

Adapting Processing in a Hybrid Work Situation

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Hello, everyone! My name is Marcella Huggard, and I'm the manuscripts processing coordinator at the Kenneth Spencer Research Library, which is part of the University of Kansas Libraries. The manuscripts processing team is housed at the Spencer Research Library, but we are part of the Cataloging and Archival Processing Department. Today I'm going to talk about how our processing priorities have shifted due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Before COVID processing prioritization

- Significance of collection and researcher demand
- Availability of staff, students, and physical resources (including staff and student knowledge and skills)
- Level of processing requested
- Additions to existing collections
- Accessioned with enough information to begin processing
- Backlog and reprocessing needs

Our processing prioritization was very flexible before the pandemic and dependent on the typical factors: who did I have available to work on what? Did our student assistants have a particular skill, talent, or background that would allow them to work on particular projects? Was there a pressing researcher need for a particular collection? Did we even know about the collection? (We have several collections that are...in a curious state of limbo.) I would typically mix in backlog collections and collections needing reprocessing as time and resources permitted.

Work-from-home projects during stay-at-home order

All legacy description projects, all the time!

- ❖ PDF inventories conversion
- ❖ Legacy online finding aid creation
- ❖ Consolidation of online finding aids that had been separated erroneously
- ❖ Continued finding aid cleanup projects from before the pandemic

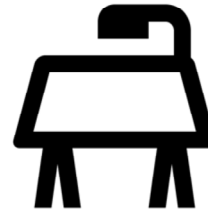
From mid-March through the end of our fiscal year (June 30) last year in 2020, all staff at the Spencer Research Library were working pretty much from home full-time. We had very limited and occasional building access, so my team and a few others in the Cataloging and Archival Processing Department were working solely on legacy descriptive projects. (I did go in a couple times to help a grad student intern complete her processing project assignment and to check on various things for some of these legacy projects.) I only had to come up with projects for full-time staff; the entire department made the decision not to have students work remotely during the latter part of the spring semester because KU was paying them their average weekly hours, whether or not they worked.

Hybrid work situation, July 2020-present

- Manuscripts processing staff working 20 hours from home, 20 hours on-site
- Student employees sometimes working unsupervised



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Starting July 1 of last year, KU was no longer going to pay staff full-time hours if they were not working full-time, so we began going into the office on a hybrid situation. My unit was basically working 20 hours on-site, 20 hours at home in order to help reduce building occupancy and increase social distancing. Starting in September, we began bringing some students back—the department (and I think Spencer overall) decided only to bring back students who had worked for us previously, in order to avoid having to do extensive training, and we brought back a limited number of students in order to keep building occupancy low. Because of split shift scheduling, students since last fall have occasionally been working without their direct supervisor present—on rare occasions, because my colleagues and I really try to avoid it, a student has been the only person in the processing area at Spencer for brief periods of time.

Processing prioritization revised!

- Continued focus on legacy collections
 - Physically processed but no online descriptive access
 - Need physical and descriptive work, but in such a state students can take the work on fairly independently
- Staff working with smaller collections
- I'm working with more collections due to lack of staffing

Even in the office, I'm having staff and students work on legacy and other collections that might not have been a priority if we were operating under normal circumstances. On the one hand, I'm having staff work on smaller collections when I would typically ask them to tackle the big, 25 linear foot plus collections. Two of our staff were working on such collections last spring when we shut down, and coming back to those collections in the summer when we got back into the office was honestly difficult, especially since we were still only working part-time. Staff have expressed frustration about their apparent lack of progress on these big projects, so until we are in the office more full-time I'll continue having them work on 20 linear feet or less collections.

Students, on the other hand, I'm giving bigger but simple projects that, once they know what they're doing, they can handle pretty independently. This is both physical and descriptive projects—we had a large photo collection that was physically processed with a paper inventory that I had a student input into a spreadsheet; we had a different large photo collection that was barely even processed sitting in the stacks for decades that I had a student physically rehouse; we have another large unprocessed accession from a photography studio of their work that I'm having a student rehouse in sections because there's three distinct series of wedding shoots, portraits, and photos from the local high school. If she gets interrupted in that project, or if she leaves before the project is done (she is a student, after all!), somebody else can take it over with relative ease.

I've also been processing a lot more than I do under normal circumstances. At the start of the pandemic, I had three full-time staff and five student assistants. I lost two full-time staff, was able to rehire one, and brought back two students in the fall semester when we brought students back to work. So while we have fewer staff, that also means I have less administrative overhead.

Post-COVID



- Legacy collections continuing to be something of a priority?
- Staff continuing to work from home a handful of hours a week or not?
- Staffing levels and types of projects?
- Time to revisit existing workflows and procedures!

- Accessibility concerns, priority for KU overall
- Legacy collections we've had for decades with little to no online presence—shouldn't these continue to be a priority?
- Will I be able to rehire my third full-time staff person? (budget cuts)
- Will I hire as many students? Will I change how I train students and what kinds of projects they work on?

WHO KNOWS?

This is a time to revisit existing workflows and procedures and determine if we should, in fact, keep doing things the way we've always done them.

Thank you!

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