and simple errands. Other routine responsibilities may include rehousing collections, creating lists for finding aids, sorting materials within collections, updating databases, summarizing the content of collections, processing collections, and assisting with the creation of exhibits or other outreach activities.

Any repository employing students, interns, and volunteers should have clear policies that establish the types of work these groups may or may not perform, as well as expectations from the archives and the employees. These positions require careful thought in preparing job descriptions and assigning tasks. Once suitable projects have been identified, William Maher recommends that the position description “should identify the basic tasks, the knowledge, skills and abilities needed for the job, and the supervisory relationships.”¹⁹ This makes the supervisor’s job much easier, because clear expectations can eliminate unnecessary misunderstandings.

At the outset of an interview with a student, intern, or volunteer, be clear about expectations and be realistic about the job itself. Describe the typical processing goals that inform the expectations that archives have for staff, and explain the process by which the supervising archivist prioritizes, assigns, and assesses work. With interns, it is crucial to specify project details in a job description that is approved between the intern, field supervisor,

¹⁹ William J. Maher, *The Management of College and University Archives* (Lanham, MD: Society of American Archivists and Scarecrow Press, 1992): 255.

and faculty member. This ensures that the interns' work experience and previous coursework will fulfill their course requirements.²⁰

Jeff Slagell and Jeanne Langendorfer, who both supervise student assistants, recommend creating a training checklist. This checklist documents the student/intern/volunteer's responsibilities and understanding of departmental policies and provides a "means to update and test their knowledge and skills ... Training is a constant process as work changes; student workers need regular reminders and testing to insure that their information and skills are satisfactory since they work relatively few hours per week."²¹

The Special Collections Technical Services Department at the Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, developed a teaching and training program for its graduate student processors. The processing supervisor holds weekly meetings with the graduate student processors and full-time processing staff to review "the basic principles of philosophies that guide decisions and to create a processing ethos from which decisions are made."²² A proactive method for training multiple students at the same time, it provides an opportunity to discuss other processing issues, such as balancing treatment to level of processing, descriptive practices, reference use of collections, digital-born collections, and other types of materials. According to Jackie Dean, "We need to talk about what we have done and why we did it in order to make smart decisions for the next collection."²³

Ultimately, flexibility and communication are vital when working with students, interns, and volunteers. They need to know what they are doing and why they are doing it, and they should have the opportunity to offer feedback in the process.

²⁰ Jeannette A. Bastian and Donna Webber, *Archival Internships: A Guide for Faculty, Supervisors and Students* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2008): 74.

²¹ Jeff Slagell and Jeanne M. Langendorfer, "Don't Tread on Me: The Art of Supervising Student Assistants," *Serials Librarian* 44, no. 3 (2003): 282.

²² Jackie Dean, "Training Graduate Students in the Art and Science of 'Responsible' Processing," *Journal for the Society of North Carolina Archivists* 6, no. 2 (Winter 2009): 36.

²³ *Ibid.*, 43.

Students

Many university and college special collections employ undergraduate or graduate students as processing or reference assistants. However, academia has not cornered the market on students. All types of repositories have student workers, including corporate archives, religious archives, government archives, and historical societies. As Alice Schreyer notes, “These programs play an important recruitment role in attracting graduate students to the library and archives profession, and the processing experience helps all students become more critically aware and productive researchers.”²⁴

When you employ students, they can also serve as recruiters for the archives. When openings arise, ask the brightest performers to refer individuals they know who might make good additions to the staff. Potential student recruits can be found by building relationships with campus departments, such as history, English, computer science, or journalism. Additional recruitment tools include online job postings and job fairs. When recruiting students, be sure to emphasize that working for an archives teaches basic skills, including problem-solving, analytical thinking, and synthesis.²⁵ These skills will assist them in obtaining future employment and educational opportunities. Once a student is hired, make an effort to match his or her interest and knowledge to the appropriate processing project.

Interns

Educational archival programs encourage internships. Jeannette Bastian and Donna Webber describe an intern as “one who works in a temporary position with an emphasis on education rather than merely employment.”²⁶ Usually these are college or university students. Remember, interns come to learn about archives and the archives profession. They also earn credit for their program, so use them on projects that will accomplish both by

²⁴ Alice Schreyer, “University of Chicago Explores Library-Faculty Partnerships in Uncovering Hidden Collections,” *ARL: A Bimonthly Report* 251 (April 2007): 6.

