<u>**Processing University of California, Irvine's historical photographs**</u>

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Introduction

I am currently working on a photograph collection from UCI's Communications Office. The photographs document the entire history of the University and are in constant use. The collection includes 92 linear feet of slides, negatives, prints, and contact sheets. Over the years several archivists, and students worked piecemeal on the collection, and a recent accession doubled its size. Various finding aids, inventories, charts, training manuals, and databases were created to help reference staff locate materials, but access remained confusing and limited at best. My job is to cohesively process the whole collection and build an easy to use comprehensive access system to gain intellectual and physical control over the materials.

Reprocessing the Collection

Throughout the years, processing had started and stopped several times, making each increment look like a different collection. However, there was some order that reflected how the collection was created and used. This original order provides valuable contextual information and also allowed for more minimal, efficient processing, because there was little if any physical arrangement to be done. For the most part, the photographs were in chronological order. However, chronological order didn't support the kind of detailed access we needed to identify people, topics, events, and places. So I have focused on describing the collection intellectually to elucidate its content.
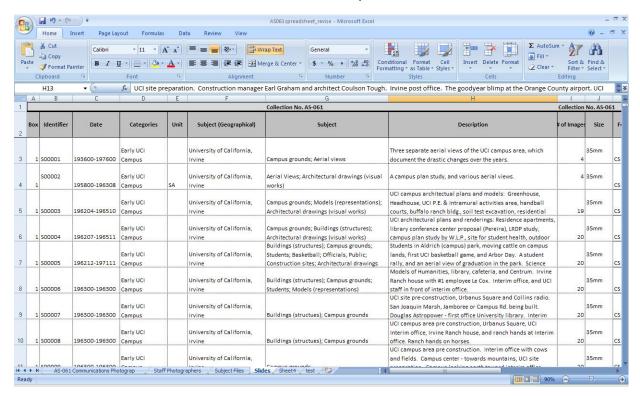

Metadata Creation

I devised a metadata structure that will support near item-level retrieval more accurately than any physical arrangement of the materials could. For example, I utilized a controlled vocabulary of subject terms, date ranges, and broader categories that work almost like subseries to group similar images intellectually. A natural language description field was added to capture nuance and unique keyword terms. I described small clusters of related images rather than individual items, e.g. a sleeve holding related slides or all the negatives from a single photo shoot. Currently, I am using Excel to capture and manipulate this data. A researcher can browse or sort through categories and, dates, or search for key

terms, making retrieval more efficient. I also plan to create an EAD-encoded finding aid for the Online Archive of California to provide an overview of the collection; this will include a link to the Excel file so researchers can interact with the data in more flexible ways.

Looking to the Future

I created this metadata structure knowing that it will soon be imported into Canto Cumulus, a digital image management system with a web publishing capability. The main categories and date ranges will be essential for staff and researchers wishing to browse the description. The structure can also be applied to future accessions of born-digital photographs as well as other photograph collections in Special Collections and Archives.

On another note, all of the processing notes and description standards are well documented. I want to make sure that any other archivist that succeeds me will be able to pick up where I left off. With budget restraints and temporary positions being the norm right now, we should make a real effort to make transitions much easier by leaving good processing notes and documenting description decisions.

Conclusion

When processing collections that many staff has worked on over the years, it is good to use what you can to minimize time spent reprocessing.   Documenting decisions and actions will be helpful for the next person, especially if it is a collection that receives accruals over the years. Creating a really solid metadata structure is essential for intellectual control, and supporting more efficient retrieval, particularly when researchers most often need item-level access to the materials, and the collection isn't arranged in ways that directly support intellectual control.