

**Society of American Archivists
Council Meeting
May 20-22, 2019
Chicago, Illinois**

**Recommendation to Approve Revisions to
Describing Archives: A Content Standard
Preface and Statement of Principles
(Prepared by John Bence and Rebecca Wiederhold)**

BACKGROUND

The Technical Subcommittee on *Describing Archives: A Content Standard* (TS-DACS) began re-evaluating *Describing Archives: A Content Standard* (DACS) for alignment with current archival theory and practice in 2016. Following an initial review over the summer of that year, TS-DACS organized an in-person meeting that took place concurrently with the SAA Annual Meeting in Atlanta to begin revising the principles. Later in 2016, TS-DACS requested funds from SAA to facilitate another meeting of TS-DACS members and other invited experts to take place outside of the Annual Meeting. This request was granted, and the second principles revision meeting took place in March 2017. TS-DACS put out a call for comment on the revised principles in June 2017. Feedback from this open comment period was analyzed and incorporated throughout 2018. In August 2018, a final call for comment was published and since then TS-DACS has been working to finalize the revisions based on that feedback. TS-DACS submitted their final packet to the Standards Committee in March 2019. The Standards Committee has approved the changes and now submits a recommendation to the SAA Council for final approval.

DISCUSSION

The revisions represent a major overhaul of the Preface and Statement of Principles of DACS. Following a deliberate process of reviewing each principle, TS-DACS and experts identified current theories and practices that were absent from the document, including:

- Providing maximum access to records;
- Prioritizing users and use of records over preservation;
- Building relationships with creators;
- Using accessible language to document traditionally underrepresented communities; and

- Documenting archival interventions and the role of archivists in shaping the historical record.

DACS is one of the primary instruments for the archives profession to put its shared principles and ethics into practice. Thus DACS it too important a tool to have such key aspects of archival theory and practice not represented within it.

Also in 2016, ICA released *Records in Context (RiC)*, a draft data model for archival description. This development only added reasons to revisit the DACS principles. TS-DACS states that, "The thinking underlying *RiC* expands understandings of the core archival concept of provenance and empowers archivists to document the complexity of record creation over time." The inclusion of updated theories and practices in the revised principles brings DACS more in line with *RiC*. TS-DACS notes that *RiC* has not been adopted yet by ICA, but emphasizes that it was created with current archival trends in mind and, thus, is worth using as a benchmark.

TS-DACS anticipates a few impacts from the changes to the principles. One likely impact will be changes to preexisting DACS rules to bring them in line with the revised principles. This may look like optional elements becoming required, for example. New rules may also be created in the future in order to implement concepts in the principles. These changes may result in increased noncompliance with the most recent version of the standard initially, but the revised principles are intended to provide archivists with a more powerful tool to conceive of a local implementation strategy that meets the needs of archivists, users, resource allocators, and managers. TS-DACS states, "The principles and DACS as a whole give structure for meeting attainable baseline requirements for descriptive records and then encouraging archivists to best decide how to spend their own time." Currently TS-DACS is working on retroactively versioning their previous work since adopting ongoing review procedures in 2014, and the technical subcommittee plans to release clearly demarcated versions going forward.

In their August 2018 call for comments, TS-DACS summarized the revised principles this way:

Overall, this shift away from the current principles as methodology to the revised principles as advocacy was understood [by commenters] as a positive one. Because they are value-driven, the revised principles represent where the community of archivists using DACS currently are and, more importantly, where they want to be.

RECOMMENDATION

THAT the SAA Council approve the proposed revisions to the *Describing Archives: A Content Standard* Preface and Statement of Principles.

Support Statement: The revised principles are evidence of a thorough and deliberate effort over time made by TS-DACS members and many experts who volunteered their time. Documentation of their efforts in both GitHub and Google Drive is robust. The work was significant and not without difficulty. TS-DACS acknowledges that grappling with community feedback was challenging but demonstrates that their process was sound. SAA special funding for their March 2017 meeting had a positive impact on their process, evidence of which can be found in their documentation.

The revised principles bring DACS up to speed with current archival theory and practice, and provide users of the standard with argumentation concerning how archival theory and ethics are inextricably linked to archival description. This change de-emphasizes a "one-size-fits-all" approach and empowers archivists to create sound practices within a local context rather than limiting archivists by emphasizing rote compliance.

The Standards Committee has concluded that the revised principles sufficiently meet the criteria outlined in *Procedures for Review and Approval of an SAA-Developed Standard*. The duration of this process, though longer than anticipated, was a direct result of the care taken by TS-DACS to create and spend the time necessary to complete a substantive revision. By making announcements via listservs, hosting in-person sessions at annual meetings, and tapping key individuals with critical perspectives, TS-DACS met and exceeded expectations for consulting others. Given the importance of DACS in the profession, TS-DACS took special care to document their revisions, community feedback, and reasoning behind their decisions.

Impact on Strategic Priorities: The revised principles positively contribute to three of SAA's strategic goals. SAA will continue to lead the profession in expanding professional knowledge about archival description as a result of the changes (*Goal 3: Advancing the Field*). The revised principles explicitly address theoretical gaps and reimagines DACS to be a powerful tool to educate practitioners about current theory and practice (*Goal 2: Enhancing Professional Growth*). Finally, the revised principles are more value-driven, meaning that implementing DACS will result in archivists and repositories being better able to articulate value of archival labor (*Goal 1: Advocating for Archives and Archivists*).

Fiscal Impact: None

Describing Archives: A Content Standard

Revision Summary

February 6, 2019

Purpose of DACS/Intended Audience

Describing Archives: A Content Standard (DACS) was adopted as the official content standard of the U. S. archival community by the Society of American Archivists in 2004. DACS was designed to be used to create a variety of archival descriptions including finding aids and catalog records. It replaced Archives, Personal Papers, and Manuscripts which had served the U. S. archival community for more than two decades. DACS grew out of the joint U.S./Canadian project on archival description (CUSTARD).

History/Revision Process Description

As a descriptive standard of the Society of American Archivists, DACS is on a periodic revision cycle.

TS-DACS members

2016-2017

Maureen Callahan (co-chair), Smith College Libraries
Adrien Hilton (co-chair), Columbia University
Elise Dunham, University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign
Adriane Hanson, University of Georgia Libraries
Susan Luftschein, University of Southern California
Cassandra Schmitt, Orbis Cascade Alliance
Elena Perez-Lizano, State Archives of New Mexico
Carrie Hintz (ex officio), Emory University

2017-2018

Maureen Callahan (co-chair), Smith College Libraries
Adrien Hilton (co-chair), Houghton Library, Harvard University
Maristella Feustle, University of North Texas
Matthew Gorham, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University
Daniel Michelson, Union College
Kate Morris, James Madison University

Susan Luftschein, Special Collections, University of Southern California Libraries
Elena Perez-Lizano, State Archives of New Mexico
Cassandra Schmitt, Orbis Cascade Alliance

2018-2019

Adrien Hilton (co-chair), Houghton Library, Harvard University
Daniel Michelson (co-chair), Smith College
Maristella Feustle, University of North Texas
Matthew Gorham, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University
Linda Hocking, Litchfield Historical Society
Susan Luftschein, University of Southern California
Kate Morris, James Madison University
Elena Perez-Lizano, State Archives of New Mexico
Gregory Wiederman, University at Albany, SUNY
Maureen Callahan (ex officio), Smith College

DACS 2016 Principles Revision Meeting Invited Guests

Mary Caldera, Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University Library
Jillian Cuellar, UCLA Library Special Collections
Jarrett Drake (unable to attend in person), Mudd Manuscript Library, Princeton University
Audra Eagle Yun, Special Collections & Archives, University of California, Irvine
Gretchen Gueguen, Digital Public Library of America
Bill Landis, Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University Library
Dennis Meissner, Minnesota Historical Society
Trevor Owens, Institute of Museum and Library Services
Mario Ramirez (unable to attend in person), University of California, Los Angeles
Dan Santamaria, Tufts Digital Collections and Archives

DACS 2017 Principles Revision Meeting Invited Guests

Hillel Arnold, Rockefeller Archive Center
Mary Caldera, Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University Library
Jillian Cuellar, UCLA Library Special Collections
Audra Eagle Yun, Special Collections & Archives, University of California, Irvine
Tamar Evangelestia-Dougherty, California Rare Book School (unable to attend because of travel delays)
Gretchen Gueguen, Digital Public Library of America (unable to attend because of travel delays)
Regine Heberlein, Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Libraries
Linda Hocking, Litchfield Historical Society
Bill Landis, Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University Library
Sandra Markham, Lewis Walpole Library, Yale University Library

Dennis Meissner, Retired
Dan Santamaria, Tufts Digital Collections and Archives

Significant Changes

This proposal aims to update the Preface and the Statement of Principles in order to better align both with current archival theory and practice as well as the International Council on Archives (ICA) draft data model for archival description, Records in Contexts (RiC). The preface revision is not hugely substantive but rather a reorganization and update of existing information. The revision to the Statement of Principles is total.

Justification for proposed change

There are two primary and equally important justifications for the revisions. First, the revision is proposed following a deep analysis of the current Statement of Principles (hereafter referred to as current principles) and the extent to which it represents archival values, theory and practice, and is teachable and clear. Second is the release of Records in Contexts and the desire by the technical subcommittee to bring DACS in better alignment with its underlying concepts and structure and, in turn, current archival theory that undergirds RiC. Although RiC has not yet been adopted as an international standard, the ideas expressed therein are in keeping with the current state of archival theory. Changes to DACS principles that have been inspired by RiC could stand on their own even if RiC is never adopted or changes significantly.

Change process

Leading up to the August 2016 annual meeting of SAA in Atlanta, members of TS-DACS analyzed the current principles, asking if they were they clear, teachable, and reflective of current archival values, theory, and practice. In addition to the technical subcommittee, a group of experts on archival description was called upon to read the principles closely and comment on their clarity, usability, and relevance.

Through this analysis, TS-DACS and the experts group found the principles confusing and difficult to teach. They also discovered that many ideas well-represented in literature on archives and archival description - providing maximum access to records, prioritizing users and use of records over preservation, building relationships with creators, using accessible language to document traditionally underrepresented communities, and documenting archival interventions and the role of archivists in shaping the historical record - were not present in the existing principles. The analysis indicated that the archival profession has an opportunity to refocus archival description on its ultimate purpose -- enabling users of archives to make sense of the past through records.

A full accounting of the written documentation and analysis of the current principles at the SAA annual meeting in Atlanta in 2016 can be found [here](#).

TS-DACS went on to analyze the conversations from that meeting and decided to organize a 5-day work meeting to revise the principles. Through a successful application to SAA and with generous support from Yale's Beinecke Library and Lewis Walpole Library, the committee plus a group of invited archival description experts was able to meet in person in March, 2017. TS-DACS led workshops on technical writing, user-centered design, and scenario mapping. The group also engaged in a community-literature review and report out. At the conclusion of the meeting, the Statement of Principles had been completely revised into what was referred to as a Minimum Viable Product (MVP). Drawing on the software development community's principles of iteration and agility, the TS thought it best to put the product to the community for initial comment before developing the concepts further. The thinking is that by getting feedback early and often, the process is responsive.

Documentation of the Consultation Process

TS-DACS put out a general call for comments on the revised principles in June 2017 and also reached out directly to leading thinkers, practitioners, and educators of archival description. All received feedback and commentary on feedback can be accessed [here](#).

General themes

A major theme throughout the feedback centered around matters of degree in descriptive practice: how many archival interventions should be documented and are certain activities more important to document than others? Community members wanted concrete guidance on when or why to add to a description and whether it was a matter of choice or rule. Archival description has always had to contend with these questions of degree, which is one of the reasons why local implementation and procedure manuals continue to be critical for repository compliance and consistency of practice. To address these concerns, TS-DACS further explicated the role of principles versus the role of rules versus archival assessment and judgement in the preface to DACS.

Similarly, the introduction of concepts such as bias, archival intervention, iteration, and transparency into the principles raised questions about what is required and what is enough. To these concerns, TS-DACS wants to reiterate and further highlight the set of required elements for single level description that DACS already provides, which should continue to form the basis of archival description, whether it is an accession record, a collection level catalog record, a finding aid, a record for a digitized resource, or any other format.

Numerous respondents were excited to see the central place of users in the principles. One person noted that Principle 2 was "just essential." However, there was concern around a perceived narrowness of definition with both use and user, as some misunderstood "users are the fundamental reason for archives" to mean only external researchers. In the principles, the terms use and user are employed

broadly. Each repository should explore and define the terms its own way. Depending on the context, use may be government accountability, genealogy, artistic endeavors, or historical research, among many others. A corporate archives will have a different set of users and uses for its records than a state government. Rather than provide a strict definition, TS-DACS added a statement on user-centered archival description in the preamble to the principles.

Many respondents read the revised principles as aspirational rather than prescriptive. One respondent suggested that the revised principles are the *what* and the *why* of archival description, while the rules are the *how*. Overall, this shift away from the current principles as methodology to the revised principles as advocacy was understood as a positive one. Because they are value-driven, the revised principles represent where the community of archivists using DACS currently are and, more importantly, where they want to be.

This will impact how we appraise records, set processing priorities, write description, and make it public, e.g. considering how to provide minimal description in keeping with standards and ethics? The principle reinforces changes we feel a need to make anyway.

We agree with the ethos of this principle (and the revised principles as a whole) and hope that it will signal a change towards a more service-oriented, user-centric way of doing archival work.

Incorporating Feedback

Analyzing feedback from 51 individuals and groups on 11 different principles proved challenging. The subcommittee created a series of worksheets to review the feedback for each principle as well as three broader, thematic categories: the role of descriptive principles, comparison of old to new principles, and the revision process itself. The worksheets synthesized community feedback into areas of agreement, disagreement, and misunderstanding and provided suggestions on how to address these concerns.

To answer general questions and clarify areas of clumsy communication, TS-DACS made minor revisions to the principles themselves. The principles were re-ordered so that like concepts were grouped together. The more substantive concerns, however, were addressed through the addition of an introduction to the concepts in the revised principles.

Following these revisions, TS-DACS submitted an official change request and announced a call to comment to the archives community. TS-DACS also reached out to each individual or group that submitted feedback on the MVP outlining how concerns were addressed, explaining certain concepts in more detail, or simply thanking them for their feedback and contribution to standard's maintenance.

On the official change request, TS-DACS received 14 responses through GitHub and 9 responses through SAA's webform.¹ The community response was overwhelmingly positive. TS-DACS did consider each response and determined whether the critical feedback was out of scope or could be addressed through

¹ It should be noted that 5 of the 9 webform responses were from the same source but addressed different issues.

adjustments to the change request. Minor adjustments included: grammar and word selection. Two more substantive adjustments were made addressing the disappearance of entity definitions from the Preface (added to the introduction to Part II) and the missing concepts previously noted in principle 7.3 (additional language added to revised principle 4A and Chapter 1).

Communication Channels

TS-DACS made the community of archivists aware of the official change request and [call to comment](#) in a variety of ways:

- An announcement was sent to various regional and national listservs: SAA Leaders, SAA Announcements, Collection Management Tools Section, Description Section, Encoded Archival Standards Section, Women Archivists Section, Archives and Archivists of Color Section, Archival Management Section, Metadata and Digital Objects Section, Diverse Sexuality and Gender Section, SNAP Section, Electronic Records Section, NEA Listserv.
- At the Society of American Archivists annual meeting in August 2018, TS-DACS made the announcement to comment at the business meetings of the Archivists and Archives of Color Section, the Description Section, the Diverse Sexuality and Gender Section, the Encoded Archival Standards Section, the Native American Archives Section, and the joint Students and New Archives Professionals and Manuscript Sections.
- Also, at the annual meeting members of TS-DACS gave a panel presentation on implementation of various concepts within the revised principles and publicized the community's ability to comment by sharing the url.
- Lastly, TS-DACS printed 500 business cards with the url of where to comment that were passed out during the annual meeting.

Impact of Changes

The impact of the changes to the Preface and the Statement of Principles will, in the future, cascade throughout parts I and II of DACS. In order to bring description into better alignment with these new principles, TS-DACS foresees some existing elements currently designated as Optimum or Added Value becoming required. In particular, it is likely that elements supporting Principles 5 and 6 - the imperative that archivists document their interventions as part of archival description - will be elevated to required status.

In addition, new rules may need to be introduced to DACS to support the revised principles. Proposed element 8.2, which requires a rights declaration for archival description, supports ideas in new Principle 8 which encourages archivists to make description machine-readable, machine-actionable, and easily disseminated.

It is expected that many, if not most, repositories will not be fully compliant with all of the principles at the time of their adoption. Many repositories, particularly small ones, are only now trying to meet existing standards, and may feel that the new principles present an even higher hurdle. These issues need not be a deterrent to the adoption of the new principles. A repository's descriptive policies and

practices, like archival description itself, are developed iteratively. They are revisited and refined over time for many reasons: to meet changing needs of users, to adapt to staff and resource constraints, to utilize new technology, and to incorporate the evolving understanding of our profession. The principles can serve a powerful role in guiding changes to policy and practice by articulating the goals of and reasons for archival description.

TS-DACS recognizes that changes from version to version of DACS have the potential to require an outlay of time and resources that may not be immediately available to all repositories. Beginning in 2019, DACS will be available under versioned releases; repositories may declare themselves compliant with a particular version of DACS as they work toward implementing the latest changes.

The flawed pursuit of perfectly described collections has contributed substantially to processing and description backlogs. Rather than adding to that burden, these principles empower archivists, whether they are managers and resource allocators or collection processors, to use their professional skills and judgment to make a greater volume of records more accessible for research. The principles and DACS as whole give structure for meeting attainable baseline requirements for descriptive records and then encouraging archivists to best decide how to spend their own time. For example, the new principles are very explicit that all holdings in the repository must have an archival description (Principle 9). This means that if the community (and council) decides to adopt these new principles, many repositories will have the opportunity to examine their own compliance with our national descriptive standard.

While implementation strategies are beyond the scope of DACS, many such strategies aligned with the principles have emerged since the original publication of DACS. These strategies, including description at the time of acquisition, iterative processing approaches, and collection assessment, reappraisal and deaccessioning are discussed in archival literature. We believe that these principles are achievable and that very good advice already exists for archivists striving to meet them.

By emphasizing the importance of describing all collections and transparency, the new principles facilitate resource advocacy, whether for professional archivists to create collection level description for all holdings or for changes within repositories towards more accessible forms of description.

We encourage repositories to consider the following strategies:

- Prioritize the allocation of staff time and resources towards activities which best align with one or more of the principles.
- When debating between possible approaches, select the one that most closely realizes the principles.
- When evaluating and reporting on changes, use increased alignment with the principles as a means to demonstrate success.

By using the principles to guide incremental change, the repository knows that individual efforts will bring the repository closer into alignment with the wisdom of the profession.

We believe that these new principles make education around archival description clearer and easier to teach. Above all, we hope that the revised principles allow for more accessible and transparent archival description for users and uses of records.

View Changes

With tracked changes

All sections: <https://github.com/saa-ts-dacs/dacs/pull/20/files>

Without tracked changes

Preface:

<https://github.com/saa-ts-dacs/dacs/blob/3a52ee51bf4dfd4d6cd1a7dc38bec196f4cc307f/preface.md>

Statement of Principles:

https://github.com/saa-ts-dacs/dacs/blob/3a52ee51bf4dfd4d6cd1a7dc38bec196f4cc307f/statement_of_principles.md

Chapter 1, Levels of Description:

https://github.com/saa-ts-dacs/dacs/blob/3a52ee51bf4dfd4d6cd1a7dc38bec196f4cc307f/part_I/chapter_1.md

Introduction to Archival Authority Records:

https://github.com/saa-ts-dacs/dacs/blob/3a52ee51bf4dfd4d6cd1a7dc38bec196f4cc307f/part_II/introduction_to_archival_authority_records.md

Revision Comments (MVP Release)

See responses to form [here](#).

