Wait, We Have HOW MANY Computer Disks?!

Three years ago I was hired as an archivist at the Wittliff Collections–a literary and manuscript archives­–partially for my knowledge of digitization and digital preservation. I was working on my DAS certificate, which I have since earned. In addition to processing collections, I have been tasked with developing a digital preservation program. Beginning in 2012, as part of the original Jump In! cohort, I had a student survey the collection for "fragile materials." I included audiovisual materials as well as computer media because our collections contain a large amount of a/v materials, and we have a student-run Migration Station for transferring mostly analog audio to digital formats.

Since then, in attempts to capture information about fragile media as it is accessioned, and basically keep that survey up-to-date, I have worked with the accessioning archivist to create a "Fragile Materials Accessioned" inventory. Each month, the accessioning archivist sends me a printout of current accessions, which we do at the folder level, and highlights "fragile materials." I enter these into the inventory. In this way I've been able to maintain the inventory, without taking away time from my other tasks.

This inventory is a bit easier to handle than the student-created inventory of our collections. For one thing, I did it myself, so I was able to make small tweaks and adjustments as I went. For example, if an accession had VHS and floppy disks, I created a new record for each different format type. It is also a smaller document, and the student was working from finding aids, rather than the accessioning archivist, who actually put her hands on the materials.

Looking over the "Fragile Materials Accessioned" inventory, I had quite a shock. In the last 2.5 years, we have taken in more computer media than analog a/v items. I had not anticipated that. We accessioned 197 optical disks (DVD and CD), 285 floppy disks, 72 minidiscs, and 1 UB (555 items); as opposed to just 397 analog a/v items, a difference of 158 items. I was also surprised at the number of floppy disks–285! I knew these materials were on the horizon; I just thought the horizon was a bit further away.

But this gives me good information. I am currently making a case for purchasing hardware and requesting programming assistance for a Digital Forensics Station. I will need to have the curator prioritize the computer media in the same way he does with analog a/v to be digitized. I will also need to develop procedures for migrating and reformatting computer media.

Our migration station is growing, as are our collections. This is an exciting time and I'm thrilled to have the support of the SAA Manuscripts Repository Section as we all move forward together.