²⁵ Bastian and Webber, 19.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 2.

providing hands-on processing experience and establishing educational goals.²⁷

The supervisor, faculty advisor, and intern should agree at the outset on a series of achievable goals that will produce tangible results. As a manager, be sure to allow time for direct supervision, and foster open communication about the process and progress of assigned projects. Have the intern keep a blog or journal and write an entry at least once a week about accomplishments, interesting findings, and feelings about the work. This will help illuminate the intern's progress as well as perspective on the experience. The intern can also share the blog/journal with his or her classroom instructor.²⁸

Volunteers

Many archives depend on volunteers such as retirees to supplement and support their activities. Many communities keep lists of folks who would like to volunteer. Consider contacting local retirement communities to publicize volunteer opportunities. Retirees are active people who have a good work ethic and lots of time on their hands. Other potential recruits include library school students, local historians, individuals with subject interests, friends of the library, and underemployed archivists seeking volunteer opportunities. Most will not have any archival experience, so focus questions on their work background and current interests.²⁹

Retention

Recruitment and retention are closely linked. Lost training, lost knowledge, and candidate searches for key processing staff are all costly. In 2003, Jen Stevens and Rosemary Streatfield conducted a survey on recruitment and retention. They found that retaining professional staff depended on such positive factors as support for professional development, salary and benefits, work environment, relationships with colleagues, reputation of the

²⁷ Ibid, 18.

²⁸ Karen Spilman, "Breaking Down the Barrier: Working with Interns," paper presented at the Society of Southwest Archivists Annual meeting, May 19, 2011.

²⁹ Other suggestions include volunteermatch.org, retirement community newsletters or even community newsletters.

archives/library, and mentoring support within their institution.³⁰ Other factors included the potential for promotion, the reputation of the entire institution, geographical location, and relationships with supervisors.

Salary increases are always helpful for keeping the best staff. Support for professional development or continuing education is also essential. All staff must be able to learn and grow in their positions, knowledge, and skills. Ask staff what skills they hope to develop and support them in their endeavor. Change in position assignments can also encourage growth and stave off stagnation.³¹

Finally, it is important to celebrate work well done and goals achieved for all employees, whether by individuals or as a group. Appreciation and recognition goes a long way. A thank-you is a powerful tool. Ways to motivate can include appreciation parties, textbook scholarships (a fund to purchase books for school), food, random rewards of food or gift cards, seminars geared specifically for student workers (on such topics as time management for students, life after graduation, etc.), field trips, and verbal praise.³²

Staff Development

Establish procedures to orient those new to the institution and to update the knowledge and skills of your experienced processing staff. An organized and ongoing effort to educate archivists, staff, student assistants, and others who process archival and manuscript collections benefits all members of the processing staff – even a staff of one.

All training should align with the department's and the institution's strategic plan, so that each staff member understands how his or her training and development supports the overall mission of the department and institution. Accomplish this goal using explicit written objectives, supporting literature, and real-life examples from the collections. Be clear about what resources are available for staff to attend necessary training sessions.

³⁰ Jen Stevens and Rosemary Streatfield, *Recruitment and Retention*, SPEC Kit 276 (Washington, DC: Association of Research Libraries, 2003): 12.

³¹ *Ibid*, 13.

³² "Student Staff Training," Consortium of Academic Research Libraries in Illinois (CARLI) webinar, April 6, 2011.

Training for New Staff Members

The first goal of training is to expose new staff to the fundamental principles of archival theory and practice.³³ Start by reviewing the following topics in current archival practices and theory:

- Fundamentals of arrangement
- Descriptive practices (from creating to encoding a descriptive finding aid)
- Basic holdings maintenance procedures
- Care and handling of books and manuscripts
- Preservation photocopying and/or scanning rare or unique materials
- Identifying materials for outreach programming
- Archives and the law (closed records, copyright)
- Assisting reference staff
- Security

Orientation for those new to processing, especially for paraprofessionals or students, may include specified readings, such as Kathleen Roe's *Arranging and Describing Archives and Manuscripts* and Syracuse University's workshop on "The Care and Handling of Books and Manuscripts."³⁴ Processing manuals can be used as part of the basic training to guide novices through the steps of processing. If the institution does not have such a manual, consult other institutions, many of whom have placed their manuals online. Use them as guides only, as copyright may be in play. Examples include the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library's *Archival Processing Manual* (2001); Moravian College and Moravian Theological Seminary Archives *Processing Manual for Archival and Special Collections* (2005); Duke University's *Archival Processing Manual for Student Assistants and Interns*

³³Barbara L. Floyd and Richard W. Oram, "Learning by Doing: Undergraduates as Employees in Archives," *American Archivist* 55 (Summer 1992): 445.