Revision Comments (Formal Change Request)

Through Github

[annietummino](#) commented [on Aug 11](#)

When I started doing archives classes with undergrads I revisited the DACS principles and they seemed pedantic, off-putting, even embarrassing! I had a hard time following them and I'm a professional archivist. In contrast, the new DACS principles are something I can get behind. They express my values and my approach to managing and processing archives-making strategic, user-centered decisions and documenting those decisions as transparently as possible. I think the emphasis on intellectual context and connections between records, creators, and subjects (as opposed to emphasizing levels and hierarchy) is also valuable and the field will only be moving further in this direction in the future.

gwiedeman commented [on Aug 13](#)

I think these revisions are a substantial improvement to DACS and I've already found that they help me be mindful of the wider implications of my work. I particularly favor the prominent role of users in the principles, and that they not only center archival practice upon use (Principle 2), but actionably connect that value to basic practices (Principle 10). I also find the focus on re-use (principle 8) to be useful for

I think it's challenging to fully understand and appreciate the value of archival description without hands-on experience working with large volumes of collections. I find that these revised DACS principles are among the best tools to convey this value to students, new professionals, and those in related professions. I've already referenced them and found them helpful in communicating the value of archival practices to the web archives community. I also try to encourage the graduate students I work with to read and engage with these principles and I've found them to be a much better medium for thoughtfully considering the implications of what we're doing than any one journal article.

rockivist commented [on Aug 13](#)

I strongly support the updated DACS principles.

In particular I appreciate principles 8 and 9. Principle 8 articulates clearly the way in which how we share description is nearly as important as what description we share. This a crucial idea for archivists to understand and take to heart if we are to maximize the potential use of our descriptive work.

Principle 9 - that "each collection within a repository must have an archival description" - pushes archivists to contextualize archival description not simply within the needs of a given collection, but across all of the holdings of a repository. I think of this as the appraisal of descriptive needs and resources - if we start with making sure everything has some description, then we can assess how much additional description we can afford to do. It is simply untenable to make descriptive decisions solely within the context of what a single collection might need, so this principle is a vital improvement.

My sincere thanks to TS-DACS and all of the thoughtful archivists who contributed to this work.

p-galligan commented [on Aug 16](#)

I don't have a ton to say over what other commenters have said here, but I'd like to voice strong support for the revised principles.

I especially like principles 8, 9, and 10, and I am excited to see them added to DACS.

alexisantracoli commented [on Aug 22](#)

I would like to thank TS-DACS for all the work that they did on these principles. I support the revisions, and am especially excited to see users centered in the revised principles. Principles 2, 7, 10, and 11 are especially exciting to see. Centering users is something that archivists as a whole can continually improve upon. One thought I have is that there may be times when user needs and priorities and archival principles aren't in alignment. I'd eventually like to see DACS address this issue. For example, centering of user needs should lead to a review of the descriptive rules in DACS with an eye to user needs. Another issue is that, currently, we don't know a lot about our users. As the profession builds knowledge in this area, I'd like to see DACS be nimble in adjusting to what is learned about how users actually find and use archival materials. Thanks again to all the members of TS-DACS.

searcy commented [on Aug 22](#) •

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I support the updated principles, and want to thank the members of TS-DACS for their efforts on this project and the work required for standards maintenance more generally. I think this revision does much to highlight the value of labor archivists perform. The new principles shift away from the nature of records themselves, basic definitions about archives, and foundational concepts about archival theory more generally -- all of which can be found in complementary resources -- toward guidance that is grounded in values and tightly focused on archival description proper. I think this is a good thing. Although the standard will require local policy and implementation decisions, as noted in the Preface, I find these updated principles to be more easily understandable and useful to archives practitioners with varied levels of experience. To be a more inclusive profession, we should strive to make our standards and best practices as accessible as possible.

A comment that you can take or leave: since the new principles are heavily values driven and repeatedly emphasize the importance of content, I would like to see some statement regarding the function of archival description in a larger records continuum context. I don't think this needs to be a principle unto itself, but could be a useful addition to the Preface. For example, Principle 1 states, "Archival description expresses professional ethics and values." The roles and responsibilities of donors and records creators are conspicuously absent; ethical description should, in my opinion, also take into consideration the persons being described, rather than solely based on the ethics of the American archival profession. And while ethical description can play a role in "encourage[ing] a diverse archival record," that cannot exist without concerted acquisition, appraisal, and internal management and prioritization. Even the most principled archival description cannot promote a diverse record in an institution that primarily collects the papers of the privileged or prioritizes those collections for arrangement and description. A general statement regarding archival description in the larger context of archival work could address this concern.

That being said, I think that these principles share much in common with what archival description should be: accessible, iterative, and focused on the users. Thank you again!

weatherlys commented [on Aug 23](#)

I support the revised principles. They are direct and concise, which will help students, new professionals, and members of related professions understand how the work of archival description is guided. The addition of several principles--but especially 5, 6, and 10--provides strong guidance for setting descriptive policies and priorities, and for the application of DACS rules when describing records.

kellybolding commented [on Aug 24](#)

I strongly support the revised principles.

They promote a user-centered, iterative, values-forward approach to archival description that reflects the best of current archival practice. I appreciate that the combination of Principles 1, 7, 10, and 11 supports a reparative approach to (re)processing that seeks to address the erasure or mis-description of materials related to people from traditionally marginalized groups in the archives. I'm also particularly in support of Principle 6 and its focus on transparency. In the upcoming revisions of the DACS rules, I hope to see additional guidance on specific information and actions to document.

Many thanks to TS-DACS for your thoughtful work on updating these principles.

mkarchivist commented [on Aug 25](#)

I support the updated principles.

The guidance they will provide for repositories and for those who do this work is clear, useful, and will be of great value. I appreciate the thought and work put into the revision. The inclusion of transparency and accessibility, as set forth in principles 6 and 7, is particularly good to see.

kschlottmann commented [on Aug 25](#)

I support the revised principles.

I agree with the comments that applaud the user-centered language in the revised principles. In particular, I appreciate that principles 5 and 6 encourage archivists to document who we are, what we did, and when we did it. This information is not only critical to our external users, but to our colleagues who will be stewarding these collections in the future. I also appreciate that the standard itself will be versioned, as this will facilitate our ability to iteratively describe the materials in our care in a documented way.

Kudos to TS-DACS for leading this revision process in a thoughtful and transparent manner.

anarchivist commented [on Aug 27](#)

Following the comments of many others I applaud the work that TS-DACS has undertaken to revise the preface and principles and generally support the revisions. What follows are some general comments regarding each section.

Preface

- I worry somewhat about the substantial changes to the section on related descriptive standards. While RiC is clearly the way forward, my understanding is that considerable changes remain before it is considered "ready for use." Of particular note are the continuing gaps around documenting functions (ISDF) and repositories that hold archives (ISDIAH). The revisions to the preface, as I understand them, don't adequately document the existence of related standards and the continued within DACS.

Principles

- Principle 2 would perhaps be strengthened by reiterating that assessment of user needs should be undertaken on a regular, or iterative, basis. This would tie it to Principles 10 and 11 more strongly.
- Principle 3: What is meant by "universal description and access"? Is this about consistency of that experience?

Thanks for your work!

[faithc](#) commented [on Aug 30](#)

Thank you to the TS-DACS committee for your work drafting these much-needed revisions. Thank you for your time, your thoughtfulness in thinking through complex topics and issues, and your efforts to engage with the archival community. I strongly support the revised principles as they currently stand.

To reiterate what others I have stated, I am particularly pleased that the updated principles articulate values that the profession is striving to adhere to and implement; and that they address issues relating to users, archival intervention, transparency, and the problematic principles of provenance (in particular) and original order. I also look forward to seeing how these updated principles are applied to the revised rules.

I agree with [@alexisantracoli](#) that centering archival description around the needs of users necessitates that archivists make more of an effort to know who their users are and identify their needs. Perhaps this point warrants further articulation and recommendations.

[davidamelolson](#) commented [on Aug 31](#)

I am writing to voice support for the updated principles. There are many specific aspects that I appreciated about the changes, but on a macro level, I would say that I appreciate how much they focus on people. The old principles focused more on products of human activity: records and description. The new ones focus more on how people and how they engage with records and description, whether the people in question are records creators, archivists, or researchers/users. They definitely add a "why" to DACS' "how", and hopefully will help encourage thoughtfulness about creating description that is more user-centric and more richly provides context around provenance and human interventions in records (including archivist interventions). Thank you.

[morriskn](#) commented [on Aug 31](#)

The focus on users is a strength of the revised principles. I appreciate the acknowledgement throughout the principles that repositories make decisions based on their resources and particular user needs. (9,10) I support the principles' emphasis on transparency related to archivists' own actions/interventions on records.

Through web form

Submitted on Thursday, August 30, 2018 - 1:37pm

Submitted by user:

Submitted values are:

Name: Liz Beckman

Email: ebeckman@gmu.edu

Affiliation: George Mason University

Phone:

Does this represent an official comment from your affiliated group? No

Comments: I fully endorse the proposed changes to the DACS principles - I think they are lucid, and they highlight the ultimate purpose of all of our descriptive work. I particularly like the imperative to identify and cite where our description comes from as a way of "build[ing] a culture of accountability and trust" in Principle 5. This is particularly important to the profession at a time when truth and sources of knowledge are being treated skeptically by so many in our culture.

Submitted on Tuesday, August 28, 2018 - 11:50am

Submitted by user:

Submitted values are:

Name: Stephanie Bredbenner

Email: stephanie.bredbenner@yale.edu

Affiliation: Yale University

Phone:

Does this represent an official comment from your affiliated group? No

Comments: I support the revision of the principles. I particularly agree with the new focus on iterative, user-driven description and redescription and the alignment with RIC.

Submitted on Wednesday, August 22, 2018 - 4:09pm

Submitted by user:

Submitted values are:

Name: Robert Battaly

Email: rbattaly@rockarch.org

Affiliation: Rockefeller Archive Center

Phone: 9143666352

Does this represent an official comment from your affiliated group? No

Comments: I would like to express strong support for all the proposed changes. I feel that the principles as proposed truly reflect the ideals of the profession, as well as actively represent our work as archivists and the practical decisions we make on a daily basis to make records accessible for research. The empowerment these principles give to archivists to efficiently and effectively use our skills, talents and resources to focus on the opening of records for research is exciting and energizing as well as critical for our profession. As Head of Processing at the Rockefeller Archive Center I wholeheartedly look forward to revising our descriptive practices and procedures to reflect these new principles once they are adopted.

Submitted on Tuesday, August 21, 2018 - 5:53pm

Submitted by user:

Submitted values are:

Name: Cory Nimer and Gordon Daines

Email: cory_nimer@byu.edu

Affiliation: Brigham Young University

Phone: 801-422-6091

Does this represent an official comment from your affiliated group? Yes

Comments:

Preface: Alignment with RiC

The preface section on "Ecosystem of Interrelated Standards for Providing Access to Archives" notes the deep connections between the current revision effort and the release of the draft of Records in Contexts (RiC), version 0.1. While it is important that there is alignment between conceptual models and content standards, it may be premature to base changes to the content standard on an unfinished model. From what we understand, RiC is currently not anticipated to be completed until 2020 and there are still a number of areas under discussion in its development.

Rather than make an early transition to RiC, if there is an interest in expanding DACS treatment of the current international conceptual model then the subcommittee could look at integrating the International Standard for Describing Functions (ISDF). This model fits with the three entity model

described in the Preface of records, agents, and activities. Such a change to create a Part II for functions would require significant work, and the description of functions does not appear to have been widely adopted by the American archival community. However, this is a potential area of contribution that the subcommittee could pursue in preparation for the release of RiC.

Submitted on Tuesday, August 21, 2018 - 5:55pm

Submitted by user:

Submitted values are:

Name: Cory Nimer and Gordon Daines

Email: cory_nimer@byu.edu

Affiliation: Brigham Young University

Phone: 801-422-6091

Does this represent an official comment from your affiliated group? Yes

Comments:

Preface: Loss of Entity Definitions

With the revisions to the Preface, one of the items that was removed was the removal of the definitions of archival entities provided for corporate bodies, persons, and families. This information should be retained somewhere in the standard, since neither Person or Family are defined elsewhere (or even in ISAAR (CPF)). The definition currently included in the 2nd ed. is based on ISAAR (CPF), but should probably be retained just so that everything is defined in one place.

It might be possible to move these definitions to the Introduction to Archival Authority Records preceding chapter 9, if there is a desire to move these out of the Preface.

Submitted on Tuesday, August 21, 2018 - 5:56pm

Submitted by user:

Submitted values are:

Name: Cory Nimer and Gordon Daines

Email: cory_nimer@byu.edu

Affiliation: Brigham Young University

Phone: 801-422-6091

Does this represent an official comment from your affiliated group? Yes

Comments:

Principles: Reintroduction of Principle 7.3

Having merged most of the 2nd ed. principles into the new principle 4, some of the nuance of the earlier principles seems to have been lost. Principle 7.3 is one of the more important of these, with its guidance to not collapse multiple descriptive levels into a single description. If some of this wording could be returned to the end of principle 4's description of records, it would be very helpful.

Submitted on Tuesday, August 21, 2018 - 5:58pm

Submitted by user:

Submitted values are:

Name: Cory Nimer and Gordon Daines

Email: cory_nimer@byu.edu

Affiliation: Brigham Young University

Phone: 801-422-6091

Does this represent an official comment from your affiliated group? Yes

Comments:

Principles: Activities in Principle 4

The proposed version of principle 4 outlines the three entities in the RiC draft conceptual model, listing them as records, agents, and activities. From discussions with EGAD members, it appears that currently this last entity is the equivalent of what is currently termed "functions" in the ICA model outlined in the International Standard for Describing Functions (ISDF Appendix A), but outside of the proposed version of the Preface there are no guidelines in DACS for the description of functions. It might be best to either pare this back and remove the reference to activities, at least until there is a proposal to add a Part III to the standard to cover this entity.

Submitted on Tuesday, August 21, 2018 - 5:59pm

Submitted by user:

Submitted values are:

Name: Cory Nimer and Gordon Daines

Email: cory_nimer@byu.edu

Affiliation: Brigham Young University

Phone: 801-422-6091

Does this represent an official comment from your affiliated group? Yes

Comments:

Principles: Introduction: Loss of Methodological Guidance

While the proposed principles provide a strong statement by tying professional ethics to archival descriptive practice, in the process much of

the methodological underpinning of this practice has been removed from the draft. In the 2nd ed., readers were walked through the process from understanding what archives are to how they are arranged to how they are described. The addition of the introduction to the statement of principles addresses this loss of context somewhat, but by problematizing foundational concepts such as provenance and original order in the text, it may be less clear for new professionals or others unfamiliar with the professional literature to apply the standard in their work. It would be helpful if there were some clearer guidance provided for amateur or early professionals integrated into the introduction.

Name: Shannon Supple

Email: ssupple@smith.edu

Affiliation: Smith College paid, SAA member

Phone:

Does this represent an official comment from your affiliated group? No

Comments:

My comments are on the statement of principles. They are excellent ??? highly thoughtful and considered and infused values and ethics, not to mention why we do what we do, into the document. Brava!

My comments are exceedingly small:

Under the first bullet in Principle 1: ???produces trust in and between users, archivists, and repositories??? ??? could donors or sources of records be added?

Under Principle 1, footnote 8: Might you consider explicitly including the RBMS ethics code as well? (Note that they are currently under revision.)

Under the first bullet in Principle 3: ???supports universal description and access??? ??? not sure ???universal??? make sense. We???re talking consistency, but we???re still describing in one human language.

Finally, while I am a diehard adherent to the Oxford comma, its use is inconsistent here, so pick a side and go with it.

Thank you for all of your work. This is an excellent document and guide to our work.

Revised and Current DACS content

1. Revised Preface and Principles – Pull Request #20 (pages 2-21)
 - Proposed revised text with changes tracked via GitHub
 - Red indicates a deleted section
 - Green indicates an added section
 - Yellow indicates a changed section (deletion or addition within a section)
 - Includes Chapter 1 and Introduction to Archival Authority Records because of revisions required by changes in the Preface and Statement of Principles, which are also included.
2. Current text of Chapter 1 Levels of Description (pages 22-25)
3. Current text of Introduction to Archival Authority Records (pages 26-28)
4. Current text of Preface (pages 29-32)
5. Current text of Statement of Principles (pages 33-36)
6. August 2018 Call for Comments including responses (pages 37-46)
 - Call for comments via GitHub
 - Links in-document are to corresponding documents itemized here as #2-#5

[saa-ts-dacs](#) / [dacs](#)

Revised Preface and Principles #20

[New issue](#)[Open](#) michelsd wants to merge 15 commits into [saa-ts-dacs:master](#) from [michelsd:New-Principles](#)

Conversation 14 Commits 15 Checks 0 Files changed 4

Changes from all commits File filter... Jump to... +197 -153

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Chapter 1 Levels of Description

Archival material can be described at many different ~~levels (see Statement of Principles: Principle 3)~~ levels.

A finding aid may consist of only one level of description (single-level descriptions), or it may include many different levels of description (multilevel descriptions). A finding aid that consists of multiple levels of description may provide information at successively narrower levels of arrangement (such as subseries, files, and even items) for some series while confining information to a single level of hierarchy for others.¹



DACS does not attempt to define the proper level of description for any set of archival materials. Archivists should follow the prescriptions of their institutions and apply their own judgment in making such determinations.

DACS defines twenty-five elements that are useful in creating systems for describing archival materials. These systems can be of any type, ranging from simple paper-based files to complex digital information management systems. The output products of these systems—archival descriptions of all kinds and formats, printed on paper or encoded in EAD or MARC 21—must include at minimum a set of discrete descriptive elements that convey standardized information about the archival materials and creators being described. These DACS elements constitute a refinement of the twenty-six high-level elements of archival description defined in the General International Standard Archival Description (ISAD[G]).

Not all of the DACS elements are required in every archival description. Combinations of descriptive elements will vary, depending on whether the archivist considers a specific description to be preliminary or complete and whether it describes archival materials at a single level (e.g., collection level or item level) or at multiple levels that have a whole-part relationship.

Simple archival descriptive systems can be constructed using only the twenty-five elements articulated and defined by this standard; however, more detailed archival descriptive and management systems may require a number of additional elements, either defined by companion standards or standardized at the local level to meet the requirements of a specific repository.

The following requirements specify particular elements from Part I of DACS that should be used in output products—from basic collection-level accession records to fully encoded, multilevel finding aids—intended for the use of archivists or researchers in managing and using archival materials. They articulate a "minimum," "optimum," and "added value" usage of the elements defined by DACS but are not intended to preclude use of other descriptive data that a repository deems necessary for its own descriptive systems or products. DACS does not specify the order or arrangement of elements in a particular descriptive output. Some systems or output formats, such as MARC 21 or EAD, provide specific guidance on the ordering of some or all elements. Others, such as a repository's preliminary accession record or a print finding aid, should include DACS elements in a logical and consistent manner determined by the repository's own procedures and standard practices. The requirements that follow are divided into two sections, one for single-level descriptions and one for multilevel descriptions.

Requirements for Single-level Descriptions

Following are examples of single-level descriptions:

- A preliminary accession record
- A MARC 21 record not linked to other MARC 21 records
- A database record in a repository's collections management database that describes archival materials only at a single level
- A METS (Metadata Encoding and Transmission Standard)²² record for a description of archival materials

Single-level descriptions can describe archival materials at *any level*, from large accumulations commonly referred to by archivists as collections, record groups, fonds, or record series, to single items and any level in between. They can, however, only describe that material at one level.



Single-level Required

A single-level description with the minimum number of DACS elements includes:

- Reference Code Element (2.1)
- Name and Location of Repository Element (2.2)
- Title Element (2.3)
- Date Element (2.4)
- Extent Element (2.5)
- Name of Creator(s) Element (2.6) (*if known*)
- Scope and Content Element (3.1)
- Conditions Governing Access Element (4.1)
- Languages and Scripts of the Material Element (4.5)

Single-level Optimum

A single-level description with the optimum number of DACS elements has all of the elements included in Single-level Minimum above, plus the following:

- Administrative/Biographical History Element (2.7)
- Access points (See Overview of Archival Description)

Single-level Added Value

A single-level description using DACS elements to provide added value for researchers includes all of the elements in Single-level Optimum above, plus any other relevant elements the repository wishes to include.

Requirements for Multilevel Descriptions

Following are examples of multilevel descriptions:



- A preliminary collection inventory or register (regardless of whether presented in print or encoded in EAD or another encoding scheme)
- A full collection inventory or register (regardless of whether presented in print or encoded in EAD or another encoding scheme)
- Multiple linked MARC 21 records
- A database record in a repository's collections management database that describes archival materials at more than one level

Multilevel descriptions can describe archival materials beginning at any level (e.g., collection level, series level) and must include at least one sublevel. Typical multilevel descriptions begin with large accumulations commonly referred to by archivists as collections, record groups, fonds, or record series. ISAD(G) envisions a descriptive framework that recognizes four levels: fonds, series, file, and item; however, DACS elements can be used to describe materials arranged according to this or any other scheme of articulating levels of arrangement of archival materials.

Within systems that communicate archival description to users, it is often the case that descriptive elements may be shared, inherited, or otherwise linked across and between entities. Traditionally, inheritance has been implicitly presented as hierarchy within the idiom of the print finding aid where frontmatter (collection-level descriptive notes, creator elements, conditions governing access and use, repository information, etc.) applies to archival descriptions on subsequent pages. However, in modern networked archival information systems (relational databases, linked data systems, etc.) linkages, relationships, and inheritances can be non-hierarchical. This makes it particularly important for outputs from these systems to clearly explain relationships so that a user understands which records, agents, or activities an archival description governs.

When a multilevel description is created, the information provided at each descriptive aggregate must be relevant to the material being described within that group.³ For instance, archivists should provide administrative and biographical information appropriate and specific to the records being described within that aggregation. Information that is common to component parts should be provided where most generally appropriate and should not be repeated within component parts unless doing so would provide clarity.

Multilevel Required

The *top* level of a multilevel description with the minimum number of DACS elements includes:



- Reference Code Element (2.1)
- Name and Location of Repository Element (2.2)
- Title Element (2.3)
- Date Element (2.4)
- Extent Element (2.5)
- Name of Creator(s) Element (2.6) *(if known)*
- Scope and Content Element (3.1) *Note: In a minimum description, this element may simply provide a short abstract of the scope and content of the materials being described.*
- Conditions Governing Access Element (4.1)
- Languages and Scripts of the Material Element (4.5)
- Identification of the whole-part relationship of the *top* level to at least the *next subsequent* level in the multilevel description. This may be done through internal tracking within a particular descriptive system; if so, the output must be able to explicitly identify this relationship.

Each *subsequent* level of a multilevel description should include:

- All of the elements used at higher levels, unless the information is the same as that of a higher level or if it is desirable to provide more specific information.

Notes:

- Name of Creator(s) Element (2.6): *At subsequent levels of a multilevel description, this element is required only if the person(s) or organization(s) responsible for the creation or accumulation of the material at the subsequent level differs from the higher level(s). This can also be accomplished by using the Name Segment of the Title Element (2.3).*
- Scope and Content Element (3.1): *Scope and contents are typically necessary for large units of aggregation and are not required at the file or item level if the Title Element (2.3) is sufficient to describe the material.*
- Identification of the whole-part relationship of *each* level to at least the *next subsequent* level in the multilevel description. This may be done through internal tracking within a particular descriptive system or through an explicit statement of the relationship.

Multilevel Optimum

The *top* level of a multilevel description with the optimum number of DACS elements includes all of the elements in Multilevel Minimum above, plus the following:

- Administrative/Biographical History Element (2.7)
- Scope and Content Element (3.1) *Note: In an optimum description, this element should include a full description of the scope and content of the materials being described.*
- Access points (See Overview of Archival Description.)

Each *subsequent* level of that multilevel description should include:

- All of the elements included at the higher levels of the multilevel description, unless the information is the same as that of a higher level or if it is desirable to provide more specific information.
- Identification of the whole-part relationship of *each* level to at least the *next subsequent* level in the multilevel description. This may be done through internal tracking within a particular descriptive system or through an explicit statement of the relationship.

Multilevel Added Value

A multilevel description using DACS elements to provide added value for researchers should include all of the elements in Multilevel Optimum above, plus any other elements the repository wishes to include.

Each *subsequent* level of that multilevel description should include:

- All of the elements included at the higher levels of the multilevel description, unless the information is the same as that of a higher level or it is desirable to provide more specific information.
- Identification of the whole-part relationship of *each* level to at least the *next subsequent* level in the multilevel description. This may be done through internal tracking within a particular descriptive system or through an explicit statement of the relationship.

[1]: For more information, refer to International Council on Archives, *ISAD(G): General International Standard Archival Description*, 2nd ed., adopted by the Committee on Descriptive Standards, Stockholm, Sweden, September 19–22, 1999, accessed February 19, 2013, [http://www.icacds.org.uk/eng/ISAD\(G\).pdf](http://www.icacds.org.uk/eng/ISAD(G).pdf).

[2]: The METS standard is an XML schema for encoding descriptive, administrative, and structural metadata for objects within a digital library. It is an initiative of the Digital Library Federation and is maintained by the Library of Congress. Information is available at <http://www.loc.gov/standards/mets/>.

[3]: In the voluminous papers of a prominent family, there may be one letter from George Washington within a small cache of a distant cousin's correspondence. It would be inaccurate and inappropriate to say that the collection is about George Washington, although an archivist may include this kind of description within the series or file that includes that letter. Similarly, if part of a collection has specific conditions governing access, it is useful to provide an overview of all access restriction types at the collection level but it is also important to provide specific conditions governing access at the more granular level where this information would be relevant.

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Introduction to Archival Authority Records

The structure and content of archival materials cannot be completely understood without some knowledge of the context in which they were created. It is insufficient for the archivist simply to include the name of the creator in the title of the description of the materials. Additional information is required regarding the corporate bodies, persons, and families responsible for the creation, assembly, accumulation, and/or maintenance and use of the archival materials being described. Part II describes the information that is required to establish this context. It is the logical outcome of Principle 84 in the Statement of Principles: that the creators of archival materials, as well as the materials themselves, must be described.

Definition of Terms

- Corporate body: an organization or group of people identified by a name and that acts, or may act, as a unit, or an institutional position held by a person
- Person: an individual of the human species
- Family: two or more people related through marriage, birth, adoption, or other legal manner, or who present themselves as a family

These definitions disallow the creation of headings for personas, bibliographic identities, and animals but otherwise would not create significant divergence from library authority file structures.

There are three steps in the process of creating the documentation that establishes archival context.



- The archivist must first identify the corporate bodies, individuals, and families that played a significant role in the creation of the materials.

Element 2.6, Name of Creator(s), provides specific guidance as to which of these entities need to be associated with the description of the materials, based on their role in the creation, assembly, accumulation, and/or maintenance and use of the records.

- The archivist must assemble biographical information about these individuals and families or data about the history, structure, functions, and relationships of the relevant organization.

Element 2.7, Administrative/Biographical History, provides guidance on recording biographical data or administrative histories.

- Finally, the names of these entities must be rendered in a standardized form using standardized vocabularies (e.g., *Library of Congress Authorities*) or with rules for formulating standardized names such as those found in AACR2, ISAAR(CPF), or RDA to facilitate the retrieval of information across descriptions, systems, and institutions.

Once formulated, this information may be presented to the user in either of two ways. Traditionally, archivists have incorporated the names of creators and contextual information about them directly into archival descriptions, both in catalog records and in finding aids. Such information, created according to DACS rules, may certainly continue to be employed in this manner.

However, DACS also provides an alternative: information about creators of archival materials can be captured and maintained in a separate system of archival authority records that are linked to the archival descriptions rather than being embedded within them. This approach reflects the model created by the International Council on Archives where the General International Standard for Archival Description (ISAD[G]) provides rules on description and the International Standard Archival Authority Record for Corporate Bodies, Persons and Families (ISAAR[CPF]) governs the creation of information about creators. Chapters 9 through 14 provide guidance on the construction of archival authority records based on the structure of ISAAR(CPF).

Separating the capture and maintenance of contextual information has a number of advantages. The ability to link a description of a creating entity to several descriptions of records from the same creator held within the same repository eliminates the need to duplicate the administrative/biographical history in each description. Furthermore, the practice enables the linking of descriptions of creating entities to descriptions of records from the same creator(s) held by more than one repository, as well as to descriptions of related library and museum materials, websites, and so on. Relationships between creating entities also can be documented in authority records. Finally, certain functions can be efficiently performed in authority records, such as maintaining a record of variant and related terms, which cannot be done well (or at all) within descriptions.

Where several repositories hold records of the same provenance, they can share or exchange contextual information about the creator more easily if it has been maintained in a standardized manner. Archival authority records do not merely *record* contextual information, they also provide a means of *standardizing* access points and the contextual information. They are similar to library authority records in that both support the creation of standardized access points in descriptions. Such standardization has two aspects: consistency and uniqueness. *Consistency* requires that the name of a creator be identical each time it is used as an access point in the descriptive system. This is achieved by implementing rules that establish an authorized form of the name where different forms exist. *Uniqueness* requires that each person, family, or corporate body have a heading that applies to it alone. This is achieved by making additions to otherwise identical names in order to distinguish between them. Whenever possible, repositories should use the form of personal and corporate names found in the *Library of Congress Authorities* (formerly *Library of Congress Name Authority File* [LCNAF]) or use rules for formulating standardized names such as those found in AACR2, ISAAR(CPF), or RDA.

While archival authority records and the bibliographic authority records used in library systems are similar, they differ in significant ways. A bibliographic authority record consists of an authorized heading that standardizes the form of the name, as well as other information elements that describe the named entity or point to other authority records. Archival authority records contain the following elements similar to bibliographic authority records:

- The authority entry (i.e., a standardized access point established by an archival agency uniquely identifying the corporate body, person, or family associated with the creation of the archival materials)
- References to related names and variant names
- Documentation of how the authority record was established and maintained

Beyond this, archival authority records support a much wider set of requirements than library authority records. These additional requirements derive from the importance of documenting the context of records creation in archival description and control systems. As such, archival authority records usually contain much more information than library authority records.

While archival authority records generally are distinguished from library authority records in that they focus on identifying and providing information about those associated in some way with the creation of archival materials, they do not include topical subjects, forms or genres, functions, or uniform titles. Archivists may also maintain authority files to control the terms used to provide access in these ways; however, such applications are beyond the scope of this standard.¹

The two methods of presenting archival context information, i.e., within the description or in a separate authority file, are not mutually exclusive. Indeed, archives may quite reasonably maintain separate files of authority data for internal control purposes even when the names reflected in those records are embedded in descriptions. Archivists may also wish to describe some contextual information only in the Administrative/Biographical History Element (see Element 2.7) embedded in descriptions of archival materials.

Purpose and Scope

Part II provides rules on the creation of authority records based on the data elements found in ISAAR(CPF).

Exclusions

Instructions for describing the archival materials themselves are found in Part I.

Instructions for identifying creators are found in Part I, Element 2.6, and instructions for creating contextual information embedded in descriptions of archival materials are found in Part I, Element 2.7.

Instructions for formatting names of persons, families, or corporate bodies identified as creators using the rules in Element 2.6 are found in companion standards.

Structure and Numbering

Part II consists of six chapters. Chapter 9 provides general rules for creating authority records for repositories that wish to maintain separate authority systems. Chapters 10 through 14 provide rules for the different areas of archival authority records.

Descriptive Outputs

The rules provide for data input but do not prescribe particular outputs or display. Presentation of this information to the user, including the way that the authority information is linked to the descriptions of the materials, will be determined by institutional policy within each repository's descriptive system.

Examples

The examples in Part II are illustrative, not prescriptive. They illustrate only the application of the rule to which they are appended. Furthermore, the presentation of the examples is intended only to assist in understanding how to use the rules and does not imply a prescribed layout, typography, or output.

[1] DACS does not provide rules for the construction and maintenance of subject authorities. However, a corporate body, person, or family can also be the subject of a unit of description, and an archival authority record that conforms to DACS may also serve to control the form of name and identity of a corporate body, person, or family named in a subject access point. See Appendix B, Companion Standards.

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Preface

About This Standard

The Society of American Archivists adopted Describing Archives: A Content Standard (DACS) as the official content standard of the U.S. archival community in 2005. DACS was designed to be used to create a variety of archival descriptions, including finding aids and catalog records. It replaced *Archives, Personal Papers, and Manuscripts, Archives, Personal Papers, and Manuscripts*,¹ which had served the U.S. archival community for more than two decades.

In 2013, following a call from the Council of the Society of American Archivists and after soliciting feedback from the community, DACS underwent a major revision. The revisions addressed the growing convergence between archival, museum, and library descriptive standards—particularly the promulgation and adoption of RDA.² Another significant issue was the development and adoption of Encoded Archival Context³ and the need to provide guidance on the creation of archival authority records.

Continuous Revision Cycle

In 2013, DACS was moved to a continuous revision cycle; this means that DACS may be revised as needs from the community arise. The most current version of DACS (and a history of revisions) can be found on the TS-DACS GitHub site.⁴

The subcommittee continues to monitor the development of other descriptive standards, particularly Records in Contexts (RiC)⁵ and RDA, to ensure compatibility and reduce duplication where necessary.

Ecosystem of Interrelated Standards for Providing Access to Archives

As a content standard, DACS is part of an ecosystem of interrelated and, in some cases, interdependent standards which support the process of archival description. Sometimes referred to as “companion standards,” these include structure standards, other content standards, and communication standards.

Relationship to Other Descriptive Standards

DACS is related to other standards. Descriptions created according to DACS are shared electronically using encoding standards, such as MACHine-Readable Cataloging (MARC 21), Encoded Archival Description (EAD), and Encoded Archival Context (EAC). There are also close connections with Resource Description and Access (RDA) and with standards promulgated by the International Council on Archives (ICA), including International Standard Archival Description—General (ISAD[G]), the International Standard Archival Authority Record for Corporate Bodies, Persons, and Families (ISAAR[CPF]), and the International Standard for Describing Functions (ISDF).

In particular, DACS largely conforms to the standards created by the ICA: ISAD(G) and ISAAR(CPF). All of the data elements of ISAD(G) and ISAAR(CPF) are incorporated into DACS—in some cases, virtually word for word. The exception is the exclusion of the Level of Description element from ISAD(G). It is hoped that these close ties will allow U.S. archivists to readily share information about their collections around the world. This revision continues to rely heavily on the ICA standards while recognizing that there is a growing convergence between museum, library, and archival practice.

This growing convergence and the removal of a glossary from DACS make it important to carefully define the entities described in DACS. Here, the following terms rely on the definitions shown:

Corporate body: an organization or group of people identified by a name and that acts, or may act, as a unit, or an institutional position held by a person

Person: an individual of the human species

Family: two or more people related through marriage, birth, adoption, or other legal manner, or who present themselves as a family

These definitions disallow the creation of headings for personas, bibliographic identities, and animals but otherwise would not create significant divergence from library authority file structures.

Revision Decisions

As a descriptive standard of the Society of American Archivists, DACS was placed on a periodic revision cycle. With the release of Resource Description and Access (RDA)² in 2010, the Council of the Society of American Archivists asked the Technical Subcommittee on Describing Archives: A Content Standard (TS-DACS) to initiate a revision of DACS. TS-DACS was asked to pay particular attention to how DACS and RDA could be brought into closer alignment. TS-DACS was also charged with looking at the relationship between DACS and the archival standards developed by the International Council on Archives.

In the fall of 2010, TS-DACS began soliciting feedback from the U.S. archival community about how DACS could better meet the needs of that community. Subcommittee members carefully reviewed that feedback and prioritized the recommended changes. Early on, it was recognized that one of the most important issues for the revision was to confront the growing convergence between archival, museum, and library descriptive standards—particularly the promulgation and adoption of RDA. Another significant issue was the need to align DACS with the descriptive standards developed and supported by the International Council on Archives. A final issue was the development of Encoded Archival Context and the Society of American Archivists' adoption of it as an encoding standard and the need to provide guidance on the creation of archival authority records.

Resource Description and Access (RDA)

A careful review of the descriptive rules in DACS and comparison with the descriptive rules contained in RDA quickly demonstrated that many of the rules in Part III of DACS had been superseded by RDA and that important archival rules (particularly those related to the creation of family names) had been included in RDA. This led to the most obvious change from DACS 2004—the removal of Part III.

RDA rules for titles provided by archivists ("devised titles") were in closer agreement with archival practices. DACS 2004 had used the term *supplied* for these titles, in alignment with ISAD(G). Recognizing the growing convergence between library, museum, and archival descriptive standards, and the predominant use of the term *devised* by companion archival standards to DACS, as well as the greater clarity of the term, the subcommittee has chosen to change the term *supplied* to *devised*.

Finally, the subcommittee considers it important that the U.S. archival community continue to monitor the development of RDA. Its reliance on entities and their linkages provides promise for informing the developing archival conceptual model and for greater cooperation between archives and libraries in the future.

Standards of the International Council on Archives

Part I of DACS was initially developed to mirror the components of the General International Standard Archival Description (ISAD[G]) developed by the International Council on Archives (ICA). Part II was designed to mirror the International Standard Archival Authority Record For Corporate Bodies, Persons and Families (ISAAR[CPF]). This structure and concordance is maintained in the revised version of DACS.

ICA has also developed standards for describing functions (International Standard for Describing Functions [ISDF]) and archival institutions (International Standard for Describing Institutions with Archival Holdings [ISDIAH]). These standards are not currently addressed by DACS.

ICA is currently in the process of developing "a single reference model for descriptive standards to enable archivists to describe different types of archival entities (archival materials, corporate bodies, persons, or families, and functions) and to document these entities in relationship to each other at particular points of time, or over time."³ The purpose of this reference model is to bring the ICA descriptive standards into closer alignment with one another. The current revision of DACS recognizes the convergence of descriptive standards, and TS-DACS will continue to monitor developments in this area with the goal of keeping DACS aligned with ICA descriptive standards.

Encoded Archival Context and the Need for a Content Standard for Archival Authority Records

ISAD(G) and ISAAR(CPF)

DACS relies on two international content standards for archival description: *International Standard Archival Description-General (ISAD(G))*⁶ and the *International Standard Archival Authority Record for Corporate Bodies, Persons, and Families (ISAAR(CPF))*.⁷ All of the data elements of ISAD(G) and ISAAR(CPF) are incorporated into DACS—in some cases, virtually verbatim. Part I of DACS was initially developed to mirror the components of ISAD(G) and Part II was designed to mirror ISAAR(CPF). This structure and concordance is maintained in the revised version of DACS.

The review of the ICA descriptive standards and the development and adoption of the Encoded Archival Context encoding standard by the Society of American Archivists led TS-DACS to heavily revise Part II of DACS in 2013. Part II of DACS ~~has been reworked to contain~~ contains rules for the creation of archival authority records. ~~Part II~~ and is broken into six chapters to align with ISAAR(CPF).⁸

The decision to make Part II into rules for archival authority records also necessitated moving Chapters 9 (Identifying Creators) and 10 (Administrative/Biographical History) into Part I as elements 2.6 and 2.7. Element 2.7 has been refocused on information necessary for understanding the collection in hand.

Digital Records

Perhaps the single area that received the most comments from community members was the need to make DACS more relevant to modern records, which increasingly include or consist exclusively of born-digital formats. Of particular concern were rules prescribing *papers*, *records*, and *collections* as the collective terms describing the nature of the archival unit. Commenters felt that these terms did not adequately convey the increasingly digital format of the records. However, there was no community consensus as to what terms should be used instead. Subcommittee members considered this issue in depth and decided to revise the corresponding rule in DACS to permit local practices for new collective terms (such as *personal archives* or *personal records*). TS-DACS recommends that this issue be readdressed during the next revision of DACS.

In response to community members' requests for electronic records examples in DACS, a few such examples were added to Part I. These examples are meant to be illustrative of a growing presence of digital records in archival collections.