³⁴Donia Conn, "The Care and Handling of Books and Manuscripts: a Workshop for SUL Staff and Students," (Syracuse, NY: Special Collections Research Center Syracuse University Library, 2004), accessed July 16, 2012, <http://library.syr.edu/about/departments/preservation/PDF/CareAndHandling.pdf>.

(2004); and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill's wiki, *How to Proceed: A Procedures Manual for the Southern Historical Collection and General Manuscripts* (2010).

Another strategy is to create training exercises. Help new processing staff understand the basics of arrangement and description and the various tasks associated with processing. Explain the principles of provenance and original order as well as the practice of arranging and describing records at varying levels to give them the "big picture" of collection organization. Encourage students or staff to meet to discuss case studies from the literature. Use exercises from David Carmichael's book, *Organizing Archival Records: A Practical Method of Arrangement and Description for Small Archives*. Have the group review a previously unprocessed collection, including the donor files, and recommend arrangement, preservation, and description options. Discuss how the collection is organized and what it actually contains. Finally, draft a work plan for the collection.

New staff should understand the types of materials with which they will be working. Always demonstrate proper handling techniques. Never forget to stress that the collection is irreplaceable and unique, so that all understand the need to handle the materials carefully and securely.³⁵

Continuing Education

Current staff members often need training for specific purposes, such as learning new software or new processing skills, thus addressing a timely need. However, the most important aspect of continuing education for processing archivists is reviewing procedures on a regular basis, at least once a year. These sessions should cover all of the topics presented to new employees (see above), but be geared toward those employees who are actually processing archival materials. Take care to acknowledge the pace and stress of these archivists' work, along with impediments they face.

Those who lead successful staff trainings take into account the differing career levels of all processing staff. Successful

³⁵ *Student Assistants in Archival Repositories* by the College and University Archives Section of the Society of American Archivists. (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1992): 19.

trainers use a mix of approaches: informal mentoring; written documentation, such as a processing manual or procedures manual; on-the-job training; wikis; conferences; workshops sponsored by professional associations; online or in-house training; and specified readings (such as chapters from the Society of American Archivists Fundamentals Series).

While it is important to offer experienced processing staff the in-house opportunities to learn new skills and review current processing practices, meeting with peers in the profession, attending conferences and continuing education workshops, and pursuing additional course work are invaluable for developing new skills. For those with graduate degrees or no training at all, continuing education keeps all staff current about trends in processing.

The Society of American Archivists offers workshops at its annual meeting and at other sites around the country throughout the year. Most of these workshops are designed for people with archival experience. For a general introduction to archival theory and practice, those new to the profession and those who have limited training should be encouraged to attend the Modern Archives Institute (offered by the National Archives and Records Administration), the Georgia Archives Institute, or the Western Archives Institute. The Northeast Document Conservation Center (NEDCC), Conservation Center for Art and Historic Artifacts (CCAHA), and *Lyrasis* all offer workshops on preservation. Regional or state archival associations may also offer workshops in areas of local interest.

Online education is on the rise and offers new options for staff development. Staff members can attend group viewings of web seminars or downloaded sessions from recent professional meetings. Other opportunities include online course options, certificate programs, and online professional development institutes.

Grant Project Staff

For any grant project to succeed, those involved must have input into the overall plan in order to meet or exceed the goals. Be realistic in assessing what can be accomplished. Susan Hamburger suggests the following for staffing grant projects: hire an archivist

with expertise in the subject matter of the collections, ensure that the archivists and project staff maintain processing skills through regular practice, use student assistants who lack processing experience to instead create work forms, and finally, assign student assistants tasks that match their abilities.³⁶

Meet on a regular basis with project staff to verify that goals are being met and identify any problems. If the project is a collaborative and multi-organizational effort, hold frequent meetings for all involved and keep weekly blogs on progress and questions that arise. As the project advances, refine project goals and processing procedures. Maintain communication throughout the entire process.

Project Assignments

When assigning any project, first review the processing priorities of the archives. Select a collection and assign it to a processor. Try to match the scope and nature of the project to a staff member who has the skills and knowledge to best approach the collection. Some processors may be strong in certain subject areas or have particular skills in technology, formats, or foreign language. Others may have more experience in processing different types of collections, such as literary papers or organizational records. Consider the size of the collection, the complexity of the collection, and the timeframe for completing the project. Bear in mind that processing projects may compete with the other responsibilities of staff and that new staff may work more slowly than experienced staff.