Examples

Another recurring theme in the community feedback was the desire for more examples to be included in DACS. The subcommittee agreed that extensive and varied examples would be a valuable help in using DACS. However, several factors pushed the subcommittee's response in a different direction. The DACS revision cycle is coinciding with that for EAD; MARC is undergoing revisions as a result of RDA implementation and will eventually be replaced; and EAC-CPF examples are just now becoming widely available. The subcommittee decided that the best way to respond to the desire for more examples would be to focus its efforts on improving and expanding DACS education offerings. The print edition of DACS retains text examples illustrating specific rules, and additional examples have been supplied as needed.

Comparison to DACS2004

Those accustomed to using DACS 2004 will have little difficulty continuing to utilize the revised DACS. DACS is now divided into two parts: Part I, Describing Archival Materials, and Part II, Archival Authority Records. The numbering schema from DACS 2004 has remained unchanged in Part I and a similar numbering schema has been developed for the revised Part II

What's New in DACS?

DACS 2013	DACS 2004
Minimum, Optimum, Added Value indicated with each element	Minimum, Optimum, Added Value indicated in Chapter 1
Encoding examples not embedded in text	Encoding examples embedded in text
Devised used to indicate titles created by an archivist	_Supplied_ used to indicate titles created by an archivist
Acronyms should be spelled out at least once	No guidance on acronyms
Abbreviations discouraged	No guidance on abbreviations
Square brackets not prescribed	No guidance on square brackets
<i>Papers, records, and collection</i> not prescribed for titles	<i>Papers, records, and collection</i> prescribed for titles
Part II covers Archival Authority Records	Part II covers Describing Creators
Element 2.6 discusses Identifying Creators	Chapter 9 discusses Identifying Creators
Element 2.7 discusses Administrative/Biographical History	Chapter 10 discusses Administrative/Biographical History
Part III eliminated	Part III discusses Forms of Names
Preface to 2004 edition included as Appendix A	Preface to 2004 edition
Relies on the SAA Glossary at http://www2.archivists.org/glossary	Glossary included as Appendix A
The number of crosswalks in Appendix C has been reduced	Crosswalks in Appendix C
Appendix D removed with emphasis reoriented to DACS educational offerings	Appendix D included full encoding examples

Records in Contexts (RiC)

Following the draft release of its conceptual model in 2016, DACS and Records in Contexts (RiC) are now entering a period of coevolution. Much of the 2018 revision of the Statement of Principles on Archival Description attempts to bring DACS in closer alignment with RiC. Of particular importance is the structuring of Principle 4, which outlines three entities that must be described: records, agents, and activities, as well as the relationships between them. This structure allows archivists to create more complex and networked representation of records, including both their content and context(s). As opposed to archival description represented as hierarchy, this network of linked entities and the relationships between them will allow for deeper understanding and discovery of records and their creators.

Other Companion Standards

Archivists should look to DACS for guidance about how to describe the qualities of archives as records -- their creation, provenance, maintenance, and relationship to other records and creators. Archivists should consult companion standards for guidance on creating authorized forms of names and portraying the particular artifactual characteristics of specialized materials (like music, archived websites, or any example of the vast variety of other materials that may be found in an archive's holdings).⁹

Implementation Neutrality

DACS is implementation-neutral and can be expressed in any data format that maps to its record structure. It has been most closely implemented by, and co-evolved with, the *Encoded Archival Description* (EAD)¹⁰ suite of XML schemata but can equally be encoded in MARC21,¹¹ RDF,¹² a database-backed archives management system, or any other communication standard. Whereas DACS primarily serves a U.S. audience, the stakeholders of many encoding standards represent an international community rooted in sometimes diverging descriptive practices. This has necessitated encoding implementations that err on the side of permissiveness, and practitioners may opt to strengthen the alignment between the respective encoding standard of their choice and DACS by producing a narrower implementation of the chosen encoding standard at the local level.

The Relationship between the Principles and the Rules

Describing Archives: A Content Standard provides a set of principles and elements (with rules for formulating elements) that unite archival professionals in the United States with common understanding and practice toward the creation of descriptions of archival holdings.

Principles are fundamental propositions that support and shape the practices of a profession and reflect its basic values. One key value shared by archivists is their responsibility to provide maximum access to the holdings in their custody.¹³ An essential precondition for providing access is the sufficient and effective description of their holdings. The eleven principles that precede DACS represent the fundamental propositions that, if collectively adhered to, can help ensure the success of archival description in promoting user access. The elements and rules of DACS, in turn, elaborate on those principles, providing the practical instructions required to produce archival description that realizes the sense and purpose of the principles.

Collectively, the principles, elements, and rules of DACS provide a framework to guide practitioners through a range of activities from concrete descriptive tasks to the development of repository-wide descriptive programs. Adherence to DACS promotes consistency for users, ensures interoperability with systems for maintenance and display, and helps to maintain the authenticity and integrity of records. The inherent flexibility of DACS requires practitioners to use their professional judgment and expertise when writing principled, standards-compliant description. Local implementation guidelines remain integral to the success of *Describing Archives: A Content Standard*.

[1]: Steven Hensen, comp., *Archives, Personal Papers, and Manuscripts*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1989). The first edition was published in 1983.

[2] Joint Steering Committee for Development of RDA, *Resource Description and Access* (Chicago, IL: American Library Association, 2010).

[3] International Council on Archives, Committee on Best Practices and Standards, *Progress Report for Revising and Harmonising ICA Descriptive Standards*, July 4, 2012, accessed November 6, 2012, <http://www.ica.org/13155/standards/cbps-progress-report-for-revising-and-harmonising-ica-descriptive-standards.html>, p. 15.

[2]: *RDA: Resource Description and Access* (RDA Steering Committee), <http://rda-rsc.org/>.

[3]: *Encoded Archival Context—Corporate Bodies, Persons, and Families* (Society of American Archivists, Technical Subcommittee on Encoded Archival Standards), <http://eac.staatsbibliothek-berlin.de/>.

[4]: <https://github.com/saa-ts-dacs/dacs>.

[5]: *Records in Contexts: A Conceptual Model for Archival Description* (International Council on Archives, September 2016), Consultation Draft v0.1, <https://www.ica.org/sites/default/files/RiC-CM-0.1.pdf>.

[6]: *ISAD(G): General International Standard Archival Description*, 2nd ed. (Ottawa: International Council on Archives, 2000), https://www.ica.org/sites/default/files/CBPS_2000_Guidelines_ISAD%28G%29_Second-edition_EN.pdf.

[7]: *ISAAR(CPF): International Standard Archival Authority Record for Corporate Bodies, Persons and Families*, 2nd ed. (International Council on Archives, 2004), https://www.ica.org/sites/default/files/CBPS_Guidelines_ISAAR_Second-edition_EN.pdf.

[8]: Between 2010-2013, a careful review of the descriptive rules in DACS Part III revealed that much duplication existed with AACR2 rules for forming names with minor variations such as additional rules for forming family names. With the release of RDA (which incorporates additional rules better-suited to archival description), along with a growing convergence of goals (consistent, reusable, and clear description whether bibliographic or archival) amongst libraries, archives, and museums, it seemed prudent for the archival community to rely on bibliographic standards rather than support two parallel but slightly divergent content standards. This led to the most obvious change from DACS 2004—the removal of Part III.

[9]: See Appendix B: Companion Standards. https://github.com/saa-ts-dacs/dacs/blob/master/appendices/appendix_b_companion_standards.md.

[10]: *Encoded Archival Description* (Society of American Archivists), <http://www.loc.gov/ead/index.html>.

[11]: *MARC 21* (Library of Congress), <http://www.loc.gov/marc/>.

[12]: *Resource Description Framework (RDF) 1.1* (W3C, 2014), <https://www.w3.org/RDF/>.

[13]: International Council on Archives. Committee on Best Practices and Standards Working Group on Access, "Principles of Access to Archives," August 24, 2012, https://www.ica.org/sites/default/files/ICA_Access-principles_EN.pdf.

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Statement of Principles

The following statement of principles forms the basis for the rules in this standard. It is a recapitulation of generally accepted archival principles as derived from theoretical works and a variety of other sources. These include earlier statements about description and descriptive standards found in the reports of working groups commissioned to investigate aspects of archival description,¹ national rules for description,² and statements of the ICA Committee on Descriptive Standards.³ In recognizing the disparate nature of archival holdings, the statement is also grounded in accepted professional practice in the United States.

Holdings of archival repositories represent every possible type of material acquired from a wide variety of sources. How archives manage and describe their holdings is rooted in the nature of the materials, the context of their creation, and two hundred years of archival theory. Archival descriptive practices have increasingly been applied to all of the materials held by archives, regardless of their provenance or method of acquisition. These principles examine the nature of archival materials and their context and reflect how those aspects are made apparent in description.

The Nature of Archival Holdings

Archival collections are the natural result of the activities of individuals and organizations and serve as the recorded memory thereof. This distinctive relationship between records and the activities that generated them differentiates archives from other documentary resources.

Principle 1: Records in archives possess unique characteristics.

Archival materials have traditionally been understood to consist of the documents organically created, accumulated, and/or used by a person or organization in the course of the conduct of affairs and preserved because of their continuing value. They most often consist of aggregations of documents (largely unpublished) and are managed as such, though archival institutions frequently hold discrete items that must also be treated consistently within the institution's descriptive system. In the course of their regular activities, individuals, archival repositories, and other institutions may also consciously acquire and assemble records that do not share a common provenance or origin but that reflect some common characteristic, such as a particular subject, theme, or form. Such collections are part of the holdings in most institutions and must be described in a way that is consistent with the rest of the holdings. All of these materials may be described using this standard.

Principle 2: The principle of *respect des fonds* is the basis of archival arrangement and description.

The records created, assembled, accumulated, and/or maintained and used by an organization or individual must be kept together (i.e., identified as belonging to the same aggregation) in their original order, if such order exists or has been maintained. They ought not to be mixed or combined with the records of another individual or corporate body. This dictum is the natural and logical consequence of the organic nature of archival materials.⁴ Inherent in the overarching principle of *respect des fonds* are two sub-principles—provenance and original order. The principle of provenance means that the records that were created, assembled, accumulated, and/or maintained by an organization or individual must be represented together, distinguishable from the records of any other organization or individual. The principle of original order means that the order of the records that was established by the creator should be maintained by physical and/or intellectual means whenever possible to preserve existing relationships between the documents and the evidential value inherent in their order. Together, these principles form the basis of archival arrangement and description.

In the context of this standard, the principle of provenance requires further elaboration. The statement that the records of one creator must be represented together does not mean that it is necessary (or even possible) to keep the records of one creator physically together. It does, however, mean that the provenance of the records must be clearly reflected in the description, that the description must enable retrieval by provenance, and that a descriptive system must be capable of representing together all the records of a single creator held by a single repository.

The Relationship Between Arrangement and Description

If the archival functions of arrangement and description are based on the principle of *respect des fonds*, what is the relationship between arrangement and description? While the two are intimately intertwined, it is possible to distinguish between them in the following way. *Arrangement* is the intellectual and/or physical processes of organizing documents in accordance with accepted archival principles, as well as the results of these processes. *Description* is the creation of an accurate representation of the archival material by the process of capturing, collating, analyzing, and organizing information that serves to identify archival material and to explain the context and records systems that produced it, as well as the results of these processes.

Principle 3: Arrangement involves the identification of groupings within the material.

Arrangement is the process of identifying the logical groupings of materials within the whole as they were established by the creator, of constructing a new organization when the original ordering has been lost, or of establishing an order when one never existed. The archivist then identifies further sub-groupings within each unit down to the level of granularity that is feasible or desirable, even to the individual item. This process creates hierarchical groupings of material, with each step in the hierarchy described as a level. By custom, archivists have assigned names to some, but not all, levels of arrangement. The most commonly identified are collection, record group, series, file (or filing unit), and item. A large or complex body of material may have many more levels. The archivist must determine for practical reasons which groupings will be treated as a unit for purposes of description. These may be defined as the entire corpus of material of the creator (papers, records, or collection), a convenient administrative grouping (record and manuscript groups), or a reflection of administrative record-keeping systems (series and filing units).

Principle 4: Description reflects arrangement.

Archival repositories must be able to describe holdings ranging from thousands of linear feet to a single item. The amount of description and level of detail will depend on the importance of the material, management needs and resources of the repository, and access requirements of the users. That being the case, an archival description may consist of a multilevel structure that begins with a description of the whole and proceeds through increasingly more detailed descriptions of the parts, or it may consist only of a description of the whole. Within a given body of material, the repository may choose to describe some parts at a greater level of detail than others. A single item may be described in minute detail, whether or not it is part of a larger body of material.

Introduction

What is archival description and what should it do?

Archival description exists to facilitate the use of archives by people in order to understand the past through traces in records. Its efficacy can be measured by how well it achieves that goal. *Describing Archives: A Content Standard* provides a set of principles for archivists to consider when conducting the work of a descriptive program, and a set of elements (and rules for creating these elements) for archivists to use when creating archival description.

Archival description enables archivists to distill masses of information about records into a small set of characteristics describing aggregations of records. Archivists do this work because it would often be impractical to fully represent the entirety of each record in a repository and because it would be difficult for a user to make sense of masses of records without a guide to what they *are*, what they *mean* and the historical *process* by which they were created and maintained.¹ For this distillation to be intelligible, archivists must understand the evidence of people, places, ideas and activities provided by records so that they can adequately represent the records to users and communicate their nature, value, and significance. Good archival description cannot just depict the physical and intellectual characteristics of documents. It must communicate how the accumulation of documents in a collection represents and provides evidence of the major functions of an organization or individual. This contextual description is key to meaning-making and gives users the tools necessary to effectively evaluate the value of records as evidence and information.

Archivists describe information about the lifecycle and administration of records that may not be present in the records themselves. Information about appraisal, custodial history, administrative interventions, restrictions, reformatting, or any other activity that has the power to change users' understanding of records' content or context should be faithfully documented and presented to the user. Without this information, the user may not be able to make a reliable determination about the historical events, ideas, places, and people that records document. Descriptive work should document a program of archival administration that maintains the authenticity, integrity, and reliability of records.

The Nature of User-centered Archival Description

Archival holdings are varied in their nature and provenance, and archival description reflects this fact. If archival materials are to be described consistently within an institutional, regional, or national descriptive system, the rules must apply to a variety of forms and media created by, and acquired from, a variety of sources.

Principle 5: The rules of description apply to all archival materials, regardless of form or medium.

It is acknowledged that archival materials come in a variety of forms and media, and rules for archival description must therefore accommodate all forms and media (and the relationships between them). Inherent in the principle of provenance—that the records created, assembled, accumulated, and/or maintained and used by an organization or individual must be kept together—is the assumption that no records are excluded from the description because of their particular form or medium. Different media of course require different rules to describe their particular characteristics; for example, sound recordings may require some indication of playing speed and photographs may require some indication of polarity and color.

Principle 6: The principles of archival description apply equally to records created by corporate bodies, individuals, or families.

The documents that are the product of the functions and activities of organizations may differ in extent, arrangement, subject matter, and so on, from those that result from the activities of individuals or families. While there may be valid reasons to distinguish between them in the workflow of a repository, the principles of archival arrangement and description should be applied equally to materials created by individuals, families, or organizations.

Principle 7: Archival descriptions may be presented at varying levels of detail to produce a variety of outputs.

The nature and origins of a body of archival materials may be summarized in their entirety in a single collective description. However, the extent and complexity of archival materials may require a more detailed description of their various components as well. The resulting technique of multilevel description is "the preparation of descriptions that are related to one another in a part-to-whole relationship and that need complete identification of both parts and the comprehensive whole in multiple descriptive records."⁵ This requires some elucidation regarding the order in which such information is presented and the relationships between description(s) of the parts and the description of the whole.⁶

Principle 7.1: Levels of description correspond to levels of arrangement.

The levels of arrangement determine the levels of description. However, because not all levels of arrangement are required or possible in all cases, it follows that not all levels of description are required. It is understood that description is an iterative and dynamic process; that is, descriptive information is recorded, reused, and enhanced at many stages in the management of archival holdings. For example, basic information is recorded when incoming material is accessioned, well before the material is arranged. Furthermore, arrangement can change, particularly when a repository receives regular accruals of records from an ongoing organization. In that situation, the arrangement will not be complete until the organization ceases to exist. Thus, it is more appropriate to say that description reflects the current state of arrangement (whatever that may be) and can (and does) change as a result of further arrangement activities.⁷

Principle 7.2: Relationships between levels of description must be clearly indicated.

While the actual work of arrangement and description can proceed in any order that makes sense to the archivist, a descriptive system must be able to represent and maintain the relationships among the various parts of the hierarchy. Depending on the point at which the descriptive system is entered, an end user must be able to navigate to higher or lower levels of description.

Principle 7.3: Information provided at each level of description must be appropriate to that level.

When a multilevel description is created, the information provided at each level of description must be relevant to the material being described at that level. This means that it is inappropriate to provide detailed information about the contents of files in a description of a higher level. Similarly, archivists should provide administrative or biographical information appropriate to the materials being described at a given level (e.g., a series). This principle also implies that it is undesirable to repeat information recorded at higher levels of description. Information that is common to the component parts should be provided at the highest appropriate level.

The Creators of Archival Material

An important aspect of understanding archival materials is the description of the context in which they were created.

Principle 8: The creators of archival materials, as well as the materials themselves, must be described.

Because the principle of provenance is fundamental to the arrangement and description of archival materials, it follows that the provenance, or the creator(s), of archival materials must be described as well. Except in cases in which the creator or collector is truly unknown, this means that the creator or collector of the materials must be identified and included in (or linked to) the description of the materials. In addition, the functions or activities of the creator(s) that produced the archival materials must be described. Finally, standardized access points must be provided that indicate not just the primary creator but also the relationships between successive creators, for example, the parts of a corporate body that has undergone reorganization(s). DACS includes rules for providing all of this information in a consistent way. The repository as collector does not need to be described.

[1] Working Group on Standards for Archival Description, "Archival Description Standards: Establishing a Process for their Development and Implementation," *American Archivist* 52, no. 4 (Fall 1989):440–443 (source hereinafter cited as the WGSAD Report); *Toward Descriptive Standards: Report and Recommendations of the Canadian Working Group on Archival Descriptive Standards* (Ottawa: Bureau of Canadian Archivists, 1985), 6–9, 55–59, 63–64; Wendy M. Duff and Kent M. Haworth, "Advancing Archival Description: A Model for Rationalizing North American Descriptive Standards," *Archives and Manuscripts* 25, no. 2 (1997):198–199, 203–204 (source hereinafter cited as the Bentley Report).

[2] *Rules for Archival Description* (Ottawa: Bureau of Canadian Archivists, 1990), xi–xvi, rules 0.1, 0.2, 0.22, 1.0A1, 1.0A2 (source hereinafter cited as *RAD*); Hensen, *Archives, Personal Papers, and Manuscripts*, rules 0.3, 0.9, 0.10, 0.12, 1.0A (source hereinafter cited as *APPM*).

[3] International Council on Archives "Statement of Principles," *Archivaria* 34 (1992): 8–16; ICA Committee on Descriptive Standards, *ISAD(G): General International Standard Archival Description*, 2nd ed. (Ottawa: International Council on Archives, 1999), 7–12 (source hereinafter cited as *ISAD(G)*).

[4] S. Muller, J. A. Feith, and R. Fruin, *Manual for the Arrangement and Description of Archives*, translation of 2nd edition (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2002), 19. "An archival collection is an organic whole."

[5] *RAD*, p. D-5.

[6] The rules for multilevel description are found in *RAD*, rule 1.0A2, and in *ISAD(G)*, p. 12.

[7] *ISAD(G)*, Statement I-3, p. 7.

Because it facilitates use, archival description is a user-centered product and process. This approach to archival description helps archivists remain connected to communities of users throughout the entire lifecycle of archives administration, dynamically and iteratively adjusting to new understanding of users and their needs.

Uses for and users of records should be considered comprehensively, and will vary from repository to repository. Users include not only those outside the repository, but the repository's own staff. It is imperative that repositories identify, engage, and seek to understand the motivations and needs of *their* users, which may include but are not limited to scholarly production, collection care and control, institutional knowledge, connection to family ties, artistic endeavors, government accountability, justice-seeking endeavors, and symbolic purposes of holding records.

Identifying aggregations of records

When describing archives, archivists provide a sensemaking function -- they help the user understand, at deepening levels of granularity, what these records are, who created them, what events they represent, and what they mean.

In order to do this, they must first identify aggregations of records. This is a core added value of archival labor -- the ability to explain masses of information to users in a manner that is both insightful and succinct.² It is also a site of archives power, where the archivist has the opportunity to declare what is important and what is not.³

Archival theory and tradition privileges description of the relationship between creators of records and the traces they leave behind as a result of events and activities in their lives. Records are often produced and kept according to these qualities, and where common aggregations are discovered, it is useful to maintain them. It is less useful for an archivist to aggregate resources by their common subject, particularly because doing so often results in the loss of information about how and by whom records were created.

Describing aggregations of records

Once an archivist has identified a meaningful aggregation of records, they may avail themselves of any relevant elements within the DACS element set in order to describe characteristics particular and appropriate to that aggregation. As described in Chapter 1, in the section on *Requirements for Multilevel Descriptions*, descriptions of a particular aggregation may (implicitly or explicitly) inherit characteristics from the more general aggregation of which it is a part. Furthermore, each aggregation should include all DACS single-level minimum elements, either described explicitly at that aggregation or inherited from associated archival description.

Provenance

To achieve the goal of faithfully documenting and maintaining information about how individuals and groups created and maintained records, archival practice has relied on the guidance of *respect des fonds* for more than 150 years.⁴ Keeping the records of a given creator separate from other records (physically, intellectually, and in descriptive systems) has been an excellent mechanism to ensure that contexts of creation and maintenance are maintained.

However, the application of *respect des fonds* can often flatten existing complexity by obscuring the ways in which human inter-connections, disruptions, false starts, and confusing circumstances produced records in the first place. Users benefit from understanding the ways that records are created, collected, and distributed by multiple agents, beyond the bare details of their shared provenance.

All records within a fonds rarely come from the same creator, even if they are from the same collector and share provenance. In modern organizations, while it is undoubtedly useful to document the person or organization who brought together the group of records given to a repository, it would be even more useful to document the web of activities by which records are collected and created, and by whom, from within and outside of the organization and how structures of power and control brought records into existence. Because information systems have the power to document relationships and contexts between and across records and creators, *respect des fonds* should be considered one articulation of a method for documenting archival content and context, rather than a principle of archival description. One could imagine technical mechanisms by which this web of contexts, records, and creators could be represented in the entirety of its complexity, beyond the directive toward administrative separation that *respect des fonds* demands.

This should not be taken as permission for archivists to create their own physical or intellectual order by subject, genre, form, or other facet -- doing so often destroys context. Instead, archivists should embrace the best information technologies available to them to document and represent records over time as they are understood to the archivist.

Original order and arrangement as archival context

The concept of original order has long been privileged in archival description as representing a state of arrangement with special significance in revealing the context underlying the creation of records. The principle of respect for original order derives from this interpretation. Recent theory and practice have shown this to be much more complex.⁵ For instance, there are many arrangements by which a creator may have maintained and used records over time. The order in which records are received by a repository may not match the order in which they were last used or maintained by their creator(s), further complicating the very concept of "originality" and the narrative of authenticity it supports. Similarly, electronic records complicate the idea of a fixed, canonical order because they are commonly moved and maintained in a file system over the course of their life cycles.⁶

Rather than a privileged physical sequence of records, original order is best thought of as an intellectual construct that communicates important activities and relationships inhering in records through identifying key groupings that reflect the main activities and functions of the record creators.⁷

The principle of original order advises archivists to determine and preserve those groupings, and then to describe records, agents, activities, and the relationships between them in a way that illuminates how creators kept their records and how they were sent to the archives. They should never disrupt or obscure evidence of recordkeeping practices through their own interventions; for instance, it is inadvisable to alter the received order of collection material without a compelling, user-driven need to do so.

By not elevating original order to the place of descriptive principle, DACS acknowledges that arrangement consists of a multitude of intellectual and physical relationships over time, and that arrangement itself is but one among many instances of archival context(s) to be documented.

Principles of Archival Description

1. Archival description expresses professional ethics and values.

Professional values and ethics drive archival work, including descriptive practice.⁸ Archival description is an iterative, ethical practice that requires continual engagement with core values. Rooting standards in values helps archivists enact these values consistently and makes them explicit to our user communities.

Archival description that is rooted in ethics will produce a richer researcher experience because it:

- produces trust in and between users, archivists, and repositories
- encourages a diverse archival record
- promotes responsible and responsive descriptive practices
- holds archivists accountable to users and to each other
- privileges equitable access and accessibility

2. Users are the fundamental reason for archival description.

Archivists make descriptive choices that impact how users find, identify, select, and use archival records. To make wise choices about descriptive practices, archivists must develop and maintain an awareness of user needs and behaviors.

3. Because archival description privileges intellectual content in context, descriptive rules apply equally to all records, regardless of format or carrier type.

Descriptive standards must recognize that not all cultures and communities document in the same ways, and our descriptive standards must be flexible enough to accommodate all the ways that human experience is recorded.

Archivists must adapt and respond to changing recordkeeping practices and technologies. Applying a common set of descriptive rules allows archivists to create consistent descriptions. It encourages confidence in professional judgment and gives archivists the flexibility to apply standards judiciously and thoughtfully.

Consistent description across formats:

- supports broad description and access
- lowers cognitive load for users
- maintains records' contexts as well as intellectual content

4. Records, agents, activities, and the relationships between them are the four fundamental concepts that constitute archival description.

Meaning in archival records is revealed through their contexts as much as through their contents. Archivists expose contextual significance by describing records, agents, activities, and the relationships between them.

- **Records must be described in aggregate and may be described in parts.**

The whole gives meaning and coherence to the parts. Description of the aggregate is therefore an indispensable component of establishing context and must be provided before proceeding with the description of component parts. Archival description must be appropriate, relevant, and specific to a particular aggregation of records.

- **Record creators and other agents must be described sufficiently to understand the meaning of records.**

Agents act on records or interact with other agents across time. Agents may be human or machine.

A category of agents, those responsible for the creation, compilation, and maintenance of the records is particularly important and must be described. Describing these agents requires archivists to document agents' roles, functions, occupations, and activities.

Archivists must be transparent about the sources of their description and recognize that agents have the right to define their identities, which may change over time.

- **Activities that are essential to understanding records must be described.**

Activities, whether biographical, historical, or administrative, provide important contextual information. Describing biographical and historical activities adds information that may be absent from the records themselves. Describing administrative activities helps users understand how the records were affected over time by the actions of various agents following their creation.

- **The relationships among records, agents, and activities are essential to understanding archives and must be described.**

Relationships, which connect agents, records, and activities, convey meaning that may not be apparent from the contents of records alone. Relationships may be simple or may comprise a complex network of interactions among multiple records, agents, and activities.

5. Archival description must be clear about what archivists know, what they don't know, and how they know it.

Archivists must always provide honest description that mitigates human bias and limitations through open reference to their sources of knowledge. Citation in archival description builds a culture of accountability and trust.

Honest description:

- acknowledges archivists' expertise in records, recordkeeping systems, and documentary forms
- delineates the limitations of archivists' knowledge and authority
- acknowledges that archivists are people, and people are biased

6. Archivists must document and make discoverable the actions they take on records.

Archivists and archival repositories are agents whose actions affect records and the ways that all users can access and interact with those records.

Archivists have an obligation based in professional values of accountability and responsible custody to thoroughly and transparently describe their own interventions in the course of their work. These interventions may potentially affect users' understandings of records and are an essential part of archival description.

7. Archival description is accessible.

Users of archives encounter barriers to accessing archival description. Typical barriers may be physical, technological, linguistic or geographic. Archivists must limit or remove these barriers to finding and interacting with description.

Accessible archival description engages creators and communities being documented to reflect their complexity, nuance, and fluidity. Archivists must be respectful of the knowledge they hold in trust and the norms of the communities from which they collect, particularly when collecting from communities that have been historically marginalized.

Accessible and respectful description builds trust between archives, users of archives, and those being documented.

8. Archival description should be easy to use, re-use, and share.

Archival description is a form of data, consisting of discrete data elements that can be expressed in a variety of useful outputs.

Users are best able to use, re-use, and share archival description when:

- it is discoverable
- it is structured
- it is machine-readable
- it is machine-actionable
- it is available under an open license

Archivists must understand the ways that their data can be consumed by a broad range of users, including people and machines.

9. Each collection within a repository must have an archival description.

The absence of archival description is a barrier to users and good stewardship. In order to access archival collections, users must know which collections a repository holds. No matter how basic a description may be, it is more advantageous to users than no description at all.

Creating these archival descriptions helps archivists meet stewardship needs. This results in:

- access to a better, broader sense of the scope of our holdings
- the ability for archivists to gather information about how collections are used
- guidance for future appraisal and acquisition choices

Archival repositories must deploy their resources in a way that permits them to describe all of their collections as part of their normal business operations.

10. Archivists must have a user-driven reason to enhance existing archival description.

When deciding how comprehensively to describe a collection, the goal should be to maximize the availability of all collection materials to users.

Once all collections in a repository have been described at a minimum level,⁹ archivists may choose to add more description. This choice must be based on demonstrated user needs or the mission of the repository.

11. 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.

[1]: For a literary example of the nature of representation and modelling see Jorge Luis Borges, "On Exactitude in Science," in *Collected Fictions*, trans. Andrew Hurley (Penguin, 2000).

[2]: As Jennifer Meehan notes, this kind of sensemaking is only as good as the archivist's judgment, and is itself an act of research and use. Jennifer Meehan, "Making the Leap from Parts to Whole: Evidence and Inference in Archival Arrangement and Description," *The American Archivist* 72, no. 1 (April 1, 2009): 72–90, <https://doi.org/10.17723/aarc.72.1.kj672v4907m11x66>.

[3]: As the anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot noted, we all make meaning of historical events through our observation of them and the power and background we bring to our work. We must acknowledge our power and biases as archivists and never pretend to be impartial stenographers of records. Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Beacon Press, 1995). Rand Jimerson makes a similar (and domain-specific) argument in *Archives Power*. Randall C. Jimerson, *Archives Power: Memory, Accountability, and Social Justice* (Society of American Archivists Chicago, 2009).

[4]: Nancy Bartlett, "Respect Des Fonds: The Origins of the Modern Archival Principle of Provenance," *Primary Sources & Original Works* 1, no. 1–2 (1992): 107–115.

[5]: Terry Cook, "What is Past is Prologue: A History of Archival Ideas Since 1898, and the Future Paradigm Shift," *Archivaria* 43 (Spring 1997), 17–63.

[6]: Jefferson Bailey, "Disrespect des Fonds: Rethinking Arrangement and Description in Born-Digital Archives," *Archive Journal* (June 2013), <http://www.archivejournal.net/essays/disrespect-des-fonds-rethinking-arrangement-and-description-in-born-digital-archives/>.

[7]: Jennifer Meehan, "Rethinking Original Order and Personal Records," *Archivaria* 70 (Fall 2010), 27. As Terry Eastwood insists, "archival arrangement is essentially a process of identifying relationships, not a process of physically ordering and storing documents" Terry Eastwood, "Putting the Parts of the Whole Together: Systematic Arrangement of Archives," *Archivaria* 50 (Fall 2000): 93–94.

[8]: In the United States context, archivists are guided by the Society of American Archivists' [Core Values Statement and Code of Ethics](#). Archivists are also encouraged to consult and follow affiliated ethics and principles statements, including the [Protocols for Native American Archival Materials](#), the International Council on Archives' [Principles for Access to Archives](#) and [Code of Ethics](#).

[9]: Chapter 1 of DACS, *Levels of Description*, provides guidance on which elements must be included for description to meet minimum requirements.

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Chapter 1 Levels of Description

Archival material can be described at many different levels (see Statement of Principles: Principle 3).

A finding aid may consist of only one level of description (single-level descriptions), or it may include many different levels of description (multilevel descriptions). A finding aid that consists of multiple levels of description may provide information at successively narrower levels of arrangement (such as subseries, files, and even items) for some series while confining information to a single level of hierarchy for others.¹

DACS does not attempt to define the proper level of description for any set of archival materials. Archivists should follow the prescriptions of their institutions and apply their own judgment in making such determinations.

DACS defines twenty-five elements that are useful in creating systems for describing archival materials. These systems can be of any type, ranging from simple paper-based files to complex digital information management systems. The output products of these systems—archival descriptions of all kinds and formats, printed on paper or encoded in EAD or MARC 21—must include at minimum a set of discrete descriptive elements that convey standardized information about the archival materials and creators being described. These DACS elements constitute a refinement of the twenty-six high-level elements of archival description defined in the General International Standard Archival Description (ISAD[G]).

Not all of the DACS elements are required in every archival description. Combinations of descriptive elements will vary, depending on whether the archivist considers a specific description to be preliminary or complete and whether it describes archival materials at a single level (e.g., collection level or item level) or at multiple levels that have a whole-part relationship.

Simple archival descriptive systems can be constructed using only the twenty-five elements articulated and defined by this standard; however, more detailed archival descriptive and management systems may require a number of additional elements, either defined by companion standards or standardized at the local level to meet the requirements of a specific repository.

The following requirements specify particular elements from Part I of DACS that should be used in output products—from basic collection-level accession records to fully encoded, multilevel finding aids—intended for the use of archivists or researchers in managing and using archival materials. They articulate a "minimum," "optimum," and "added value" usage of the elements defined by DACS but are not intended to preclude use of other descriptive data that a repository deems necessary for its own descriptive systems or products. DACS does not specify the order or arrangement of elements in a particular descriptive output. Some systems or output formats, such as MARC 21 or EAD, provide specific guidance on the ordering of some or all elements. Others, such as a repository's preliminary accession record or a print finding aid, should include DACS elements in a logical and consistent manner determined by the repository's own procedures and standard practices. The requirements that follow are divided into two sections, one for single-level descriptions and one for multilevel descriptions.

Requirements for Single-level Descriptions

Following are examples of single-level descriptions:

- A preliminary accession record
- A MARC 21 record not linked to other MARC 21 records
- A database record in a repository's collections management database that describes archival materials only at a single level
- A METS (Metadata Encoding and Transmission Standard)² record for a description of archival materials

Single-level descriptions can describe archival materials at *any level*, from large accumulations commonly referred to by archivists as collections, record groups, fonds, or record series, to single items and any level in between. They can, however, only describe that material at one level.

Single-level Required

A single-level description with the minimum number of DACS elements includes:

- Reference Code Element (2.1)
- Name and Location of Repository Element (2.2)
- Title Element (2.3)
- Date Element (2.4)
- Extent Element (2.5)
- Name of Creator(s) Element (2.6) (*if known*)
- Scope and Content Element (3.1)
- Conditions Governing Access Element (4.1)
- Languages and Scripts of the Material Element (4.5)

Single-level Optimum

A single-level description with the optimum number of DACS elements has all of the elements included in Single-level Minimum above, plus the following:

- Administrative/Biographical History Element (2.7)
- Access points (See Overview of Archival Description)

Single-level Added Value

A single-level description using DACS elements to provide added value for researchers includes all of the elements in Single-level Optimum above, plus any other relevant elements the repository wishes to include.

Requirements for Multilevel Descriptions

Following are examples of multilevel descriptions:

- A preliminary collection inventory or register (regardless of whether presented in print or encoded in EAD or another

encoding scheme)

- A full collection inventory or register (regardless of whether presented in print or encoded in EAD or another encoding scheme)
- Multiple linked MARC 21 records
- A database record in a repository's collections management database that describes archival materials at more than one level

Multilevel descriptions can describe archival materials beginning at any level (e.g., collection level, series level) and must include at least one sublevel. Typical multilevel descriptions begin with large accumulations commonly referred to by archivists as collections, record groups, fonds, or record series. ISAD(G) envisions a descriptive framework that recognizes four levels: fonds, series, file, and item; however, DACS elements can be used to describe materials arranged according to this or any other scheme of articulating levels of arrangement of archival materials.

Multilevel Required

The *top* level of a multilevel description with the minimum number of DACS elements includes:

- Reference Code Element (2.1)
- Name and Location of Repository Element (2.2)
- Title Element (2.3)
- Date Element (2.4)
- Extent Element (2.5)
- Name of Creator(s) Element (2.6) (*if known*)
- Scope and Content Element (3.1) *Note: In a minimum description, this element may simply provide a short abstract of the scope and content of the materials being described.*
- Conditions Governing Access Element (4.1)
- Languages and Scripts of the Material Element (4.5)
- Identification of the whole-part relationship of the *top* level to at least the *next subsequent* level in the multilevel description. This may be done through internal tracking within a particular descriptive system; if so, the output must be able to explicitly identify this relationship.

Each *subsequent* level of a multilevel description should include:

- All of the elements used at higher levels, unless the information is the same as that of a higher level or if it is desirable to provide more specific information.

Notes:

- Name of Creator(s) Element (2.6): *At subsequent levels of a multilevel description, this element is required only if the person(s) or organization(s) responsible for the creation or accumulation of the material at the subsequent level differs from the higher level(s). This can also be accomplished by using the Name Segment of the Title Element (2.3).*
- Scope and Content Element (3.1): *Scope and contents are typically necessary for large units of aggregation and are not required at the file or item level if the Title Element (2.3) is sufficient to describe the material.*
- Identification of the whole-part relationship of *each* level to at least the *next subsequent* level in the multilevel description. This may be done through internal tracking within a particular descriptive system or through an explicit statement of the relationship.

Multilevel Optimum

The *top* level of a multilevel description with the optimum number of DACS elements includes all of the elements in Multilevel Minimum above, plus the following:

- Administrative/Biographical History Element (2.7)
- Scope and Content Element (3.1) *Note: In an optimum description, this element should include a full description of the scope and content of the materials being described.*

- Access points (See Overview of Archival Description.)

Each *subsequent* level of that multilevel description should include:

- All of the elements included at the higher levels of the multilevel description, unless the information is the same as that of a higher level or if it is desirable to provide more specific information.
- Identification of the whole-part relationship of *each* level to at least the *next subsequent* level in the multilevel description. This may be done through internal tracking within a particular descriptive system or through an explicit statement of the relationship.

Multilevel Added Value

A multilevel description using DACS elements to provide added value for researchers should include all of the elements in Multilevel Optimum above, plus any other elements the repository wishes to include.

Each *subsequent* level of that multilevel description should include:

- All of the elements included at the higher levels of the multilevel description, unless the information is the same as that of a higher level or it is desirable to provide more specific information.
- Identification of the whole-part relationship of *each* level to at least the *next subsequent* level in the multilevel description. This may be done through internal tracking within a particular descriptive system or through an explicit statement of the relationship.

[1] For more information, refer to International Council on Archives, *ISAD(G): General International Standard Archival Description*, 2nd ed., adopted by the Committee on Descriptive Standards, Stockholm, Sweden, September 19–22, 1999, accessed February 19, 2013, [http://www.icacds.org.uk/eng/ISAD\(G\).pdf](http://www.icacds.org.uk/eng/ISAD(G).pdf).

[2] The METS standard is an XML schema for encoding descriptive, administrative, and structural metadata for objects within a digital library. It is an initiative of the Digital Library Federation and is maintained by the Library of Congress. Information is available at <http://www.loc.gov/standards/mets/>.

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Introduction to Archival Authority Records

The structure and content of archival materials cannot be completely understood without some knowledge of the context in which they were created. It is insufficient for the archivist simply to include the name of the creator in the title of the description of the materials. Additional information is required regarding the corporate bodies, persons, and families responsible for the creation, assembly, accumulation, and/or maintenance and use of the archival materials being described. Part II describes the information that is required to establish this context. It is the logical outcome of Principle 8 in the Statement of Principles: that the creators of archival materials, as well as the materials themselves, must be described.