At the University of Connecticut's Dodd Center, a student assistant's primary responsibility is paging, which includes retrieving requested materials, reshelving collections, and handling on-demand photocopying. Once this work is completed, a student's secondary tasks can include working on book processing, inventorying new collections, or processing existing collections. A specific regular task is accessioning, which can include creating box-level inventories for new collections or additions to collections. This collection appraisal also provides information on the current arrangement scheme and physical condition. The

³⁶ Susan Hamburger, "Life with Grant: Administering Manuscripts Cataloging Grant Projects," *American Archivist* 62 no. 2, (Spring 1999): 147.

students use a template for gathering this information. Students may also rebox materials in appropriate housing, if deemed necessary. The completed box inventory forms are submitted to the processing archivist, who uses the information to better plan and prioritize for later phases of work on each collection, such as reboxing into archival boxes, developing a folder inventory (if appropriate), and arranging series and folders.³⁷

Once projects are assigned, maintain continual communication to monitor the pace and direction of the work. Create adequate documentation for each processed collection, such as a processing plan and checklist. Assigning projects is a balance of workload, expertise, and resources.

Organization and Performance Evaluation

Michael Kurtz writes that “it is vitally important to have a management performance measurement system in place to monitor organizational performance as the work year moves forward.”³⁸ To accomplish this, set goals for all projects and staff and then, at set points during the year, evaluate processing priorities, plans, and personnel to ascertain whether goals and objectives are being met and address any problems that have arisen.

Tools to monitor and evaluate processing activities include spreadsheets (such as Excel or Access) and annual reports. Review finding aids once processing staff complete them and provide feedback for improvement and quality control. Examine the number and the physical size of the collections accessioned, the number and physical size of collections processed, the number of finding aids encoded or digitized, and the number of catalog records created or updated. Gather statistics monthly or yearly and include them in an annual evaluation of each staff member.

Evaluate the quality of the collections by reviewing researcher statistics. Which collections are being used? Are researchers able to locate the necessary information? One way to acquire this information is to conduct a user-based evaluation of reference services using the Archival Metrics Researcher

³⁷ University Archivist Betsy Pittman, University of Connecticut. Discussion with author, April 18, 2011.

³⁸ Kurtz, *Managing Archival and Manuscript Repositories*, 80.

Questionnaire.³⁹ This standardized questionnaire is an effective tool for assessing catalog records, finding aids, and basic reference service.

Example of report

Collection number: _____
Creator: _____
Collection title: _____
Linear feet: _____
EAD finding aid: _____
Catalog record: _____
Addition or reprocessed: _____

In addition to reviewing the collections, immediate supervisors should evaluate archives staff (including professional, paraprofessional, students, interns, and even volunteers) on a regular basis—at least once per year. “Organizational, team, and individual performances can be measured objectively only through the use of a reliable performance measurement system,” writes Michael Kurtz.⁴⁰ Conventionally, the procedure consists of two components. The supervisor generates a written evaluation using an established format, and the supervisor and the individual then discuss the written evaluation and establish steps to adjust performance and plan goals for the upcoming year. This process also provides an opportunity to review and revise job descriptions as needed.

Setting specific goals for the forthcoming year is an excellent way to establish expectations for the position, specify the work and projects to be completed, and explain how performance is measured. Tie these goals to the overall processing priorities and the repository’s overall goals. Incorporate additional training as a goal or change goals or tasks as necessary to fit with the repository’s current mission and budget. Connecting goals to

³⁹ University of Michigan. “Archival Metrics: Promoting a Culture of Assessment in Archives and Special Collections,” accessed July 16, 2012, <http://archivalmetrics.cms.si.umich.edu/>.

⁴⁰ Kurtz, 86.

evaluations clarifies expectations for staff and identifies any gaps in training as well as resources needed for the coming year.

Final Thoughts

A successful archives program hinges on training and managing a skilled archives staff. The managing archivist determines the skill sets and job responsibilities required, encourages staff development and retention, and mentors all those involved in processing. Managing archivists must be accountable for staff and their accomplishments, using available tools for planning and documenting their performance. Hire good staff, encourage them to develop their knowledge and skills, and most importantly, acknowledge a job well done, and you will have a strong and vibrant processing program.

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