There are three steps in the process of creating the documentation that establishes archival context.

- The archivist must first identify the corporate bodies, individuals, and families that played a significant role in the creation of the materials.

Element 2.6, Name of Creator(s), provides specific guidance as to which of these entities need to be associated with the description of the materials, based on their role in the creation, assembly, accumulation, and/or maintenance and use of the records.

- The archivist must assemble biographical information about these individuals and families or data about the history, structure, functions, and relationships of the relevant organization.

Element 2.7, Administrative/Biographical History, provides guidance on recording biographical data or administrative histories.

- Finally, the names of these entities must be rendered in a standardized form using standardized vocabularies (e.g., *Library of Congress Authorities*) or with rules for formulating standardized names such as those found in AACR2, ISAAR(CPF), or RDA to facilitate the retrieval of information across descriptions, systems, and institutions.

Once formulated, this information may be presented to the user in either of two ways. Traditionally, archivists have incorporated the names of creators and contextual information about them directly into archival descriptions, both in catalog records and in finding aids. Such information, created according to DACS rules, may certainly continue to be employed in this manner.

However, DACS also provides an alternative: information about creators of archival materials can be captured and maintained in a separate system of archival authority records that are linked to the archival descriptions rather than being embedded within them. This approach reflects the model created by the International Council on Archives where the General International Standard for Archival Description (ISAD[G]) provides rules on description and the International Standard Archival Authority Record for Corporate Bodies, Persons and Families (ISAAR[CPF]) governs the creation of information about creators. Chapters 9 through 14 provide guidance on the construction of archival authority records based on the structure of ISAAR(CPF).

Separating the capture and maintenance of contextual information has a number of advantages. The ability to link a description of a creating entity to several descriptions of records from the same creator held within the same repository eliminates the need to duplicate the administrative/biographical history in each description. Furthermore, the practice enables the linking of descriptions of creating entities to descriptions of records from the same creator(s) held by more than one repository, as well as to descriptions of related library and museum materials, websites, and so on. Relationships between creating entities also can be documented in authority records. Finally, certain functions can be efficiently performed in authority records, such as maintaining a record of variant and related terms, which cannot be done well (or at all) within descriptions.

Where several repositories hold records of the same provenance, they can share or exchange contextual information about the creator more easily if it has been maintained in a standardized manner. Archival authority records do not merely *record* contextual information, they also provide a means of *standardizing* access points and the contextual information. They are similar to library authority records in that both support the creation of standardized access points in descriptions. Such standardization has two aspects: consistency and uniqueness. *Consistency* requires that the name of a creator be identical each time it is used as an access point in the descriptive system. This is achieved by implementing rules that establish an authorized form of the name where different forms exist. *Uniqueness* requires that each person, family, or corporate body have a heading that applies to it alone. This is achieved by making additions to otherwise identical names in order to distinguish between them. Whenever possible, repositories should use the form of personal and corporate names found in the *Library of Congress Authorities* (formerly *Library of Congress Name Authority File* [LCNAF]) or use rules for formulating standardized names such as those found in AACR2, ISAAR(CPF), or RDA.

While archival authority records and the bibliographic authority records used in library systems are similar, they differ in significant ways. A bibliographic authority record consists of an authorized heading that standardizes the form of the name, as well as other information elements that describe the named entity or point to other authority records. Archival authority records contain the following elements similar to bibliographic authority records:

- The authority entry (i.e., a standardized access point established by an archival agency uniquely identifying the corporate body, person, or family associated with the creation of the archival materials)
- References to related names and variant names
- Documentation of how the authority record was established and maintained

Beyond this, archival authority records support a much wider set of requirements than library authority records. These additional requirements derive from the importance of documenting the context of records creation in archival description and control systems. As such, archival authority records usually contain much more information than library authority records.

While archival authority records generally are distinguished from library authority records in that they focus on identifying and providing information about those associated in some way with the creation of archival materials, they do not include topical subjects, forms or genres, functions, or uniform titles. Archivists may also maintain authority files to control the terms used to provide access in these ways; however, such applications are beyond the scope of this standard.¹

The two methods of presenting archival context information, i.e., within the description or in a separate authority file, are not mutually exclusive. Indeed, archives may quite reasonably maintain separate files of authority data for internal control purposes even when the names reflected in those records are embedded in descriptions. Archivists may also wish to describe some contextual information only in the Administrative/Biographical History Element (see Element 2.7) embedded in descriptions of archival materials.

Purpose and Scope

Part II provides rules on the creation of authority records based on the data elements found in ISAAR(CPF).

Exclusions

Instructions for describing the archival materials themselves are found in Part I.

Instructions for identifying creators are found in Part I, Element 2.6, and instructions for creating contextual information embedded in descriptions of archival materials are found in Part I, Element 2.7.

Instructions for formatting names of persons, families, or corporate bodies identified as creators using the rules in Element 2.6 are found in companion standards.

Structure and Numbering

Part II consists of six chapters. Chapter 9 provides general rules for creating authority records for repositories that wish to maintain separate authority systems. Chapters 10 through 14 provide rules for the different areas of archival authority records.

Descriptive Outputs

The rules provide for data input but do not prescribe particular outputs or display. Presentation of this information to the user, including the way that the authority information is linked to the descriptions of the materials, will be determined by institutional policy within each repository's descriptive system.

Examples

The examples in Part II are illustrative, not prescriptive. They illustrate only the application of the rule to which they are appended. Furthermore, the presentation of the examples is intended only to assist in understanding how to use the rules and does not imply a prescribed layout, typography, or output.

[1] DACS does not provide rules for the construction and maintenance of subject authorities. However, a corporate body, person, or family can also be the subject of a unit of description, and an archival authority record that conforms to DACS may also serve to control the form of name and identity of a corporate body, person, or family named in a subject access point. See Appendix B, Companion Standards.

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Preface

The Society of American Archivists adopted Describing Archives: A Content Standard (DACS) as the official content standard of the U.S. archival community in 2005. DACS was designed to be used to create a variety of archival descriptions, including finding aids and catalog records. It replaced *Archives, Personal Papers, and Manuscripts*,¹ which had served the U.S. archival community for more than two decades.

Relationship to Other Standards

DACS is related to other standards. Descriptions created according to DACS are shared electronically using encoding standards, such as MACHine-Readable Cataloging (MARC 21), Encoded Archival Description (EAD), and Encoded Archival Context (EAC). There are also close connections with Resource Description and Access (RDA) and with standards promulgated by the International Council on Archives (ICA), including International Standard Archival Description—General (ISAD[G]), the International Standard Archival Authority Record for Corporate Bodies, Persons, and Families (ISAAR[CPF]), and the International Standard for Describing Functions (ISDF).

In particular, DACS largely conforms to the standards created by the ICA: ISAD(G) and ISAAR(CPF). All of the data elements of ISAD(G) and ISAAR(CPF) are incorporated into DACS—in some cases, virtually word for word. The exception is the exclusion of the Level of Description element from ISAD(G). It is hoped that these close ties will allow U.S. archivists to readily share information about their collections around the world. This revision continues to rely heavily on the ICA standards while recognizing that there is a growing convergence between museum, library, and archival practice.

This growing convergence and the removal of a glossary from DACS make it important to carefully define the entities described in DACS. Here, the following terms rely on the definitions shown:

Corporate body: an organization or group of people identified by a name and that acts, or may act, as a unit, or an institutional position held by a person

Person: an individual of the human species

Family: two or more people related through marriage, birth, adoption, or other legal manner, or who present themselves as a family

These definitions disallow the creation of headings for personas, bibliographic identities, and animals but otherwise would not create significant divergence from library authority file structures.

Revision Decisions

As a descriptive standard of the Society of American Archivists, DACS was placed on a periodic revision cycle. With the release of Resource Description and Access (RDA)² in 2010, the Council of the Society of American Archivists asked the Technical Subcommittee on Describing Archives: A Content Standard (TS-DACS) to initiate a revision of DACS. TS-DACS was asked to pay particular attention to how DACS and RDA could be brought into closer alignment. TS-DACS was also charged with looking at the relationship between DACS and the archival standards developed by the International Council on Archives.

In the fall of 2010, TS-DACS began soliciting feedback from the U.S. archival community about how DACS could better meet the needs of that community. Subcommittee members carefully reviewed that feedback and prioritized the recommended changes. Early on, it was recognized that one of the most important issues for the revision was to confront the growing convergence between archival, museum, and library descriptive standards—particularly the promulgation and adoption of RDA. Another significant issue was the need to align DACS with the descriptive standards developed and supported by the International Council on Archives. A final issue was the development of Encoded Archival Context and the Society of American Archivists' adoption of it as an encoding standard and the need to provide guidance on the creation of archival authority records.

Resource Description and Access (RDA)

A careful review of the descriptive rules in DACS and comparison with the descriptive rules contained in RDA quickly demonstrated that many of the rules in Part III of DACS had been superseded by RDA and that important archival rules (particularly those related to the creation of family names) had been included in RDA. This led to the most obvious change from DACS 2004—the removal of Part III.

RDA rules for titles provided by archivists ("devised titles") were in closer agreement with archival practices. DACS 2004 had used the term *supplied* for these titles, in alignment with ISAD(G). Recognizing the growing convergence between library, museum, and archival descriptive standards, and the predominant use of the term *devised* by companion archival standards to DACS, as well as the greater clarity of the term, the subcommittee has chosen to change the term *supplied* to *devised*.

Finally, the subcommittee considers it important that the U.S. archival community continue to monitor the development of RDA. Its reliance on entities and their linkages provides promise for informing the developing archival conceptual model and for greater cooperation between archives and libraries in the future.

Standards of the International Council on Archives

Part I of DACS was initially developed to mirror the components of the General International Standard Archival Description (ISAD[G]) developed by the International Council on Archives (ICA). Part II was designed to mirror the International Standard Archival Authority Record For Corporate Bodies, Persons and Families (ISAAR[CPF]). This structure and concordance is maintained in the revised version of DACS.

ICA has also developed standards for describing functions (International Standard for Describing Functions [ISDF]) and archival institutions (International Standard for Describing Institutions with Archival Holdings [ISDIAH]). These standards are not currently addressed by DACS.

ICA is currently in the process of developing "a single reference model for descriptive standards to enable archivists to describe different types of archival entities (archival materials, corporate bodies, persons, or families, and functions) and to document these entities in relationship to each other at particular points of time, or over time."³ The purpose of this reference model is to bring the ICA descriptive standards into closer alignment with one another. The current revision of DACS recognizes the convergence of descriptive standards, and TS-DACS will continue to monitor developments in this area with the goal of keeping DACS aligned with ICA descriptive standards.

Encoded Archival Context and the Need for a Content Standard for Archival Authority Records

The review of the ICA descriptive standards and the development and adoption of the Encoded Archival Context encoding standard by the Society of American Archivists led TS-DACS to heavily revise Part II of DACS. Part II of DACS has been reworked to contain rules for the creation of archival authority records. Part II is broken into six chapters to align with ISAAR(CPF).

The decision to make Part II into rules for archival authority records also necessitated moving Chapters 9 (Identifying Creators) and 10 (Administrative/Biographical History) into Part I as elements 2.6 and 2.7. Element 2.7 has been refocused on information necessary for understanding the collection in hand.

Digital Records

Perhaps the single area that received the most comments from community members was the need to make DACS more relevant to modern records, which increasingly include or consist exclusively of born-digital formats. Of particular concern were rules prescribing *papers*, *records*, and *collections* as the collective terms describing the nature of the archival unit. Commenters felt that these terms did not adequately convey the increasingly digital format of the records. However, there was no community consensus as to what terms should be used instead. Subcommittee members considered this issue in depth and decided to revise the corresponding rule in DACS to permit local practices for new collective terms (such as *personal archives* or *personal records*). TS-DACS recommends that this issue be readdressed during the next revision of DACS.

In response to community members' requests for electronic records examples in DACS, a few such examples were added to Part I. These examples are meant to be illustrative of a growing presence of digital records in archival collections.

Examples

Another recurring theme in the community feedback was the desire for more examples to be included in DACS. The subcommittee agreed that extensive and varied examples would be a valuable help in using DACS. However, several factors pushed the subcommittee's response in a different direction. The DACS revision cycle is coinciding with that for EAD; MARC is undergoing revisions as a result of RDA implementation and will eventually be replaced; and EAC-CPF examples are just now becoming widely available. The subcommittee decided that the best way to respond to the desire for more examples would be to focus its efforts on improving and expanding DACS education offerings. The print edition of DACS retains text examples illustrating specific rules, and additional examples have been supplied as needed.

Comparison to DACS2004

Those accustomed to using DACS 2004 will have little difficulty continuing to utilize the revised DACS. DACS is now divided into two parts: Part I, Describing Archival Materials, and Part II, Archival Authority Records. The numbering schema from DACS 2004 has remained unchanged in Part I and a similar numbering schema has been developed for the revised Part II

What's New in DACS?

DACS 2013	DACS 2004
Minimum, Optimum, Added Value indicated with each element	Minimum, Optimum, Added Value indicated in Chapter 1
Encoding examples not embedded in text	Encoding examples embedded in text
Devised used to indicate titles created by an archivist	_Supplied_ used to indicate titles created by an archivist
Acronyms should be spelled out at least once	No guidance on acronyms
Abbreviations discouraged	No guidance on abbreviations
Square brackets not prescribed	No guidance on square brackets

<i>Papers, records, and collection</i> not prescribed for titles	<i>Papers, records, and collection</i> prescribed for titles
Part II covers Archival Authority Records	Part II covers Describing Creators
Element 2.6 discusses Identifying Creators	Chapter 9 discusses Identifying Creators
Element 2.7 discusses Administrative/Biographical History	Chapter 10 discusses Administrative/Biographical History
Part III eliminated	Part III discusses Forms of Names
Preface to 2004 edition included as Appendix A	Preface to 2004 edition
Relies on the SAA Glossary at http://www2.archivists.org/glossary	Glossary included as Appendix A
The number of crosswalks in Appendix C has been reduced	Crosswalks in Appendix C
Appendix D removed with emphasis reoriented to DACS educational offerings	Appendix D included full encoding examples

[1] Steven Hensen, comp., *Archives, Personal Papers, and Manuscripts*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1989). The first edition was published in 1983.

[2] Joint Steering Committee for Development of RDA, *Resource Description and Access* (Chicago, IL: American Library Association, 2010).

[3] International Council on Archives, Committee on Best Practices and Standards, *Progress Report for Revising and Harmonising ICA Descriptive Standards*, July 4, 2012, accessed November 6, 2012, <http://www.ica.org/13155/standards/cbps-progress-report-for-revising-and-harmonising-ica-descriptive-standards.html>, p. 15.

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951dcec on Dec 30, 2015

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84 lines (42 sloc) 14.9 KB

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Statement of Principles

The following statement of principles forms the basis for the rules in this standard. It is a recapitulation of generally accepted archival principles as derived from theoretical works and a variety of other sources. These include earlier statements about description and descriptive standards found in the reports of working groups commissioned to investigate aspects of archival description,¹ national rules for description,² and statements of the ICA Committee on Descriptive Standards.³ In recognizing the disparate nature of archival holdings, the statement is also grounded in accepted professional practice in the United States.

Holdings of archival repositories represent every possible type of material acquired from a wide variety of sources. How archives manage and describe their holdings is rooted in the nature of the materials, the context of their creation, and two hundred years of archival theory. Archival descriptive practices have increasingly been applied to all of the materials held by archives, regardless of their provenance or method of acquisition. These principles examine the nature of archival materials and their context and reflect how those aspects are made apparent in description.

The Nature of Archival Holdings

Archival collections are the natural result of the activities of individuals and organizations and serve as the recorded memory thereof. This distinctive relationship between records and the activities that generated them differentiates archives from other documentary resources.

Principle 1: Records in archives possess unique characteristics.

Archival materials have traditionally been understood to consist of the documents organically created, accumulated, and/or used by a person or organization in the course of the conduct of affairs and preserved because of their continuing value. They most often consist of aggregations of documents (largely unpublished) and are managed as such, though archival institutions frequently hold discrete items that must also be treated consistently within the institution's descriptive system. In the course of their regular activities, individuals, archival repositories, and other institutions may also consciously acquire and assemble records that do not share a common provenance or origin but that reflect some common characteristic, such as a particular subject, theme, or form. Such collections are part of the holdings in most institutions and must be described in a way that is consistent with the rest of the holdings. All of these materials may be described using this standard.

Principle 2: The principle of *respect des fonds* is the basis of archival arrangement and description.

The records created, assembled, accumulated, and/or maintained and used by an organization or individual must be kept together (i.e., identified as belonging to the same aggregation) in their original order, if such order exists or has been maintained. They ought not to be mixed or combined with the records of another individual or corporate body. This dictum is the natural and logical consequence of the organic nature of archival materials.⁴ Inherent in the overarching principle of *respect des fonds* are two sub-principles—provenance and original order. The principle of provenance means that the records that were created, assembled, accumulated, and/or maintained by an organization or individual must be represented together, distinguishable from the records of any other organization or individual. The principle of original order means that the order of the records that was established by the creator should be maintained by physical and/or intellectual means whenever possible to preserve existing relationships between the documents and the evidential value inherent in their order. Together, these principles form the basis of archival arrangement and description.

In the context of this standard, the principle of provenance requires further elaboration. The statement that the records of one creator must be represented together does not mean that it is necessary (or even possible) to keep the records of one creator physically together. It does, however, mean that the provenance of the records must be clearly reflected in the description, that the description must enable retrieval by provenance, and that a descriptive system must be capable of representing together all the records of a single creator held by a single repository.

The Relationship Between Arrangement and Description

If the archival functions of arrangement and description are based on the principle of *respect des fonds*, what is the relationship between arrangement and description? While the two are intimately intertwined, it is possible to distinguish between them in the following way. *Arrangement* is the intellectual and/or physical processes of organizing documents in accordance with accepted archival principles, as well as the results of these processes. *Description* is the creation of an accurate representation of the archival material by the process of capturing, collating, analyzing, and organizing information that serves to identify archival material and to explain the context and records systems that produced it, as well as the results of these processes.

Principle 3: Arrangement involves the identification of groupings within the material.

Arrangement is the process of identifying the logical groupings of materials within the whole as they were established by the creator, of constructing a new organization when the original ordering has been lost, or of establishing an order when one never existed. The archivist then identifies further sub-groupings within each unit down to the level of granularity that is feasible or desirable, even to the individual item. This process creates hierarchical groupings of material, with each step in the hierarchy described as a level. By custom, archivists have assigned names to some, but not all, levels of arrangement. The most commonly identified are collection, record group, series, file (or filing unit), and item. A large or complex body of material may have many more levels. The archivist must determine for practical reasons which groupings will be treated as a unit for purposes of description. These may be defined as the entire corpus of material of the creator (papers, records, or collection), a convenient administrative grouping (record and manuscript groups), or a reflection of administrative record-keeping systems (series and filing units).

Principle 4: Description reflects arrangement.

Archival repositories must be able to describe holdings ranging from thousands of linear feet to a single item. The amount of description and level of detail will depend on the importance of the material, management needs and resources of the repository, and access requirements of the users. That being the case, an archival description may consist of a multilevel structure that begins with a description of the whole and proceeds through increasingly more detailed descriptions of the parts, or it may consist only of a description of the whole. Within a given body of material, the repository may choose to describe some parts at a greater level of detail than others. A single item may be described in minute detail, whether or not it is part of a larger body of material.

The Nature of Archival Description

Archival holdings are varied in their nature and provenance, and archival description reflects this fact. If archival materials are to be described consistently within an institutional, regional, or national descriptive system, the rules must apply to a variety of forms and media created by, and acquired from, a variety of sources.

Principle 5: The rules of description apply to all archival materials, regardless of form or medium.

It is acknowledged that archival materials come in a variety of forms and media, and rules for archival description must therefore accommodate all forms and media (and the relationships between them). Inherent in the principle of provenance—that the records created, assembled, accumulated, and/or maintained and used by an organization or individual must be kept together—is the assumption that no records are excluded from the description because of their particular form or medium. Different media of course require different rules to describe their particular characteristics; for example, sound recordings may require some indication of playing speed and photographs may require some indication of polarity and color.

Principle 6: The principles of archival description apply equally to records created by corporate bodies, individuals, or families.

The documents that are the product of the functions and activities of organizations may differ in extent, arrangement, subject matter, and so on, from those that result from the activities of individuals or families. While there may be valid reasons to distinguish between them in the workflow of a repository, the principles of archival arrangement and description should be applied equally to materials created by individuals, families, or organizations.

Principle 7: Archival descriptions may be presented at varying levels of detail to produce a variety of outputs.

The nature and origins of a body of archival materials may be summarized in their entirety in a single collective description. However, the extent and complexity of archival materials may require a more detailed description of their various components as well. The resulting technique of multilevel description is "the preparation of descriptions that are related to one another in a part-to-whole relationship and that need complete identification of both parts and the comprehensive whole in multiple descriptive records."⁵ This requires some elucidation regarding the order in which such information is presented and the relationships between description(s) of the parts and the description of the whole.⁶

Principle 7.1: Levels of description correspond to levels of arrangement.

The levels of arrangement determine the levels of description. However, because not all levels of arrangement are required or possible in all cases, it follows that not all levels of description are required. It is understood that description is an iterative and dynamic process; that is, descriptive information is recorded, reused, and enhanced at many stages in the management of archival holdings. For example, basic information is recorded when incoming material is accessioned, well before the material is arranged. Furthermore, arrangement can change, particularly when a repository receives regular accruals of records from an ongoing organization. In that situation, the arrangement will not be complete until the organization ceases to exist. Thus, it is more appropriate to say that description reflects the current state of arrangement (whatever that may be) and can (and does) change as a result of further arrangement activities.⁷

Principle 7.2: Relationships between levels of description must be clearly indicated.

While the actual work of arrangement and description can proceed in any order that makes sense to the archivist, a descriptive system must be able to represent and maintain the relationships among the various parts of the hierarchy. Depending on the point at which the descriptive system is entered, an end user must be able to navigate to higher or lower levels of description.

Principle 7.3: Information provided at each level of description must be appropriate to that level.

When a multilevel description is created, the information provided at each level of description must be relevant to the material being described at that level. This means that it is inappropriate to provide detailed information about the contents of files in a description of a higher level. Similarly, archivists should provide administrative or biographical information appropriate to the materials being described at a given level (e.g., a series). This principle also implies that it is undesirable to repeat information recorded at higher levels of description. Information that is common to the component parts should be provided at the highest appropriate level.

The Creators of Archival Material

An important aspect of understanding archival materials is the description of the context in which they were created.

Principle 8: The creators of archival materials, as well as the materials themselves, must be described.

Because the principle of provenance is fundamental to the arrangement and description of archival materials, it follows that the provenance, or the creator(s), of archival materials must be described as well. Except in cases in which the creator or collector is truly unknown, this means that the creator or collector of the materials must be identified and included in (or linked to) the description of the materials. In addition, the functions or activities of the creator(s) that produced the archival materials must be described. Finally, standardized access points must be provided that indicate not just the primary creator but also the relationships between successive creators, for example, the parts of a corporate body that has undergone reorganization(s). DACS includes rules for providing all of this information in a consistent way. The repository as collector does not need to be described.

[1] Working Group on Standards for Archival Description, "Archival Description Standards: Establishing a Process for their Development and Implementation," *American Archivist* 52, no. 4 (Fall 1989):440–443 (source hereinafter cited as the WGSAD Report); *Toward Descriptive Standards: Report and Recommendations of the Canadian Working Group on Archival Descriptive Standards* (Ottawa: Bureau of Canadian Archivists, 1985), 6–9, 55–59, 63–64; Wendy M. Duff and Kent M. Haworth, "Advancing Archival Description: A Model for Rationalizing North American Descriptive Standards," *Archives and Manuscripts* 25, no. 2 (1997):198–199, 203–204 (source hereinafter cited as the Bentley Report).

[2] *Rules for Archival Description* (Ottawa: Bureau of Canadian Archivists, 1990), xi–xvi, rules 0.1, 0.2, 0.22, 1.0A1, 1.0A2 (source hereinafter cited as *RAD*); Hensen, *Archives, Personal Papers, and Manuscripts*, rules 0.3, 0.9, 0.10, 0.12, 1.0A (source hereinafter cited as *APPM*).

[3] International Council on Archives "Statement of Principles," *Archivaria* 34 (1992): 8–16; ICA Committee on Descriptive Standards, *ISAD(G): General International Standard Archival Description*, 2nd ed. (Ottawa: International Council on Archives, 1999), 7–12 (source hereinafter cited as *ISAD[G]*).

[4] S. Muller, J. A. Feith, and R. Fruin, *Manual for the Arrangement and Description of Archives*, translation of 2nd edition (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2002), 19. "An archival collection is an organic whole."

[5] *RAD*, p. D-5.

[6] The rules for multilevel description are found in *RAD*, rule 1.0A2, and in *ISAD(G)*, p. 12.

[7] *ISAD(G)*, Statement I-3, p. 7.

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Revised Preface and Principles #20

New issue

Open michelsd wants to merge 15 commits into `saa-ts-dacs:master` from `michelsd:New-Principles`

Conversation 14 Commits 15 Checks 0 Files changed 4 +197 -153



michelsd commented on Aug 6, 2018 • edited ▾

Contributor

Dear Colleagues,

SAA's Technical Subcommittee on Describing Archives: A Content Standard (TS-DACS) welcomes your comments on a proposal to revise the [Preface and the Statement of Principles](#) in DACS. This proposal comes from TS-DACS and responds to preliminary community feedback in 2017-2018. It includes work undertaken by an experts group¹ convened at SAA's annual meetings in 2016-2017 and the Lewis Walpole Library in Farmington, Connecticut in March 2017.

Chapters to change

[Preface and the Statement of Principles](#)

Proposed change

This proposal aims to update the [Preface and the Statement of Principles](#) in order to better align both with current archival theory and practice as well as the International Council on Archives (ICA) draft data model for archival description, Records in Contexts (RiC).² The preface revision is not hugely substantive but rather a reorganization and update of existing information. The revision to the Statement of Principles is total.

Justification for proposed change

There are two primary and equally important justifications for the revisions. First, the revision is proposed following a deep analysis of the current Statement of Principles (hereafter referred to as current principles) and the extent to which it represents archival values, theory and practice, and is teachable and clear. Second is the release of Records in Contexts and the desire by the technical subcommittee to bring DACS in better alignment with its underlying concepts and structure and, in turn, current archival theory that undergirds RiC.

Analysis of the current principles

Leading up to the August 2016 annual meeting of SAA in Atlanta, members of TS-DACS analyzed the current principles, asking if they were they clear, teachable, and reflective of current archival values, theory, and practice. In addition to the technical subcommittee, a group of experts on archival description was called upon to read the principles closely and comment on their clarity, usability, and relevance.

Reviewers

No reviews

Assignees

No one assigned

Labels

None yet

Projects

None yet

Milestone

No milestone

15 participants



Through this analysis, TS-DACS and the experts group found the principles confusing and difficult to teach. They also discovered that many ideas well-represented in literature on archives and archival description - providing maximum access to records, prioritizing users and use of records over preservation, building relationships with creators, using accessible language to document traditionally underrepresented communities, and documenting archival interventions and the role of archivists in shaping the historical record - were not present in the existing principles. The analysis indicated that the archival profession has an opportunity to refocus archival description on its ultimate purpose -- enabling users of archives to make sense of the past through records.

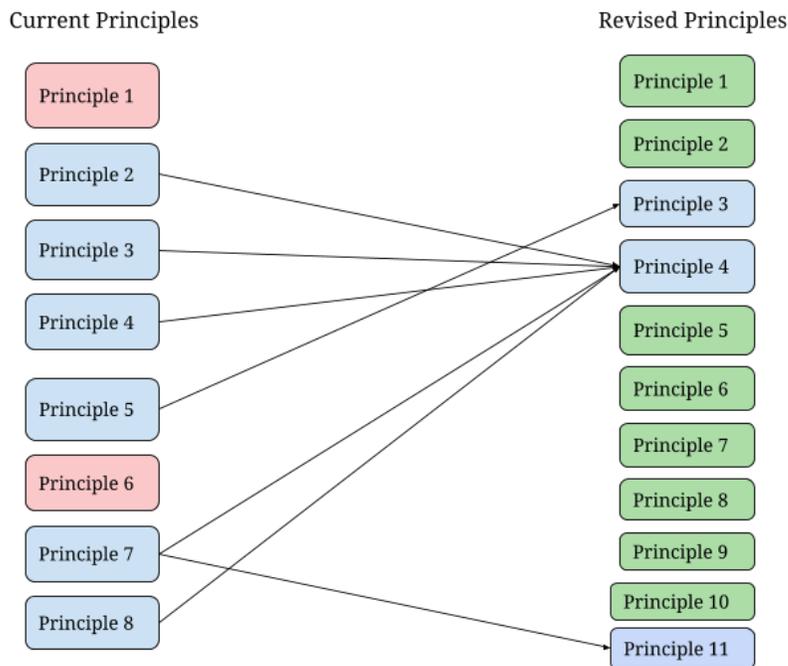
A full accounting of the written documentation and analysis of the current principles at the SAA annual meeting in Atlanta in 2016 can be found [here](#).

Changing conceptual models for archival description

Shortly following, in September 2016, ICA's Expert's Group on Archival Description (EGAD) released the first version of a data model for archival description, Records in Contexts (RiC). The model attempts to account for complexity in records and record creation by allowing for a network of linked entities and relationships to represent archival description. This network representation goes beyond the widespread understanding and implementation of archival description as simple hierarchy.³ The thinking underlying RiC expands understandings of the core archival concept of provenance and empowers archivists to document the complexity of record creation over time.

Creating revised principles

To address the limitations of the existing principles, TS-DACS led an effort to comprehensively revise them, convening a group of experts on archival description from a variety of institutional contexts for an in-person meeting.⁴ This process resulted in 11 principles which reframed the existing 8 principles, combining related concepts, adding missing ideas, and in some cases removing obsolete or unnecessary principles.



Call for comments and community feedback

Process

TS-DACS put out a general call for comments on the revised principles in June 2017 and also reached out directly to leading thinkers, practitioners, and educators of archival description. All received feedback and commentary on feedback can be accessed [here](#).

Analyzing feedback from 51 individuals and groups on 11 different principles proved challenging. The subcommittee created a series of worksheets to review the feedback for each principle as well as three broader, thematic categories: the role of descriptive principles, comparison of old to new principles, and the revision process itself. The worksheets synthesized community feedback into areas of agreement, disagreement, and misunderstanding and provided suggestions on how to address these concerns.

To answer general questions and clarify areas of clumsy communication, TS-DACS made minor revisions to the principles themselves.⁵

General themes

A major theme throughout the feedback centered around matters of degree in descriptive practice: how many archival interventions should be documented and are certain activities more important to document than others? Community members wanted concrete guidance on when or why to add to a description and whether it was a matter of choice or rule. Archival description has always had to contend with these questions of degree, which is one of the reasons why local implementation and procedure manuals continue to be critical for repository compliance and consistency of practice. To address these concerns, TS-DACS further explicated the role of principles versus the role of rules versus archival assessment and judgement in the preface to DACS.

Similarly, the introduction of concepts such as bias, archival intervention, iteration, and transparency into the principles raised questions about what is required and what is enough. To these concerns, TS-DACS wants to reiterate and further highlight the set of required elements for single level description that DACS already provides,⁶ which should continue to form the basis of archival description, whether it is an accession record, a collection level catalog record, a finding aid, a record for a digitized resource, or any other format.

Numerous respondents were excited to see the central place of users in the principles. One person noted that Principle 2 was "just essential." However, there was concern around a perceived narrowness of definition with both use and user, as some misunderstood "users are the fundamental reason for archives" to mean only external researchers. In the principles, the terms use and user are employed broadly. Each repository should explore and define the terms its own way. Depending on the context, use may be government accountability, genealogy, artistic endeavors, or historical research, among many others. A corporate archives will have a different set of users and uses for its records than a state government. Rather than provide a strict definition, TS-DACS added a statement on user-centered archival description in the preamble to the principles.

Many respondents read the revised principles as aspirational rather than prescriptive. One respondent suggested that the revised principles are the *what* and the *why* of archival description, while the rules are the *how*. Overall, this shift away from the current principles as methodology to the revised principles as advocacy was understood as a positive one. Because they are value-driven, the revised principles represent where the community of archivists using DACS currently are and, more importantly, where they want to be.

This will impact how we appraise records, set processing priorities, write description, and make it public, e.g. considering how to provide minimal description in keeping with standards and ethics? The principle reinforces changes we feel a need to make anyway.

We agree with the ethos of this principle (and the revised principles as a whole) and hope that it will signal a change towards a more service-oriented, user-centric way of doing archival work.⁷

Principle 4

As the chart above highlights, nearly all of the current principles were consolidated into revised Principle 4, which affirms that records often have multiple contexts of provenance, creation, maintenance and use. Much of the feedback focused on the concepts raised therein. Respondents to revised Principle 4 articulated that "the four fundamental concepts" provide an intellectually inclusive means for addressing basic ideas. They felt the assertion that archivists "reveal" and "expose" provides clarity, while the focus on creators and relationships, rather than hierarchy, was appreciated. One participant noted that this principle is the most useful statement she has ever seen to explain how archival description differs from bibliographic description.

The main criticism of the principle was the absence of the terms "provenance" or "original order." As one respondent wrote:

The fundamental principle of respect des fonds is missing entirely. I understand that the application of the principle is being critically examined, but it is what distinguishes archives from libraries. I would also suggest that the other principle of original order be addressed in some way. I know that OO is also being re-examined, but to the extent that it exists, it is evidence of the context of the records, and shouldn't be disrupted. As these principles stand, there is nothing the counsels an archivist not to rearrange the whole thing by subject (or even merge all the repository holdings into one big subject file).

Other comments requested guidance and examples about how to identify aggregates and implement other aspects of the principle.

In response to this feedback, a discussion of provenance, original order, and guidance in determining aggregate groupings was added to the preamble to the principles. More detail and practical guidance will be provided in the upcoming revisions of the rules to implement the new principles.

Conclusion

While some of the feedback was critical (which in return resulted in a stronger revision of the principles), there was widespread support for the revised principles. TS-DACS found that the community was ready for the revised principles as presented⁸ and have already had four requests for citation in publishing. By adding a preamble to the principles to provide context, TS-DACS is ready to put forth a second version of the principles.

Impact of proposed change

The impact of the changes to the [Preface and the Statement of Principles](#) will, in the future, cascade throughout parts I and II of DACS. In order to bring description into better alignment with these new principles, TS-DACS foresees some existing elements currently designated as Optimum or Added Value becoming required. In particular, it is likely that elements supporting Principles 5 and 6 - the imperative that archivists document their interventions as part of archival description - will be elevated to required status.

In addition, new rules may need to be introduced to DACS to support the revised principles. Proposed element 8.2,⁹ which requires a rights declaration for archival description, supports ideas in new Principle 8 which encourages archivists to make description machine-readable, machine-actionable, and easily disseminated.

It is expected that many, if not most, repositories will not be fully compliant with all of the principles at the time of their adoption. Many repositories, particularly small ones, are only now trying to meet existing standards, and may feel that the new principles present an even higher hurdle. These issues need not be a deterrent to the adoption of the new principles. A repository's descriptive policies and practices, like archival description itself, are developed iteratively. They are revisited and refined over time for many reasons: to meet changing needs of users, to adapt to staff and resource constraints, to utilize new technology, and to incorporate the evolving understanding of our profession. The principles can serve a powerful role in guiding changes to policy and practice by articulating the goals of and reasons for archival description.

TS-DACS recognizes that changes from version to version of DACS have the potential to require an outlay of time and resources that may not be immediately available to all repositories. Beginning in 2018, DACS will be available under versioned releases; repositories may declare themselves compliant with a particular version of DACS as they work toward implementing the latest changes.

The flawed pursuit of perfectly described collections has contributed substantially to processing and description backlogs. Rather than adding to that burden, these principles empower archivists, whether they are managers and resource allocators or collection processors, to use their professional skills and judgment to make a greater volume of records more accessible for research. The principles and DACS as whole give structure for meeting attainable baseline requirements for descriptive records and then encouraging archivists to best decide how to spend their own time. For example, the new principles are very explicit that all holdings in the repository must have an archival description (Principle 9). This means that if the community (and council) decides to adopt these new principles, many repositories will have the opportunity to examine their own compliance with our national descriptive standard.

While implementation strategies are beyond the scope of DACS, many such strategies aligned with the principles have emerged since the original publication of DACS. These strategies, including description at the time of acquisition, iterative processing approaches, and collection assessment, reappraisal and deaccessioning are discussed in archival literature. We believe that these principles are achievable and that very good advice already exists for archivists striving to meet them.¹⁰

By emphasizing the importance of describing all collections and transparency, the new principles facilitate resource advocacy, whether for professional archivists to create collection level description for all holdings or for changes within repositories towards more accessible forms of description.

We encourage repositories to consider the following strategies:

- Prioritize the allocation of staff time and resources towards activities which best align with one or more of the principles.
- When debating between possible approaches, select the one that most closely realizes the principles.
- When evaluating and reporting on changes, use increased alignment with the principles as a means to demonstrate success.

By using the principles to guide incremental change, the repository knows that individual efforts will bring the repository closer into alignment with the wisdom of the profession.

We believe that these new principles make education around archival description clearer and easier to teach. Above all, we hope that the revised principles allow for more accessible and transparent archival description for users and uses of records.

How to submit feedback

There are two possible channels for proposing feedback.

Option 1 (preferred)

If you have a GitHub account, you can comment on the proposed change here: [#20](#). If you do not yet have a GitHub account, it is easy to create one.

We prefer this method because it is more transparent (comments are available to the world) and because it helps maintain the history of conversations around DACS changes.

Option 2 (also very welcome!)

Submit your comments to the SAA website, here: <http://www2.archivists.org/standards/DACS/revisions>.

These comments will be forwarded to TS-DACS, but will not be immediately viewable by other SAA members. This method does not provide the same opportunity to engage in conversation about a change proposal as commenting in GitHub.

We will accept comments until **August 31, 2018**.

Information about the DACS change proposal and review process is available here: <https://github.com/saa-ts-dacs/dacs#revision-process>

Direct links

- With tracked changes
 - Preface and Statement of Principles: <https://github.com/saa-ts-dacs/dacs/pull/20/files>
- Without tracked changes
 - Preface: <https://github.com/saa-ts-dacs/dacs/blob/c9e8df594dd8a8a984289674555a93f376bd5d81/preface.md>
 - Statement of Principles: https://github.com/saa-ts-dacs/dacs/blob/b09f522f85a1ce11238a6bfd5a53db04f835c7d6/statement_of_principles.md

[1]: **Current and former TS-DACS Members:** Maureen Callahan, Elise Dunham, Maristella Feustle, Matthew Gorham, Adriane Hanson, Adrien Hilton, Sue Luftschein, Dan Michelson, Kate Morris, Elena Perez-Lizano, Cassie Schmitt, Carrie Hintz (ex officio), Weatherly Stephan (ex officio); **Principle revision participants:** Hillel Arnold, Mary Caldera, Jillian Cuellar, Tamar Dougherty, Jarret Drake, Gretchen Gueguen, Regine Heberlein, Linda Hocking, Bill Landis, Dennis Meissner, Trevor Owens, Mario Ramirez, Daniel Santamaria, Audra Eagle Yun

[2]: *Records in Contexts: A Conceptual Model for Archival Description* (International Council on Archives, September 2016), Consultation Draft v0.1, <https://www.ica.org/sites/default/files/RIC-CM-0.1.pdf>.

[3]: *Records in Contexts*, 9.

[4]: For perspectives on the meeting see Hillel Arnold: <http://blog.rockarch.org/?p=1710> and a report submitted to Society of American Archivists Council: https://docs.google.com/document/d/1aOV7Igh5WqVI-tXUswCJkZAML_A8SKjTZOB4_wGz35w/edit?usp=sharing.

[5]: For instance, the SAA statement of ethics as well as industry adjacent statements were added as links to Principle 1; events was changed to activities in Principle 4 to better reflect current terminology; and the claim that archivists' primary intellectual output is description was deleted in Principle 8.

[6]: DACS element sets are described in Chapter 1. https://github.com/saa-ts-dacs/dacs/blob/master/part_1/chapter_1.md

[7]: Feedback on Revised Principles, June 2017.

[8]: Of the 51 respondents to an online feedback form, 29 were submitted by individuals, 22 were submitted by a group. The average ranking by all respondents in response to the statement, "I / we support this new set of DACS principles and would like to see them adopted as part of DACS" on a scale of 1-10, with 10 being the greatest support, was 7.1. On average the group rankings were higher than that of the individuals, 7.5 versus 6.8. Without knowing the number of participants in each group we can't say for certain how many individuals this represents, but it points to an even greater number of respondents agreeing with the revised principles.

[9]: #14.

[10]: See Daniel A. Santamaria, *Extensible Processing for Archives and Special Collections* (Chicago: American Library Association, 2015); Christine Weideman, "Accessioning as Processing," *The American Archivist*, 69, No. 2 (Fall/Winter 2006): 274-283; University of California Systemwide Libraries, "Guidelines for Efficient Archival Processing in the University of California Libraries (Version 3.2)," 2012, <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/1sw157j3>; Harvard University Special Collections and Archives, "Joint Processing Guidelines," <https://projects.iq.harvard.edu/jointprocessingguidelines>; Society of American Archivists, "Guidelines for Reappraisal and Deaccessioning," 2017, https://www2.archivists.org/sites/all/files/GuidelinesForReappraisalDeaccessioning_2017.pdf.

 michelsd added some commits on Aug 4, 2018

	 Merge pull request #2 from saa-ts-dacs/master ...		f131386
	 Update preface.md		0be2542
	 Update statement_of_principles.md		d704eac
	 Update statement_of_principles.md		05be145
	 Update statement_of_principles.md		1fcf9c4



annietummino commented on Aug 11, 2018

When I started doing archives classes with undergrads I revisited the DACS principles and they seemed pedantic, off-putting, even embarrassing! I had a hard time following them and I'm a professional archivist. In contrast, the new DACS principles are something I can get behind. They express my values and my approach to managing and processing archives- making strategic, user-centered decisions and documenting those decisions as transparently as possible. I think the emphasis on intellectual context and connections between records, creators, and subjects (as opposed to emphasizing levels and heirarchy) is also valuable and the field will only be moving further in this direction in the future.

gwiedeman commented on Aug 13, 2018

I think these revisions are a substantial improvement to DACS and I've already found that they help me be mindful of the wider implications of my work. I particularly favor the prominent role of users in the principles, and that they not only center archival practice upon use (Principle 2), but actionably connect that value to basic practices (Principle 10). I also find the focus on re-use (principle 8) to be useful for

I think it's challenging to fully understand and appreciate the value of archival description without hands-on experience working with large volumes of collections. I find that these revised DACS principles are among the best tools to convey this value to students, new professionals, and those in related professions. I've already referenced them and found them helpful in communicating the value of archival practices to the web archives community. I also try to encourage the graduate students I work with to read and engage with these principles and I've found them to be a much better medium for thoughtfully considering the implications of what we're doing than any one journal article.



rockivist commented on Aug 13, 2018

I strongly support the updated DACS principles.

In particular I appreciate principles 8 and 9. Principle 8 articulates clearly the way in which how we share description is nearly as important as what description we share. This a crucial idea for archivists to understand and take to heart if we are to maximize the potential use of our descriptive work.

Principle 9 - that "each collection within a repository must have an archival description" - pushes archivists to contextualize archival description not simply within the needs of a given collection, but across all of the holdings of a repository. I think of this as the appraisal of descriptive needs and resources - if we start with making sure everything has some description, then we can assess how much additional description we can afford to do. It is simply untenable to make descriptive decisions solely within the context of what a single collection might need, so this principle is a vital improvement.

My sincere thanks to TS-DACS and all of the thoughtful archivists who contributed to this work.



p-galligan commented on Aug 16, 2018

I don't have a ton to say over what other commenters have said here, but I'd like to voice strong support for the revised principles.

I especially like principles 8, 9, and 10, and I am excited to see them added to DACS.



alexisantracoli commented on Aug 22, 2018

I would like to thank TS-DACS for all the work that they did on these principles. I support the revisions, and am especially excited to see users centered in the revised principles. Principles 2, 7, 10, and 11 are especially exciting to see. Centering users is something that archivists as a whole can continually improve upon. One thought I have is that there may be times when user needs and priorities and archival principles aren't in alignment. I'd eventually like to see DACS address this issue. For example, centering of user needs should lead to a review of the descriptive rules in DACS with an eye to user needs. Another issue is that, currently, we don't know a lot about our users. As the profession builds knowledge in this area, I'd like to see DACS be nimble in adjusting to what is learned about how users actually find and use archival materials. Thanks again to all the members of TS-DACS.



searcy commented on Aug 22, 2018 • edited ▾

I support the updated principles, and want to thank the members of TS-DACS for their efforts on this project and the work required for standards maintenance more generally. I think this revision does much to highlight the value of labor archivists perform. The new principles shift away from the nature of records themselves, basic definitions about archives, and foundational concepts about archival theory more generally -- all of which can be found in complementary resources -- toward guidance that is grounded in values and tightly focused on archival description proper. I think this is a good thing. Although the standard will require local policy and implementation decisions, as noted in the Preface, I find these updated principles to be more easily understandable and useful to archives practitioners with varied levels of experience. To be a more inclusive profession, we should strive to make our standards and best practices as accessible as possible.

A comment that you can take or leave: since the new principles are heavily values driven and repeatedly emphasize the importance of content, I would like to see some statement regarding the function of archival description in a larger records continuum context. I don't think this needs to be a principle unto itself, but could be a useful addition to the Preface. For example, Principle 1 states, "Archival description expresses professional ethics and values." The roles and responsibilities of donors and records creators are conspicuously absent; ethical description should, in my opinion, also take into consideration the persons being described, rather than solely based on the ethics of the American archival profession. And while ethical description can play a role in "encourage[ing] a diverse archival record," that cannot exist without concerted acquisition, appraisal, and internal management and prioritization. Even the most principled archival description cannot promote a diverse record in an institution that primarily collects the papers of the privileged or prioritizes those collections for arrangement and description. A general statement regarding archival description in the larger context of archival work could address this concern.

That being said, I think that these principles share much in common with what archival description should be: accessible, iterative, and focused on the users. Thank you again!



weatherlys commented on Aug 23, 2018

I support the revised principles. They are direct and concise, which will help students, new professionals, and members of related professions understand how the work of archival description is guided. The addition of several principles--but especially 5, 6, and 10--provides strong guidance for setting descriptive policies and priorities, and for the application of DACS rules when describing records.



kellybolding commented on Aug 24, 2018

I strongly support the revised principles.

They promote a user-centered, iterative, values-forward approach to archival description that reflects the best of current archival practice. I appreciate that the combination of Principles 1, 7, 10, and 11 supports a reparative approach to (re)processing that seeks to address the erasure or mis-description of materials related to people from traditionally marginalized groups in the archives. I'm also particularly in support of Principle 6 and its focus on transparency. In the upcoming revisions of the DACS rules, I hope to see additional guidance on specific information and actions to document.

Many thanks to TS-DACS for your thoughtful work on updating these principles.



mkarchivist commented on Aug 25, 2018

I support the updated principles.

The guidance they will provide for repositories and for those who do this work is clear, useful, and will be of great value. I appreciate the thought and work put into the revision. The inclusion of transparency and accessibility, as set forth in principles 6 and 7, is particularly good to see.



kschlottmann commented on Aug 25, 2018

I support the revised principles.

I agree with the comments that applaud the user-centered language in the revised principles. In particular, I appreciate that principles 5 and 6 encourage archivists to document who we are, what we did, and when we did it. This information is not only critical to our external users, but to our colleagues who will be stewarding these collections in the future. I also appreciate that the standard itself will be versioned, as this will facilitate our ability to iteratively describe the materials in our care in a documented way.

Kudos to TS-DACS for leading this revision process in a thoughtful and transparent manner.



anarchivist commented on Aug 27, 2018

Following the comments of many others I applaud the work that TS-DACS has undertaken to revise the preface and principles and generally support the revisions. What follows are some general comments regarding each section.

Preface

- I worry somewhat about the substantial changes to the section on related descriptive standards. While RiC is clearly the way forward, my understanding is that considerable changes remain before it is considered "ready for use." Of particular note are the continuing gaps around documenting functions (ISDF) and repositories that hold archives (ISDIAH). The revisions to the preface, as I understand them, don't adequately document the existence of related standards and the continued within DACS.

Principles

- Principle 2 would perhaps be strengthened by reiterating that assessment of user needs should be undertaken on a regular, or iterative, basis. This would tie it to Principles 10 and 11 more strongly.
- Principle 3: What is meant by "universal description and access"? Is this about consistency of that experience?

Thanks for your work!



faithc commented on Aug 30, 2018

Thank you to the TS-DACS committee for your work drafting these much-needed revisions. Thank you for your time, your thoughtfulness in thinking through complex topics and issues, and your efforts to engage with the archival community. I strongly support the revised principles as they currently stand.

To reiterate what others I have stated, I am particularly pleased that the updated principles articulate values that the profession is striving to adhere to and implement; and that they address issues relating to users, archival intervention, transparency, and the problematic principles of provenance (in particular) and original order. I also look forward to seeing how these updated principles are applied to the revised rules.

I agree with [@alexisantracoli](#) that centering archival description around the needs of users necessitates that archivists make more of an effort to know who their users are and identify their needs. Perhaps this point warrants further articulation and recommendations.



davidamelolson commented on Aug 31, 2018

I am writing to voice support for the updated principles. There are many specific aspects that I appreciated about the changes, but on a macro level, I would say that I appreciate how much they focus on people. The old principles focused more on products of human activity: records and description. The new ones focus more on how people and how they engage with records and description, whether the people in question are records creators, archivists, or researchers/users. They definitely add a "why" to DACS' "how", and hopefully will help encourage thoughtfulness about creating description that is more user-centric and more richly provides context around provenance and human interventions in records (including archivist interventions). Thank you.

morriskn commented on Aug 31, 2018



The focus on users is a strength of the revised principles. I appreciate the acknowledgement throughout the principles that repositories make decisions based on their resources and particular user needs. (9,10) I support the principles' emphasis on transparency related to archivists' own actions/interventions on records.

 **michelsd** added some commits on Nov 19, 2018

  Added missing comma	 Verified	d6a54f4
  Added missing commas	 Verified	b09f522
  Order and formatting changes ...	 Verified	42f0337
  Removal of statement about DACS/RiC relation ...	 Verified	c9e8df5
  Added definition of entities ...	 Verified	8111bd2
  Principle 3 word change ...	 Verified	db07364
  Removal of reference to old principle 3	 Verified	9e947a5
  Updated reference to numbered principle	 Verified	d40bb0d
  Reintroduction of concepts in old principle 7.3	 Verified	c04dc18
  Reintroduction and expansion of concepts in old principle 7.3 ...	 Verified	3a52ee5

July 2017 responses (MVP release)

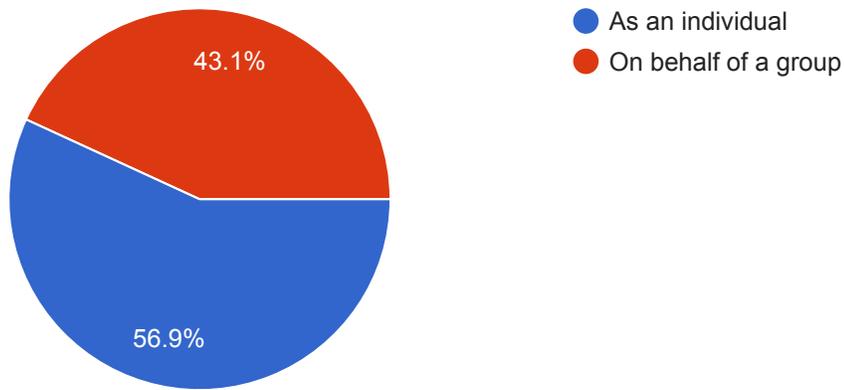
1. DACS Revised Principles Feedback responses from Google form (pages 2-117)
2. "Finding Aids Under Late Capitalism," *Archives and the Old Mole*, April 28, 2017.
<https://archivesoldmole.wordpress.com/2017/04/28/finding-aids-under-late-capitalism/> (pages 118-120)
3. Michelle Light correspondence, May 13, 2017 (pages 121-123)
4. Jean Dryden correspondence, June 3, 2017 (page 124)
5. New York Digital Archivists Working Group letter, July 1, 2017 (pages 125-126)
6. NARA DACS Working Group *Response to Revised DACS Principles* (pages 127-128)
7. Paul Conway MVP feedback (pages 129-133)
8. Bowling Green State University MVP feedback (134-135)

DACS Revised Principles Feedback

51 responses

I am providing feedback

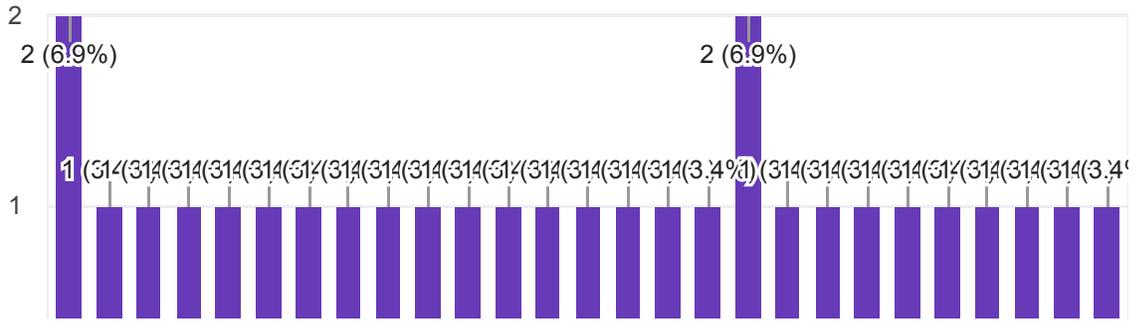
51 responses



Responding as an individual

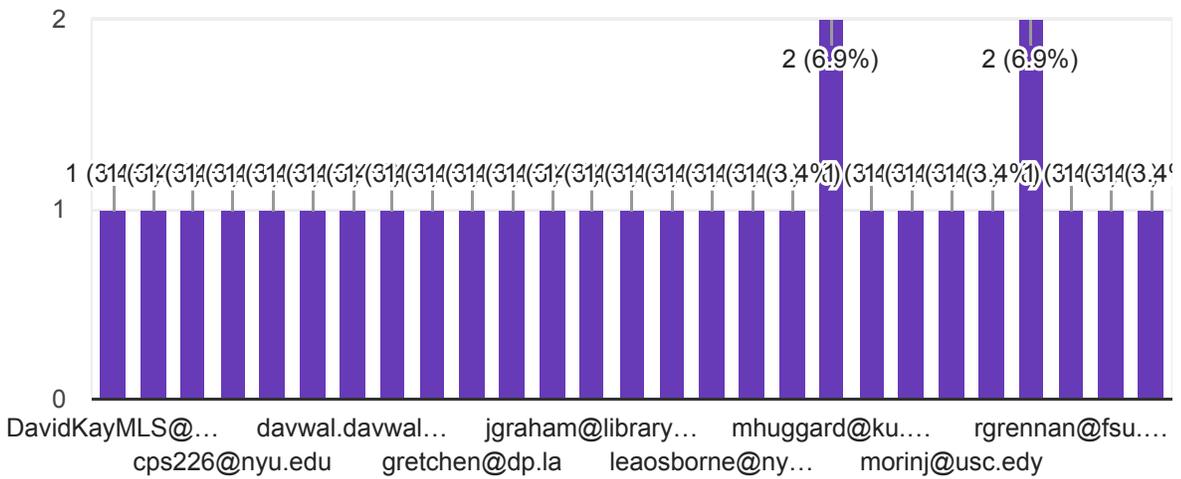
What is your name?

29 responses



What is your email address?

29 responses



Where do you do work that interacts with archives?

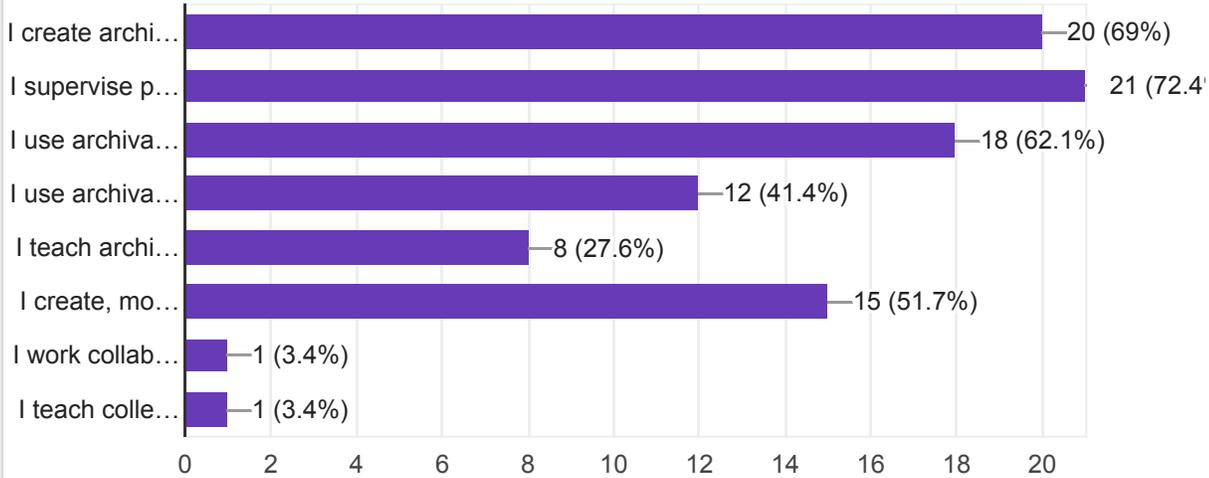
29 responses

2

2 (6.9%)

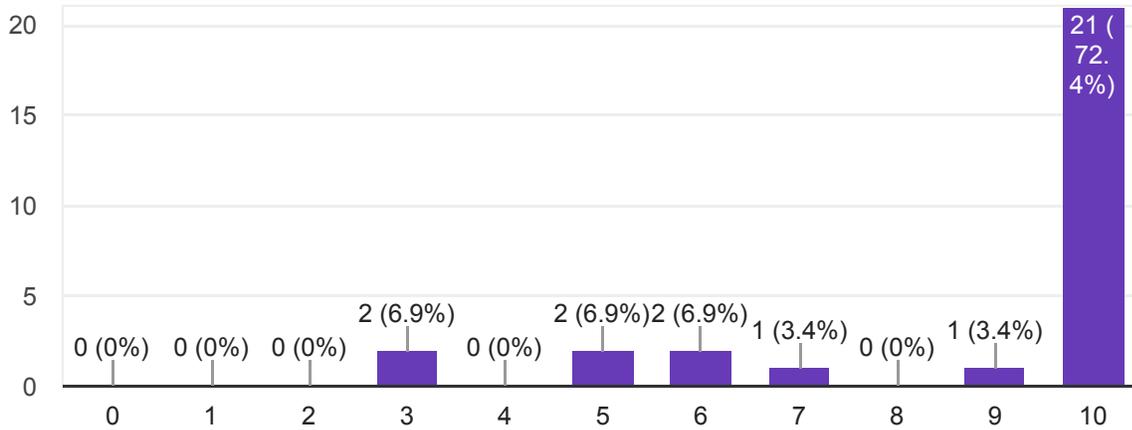
In what capacity do you interact with archival description?

29 responses



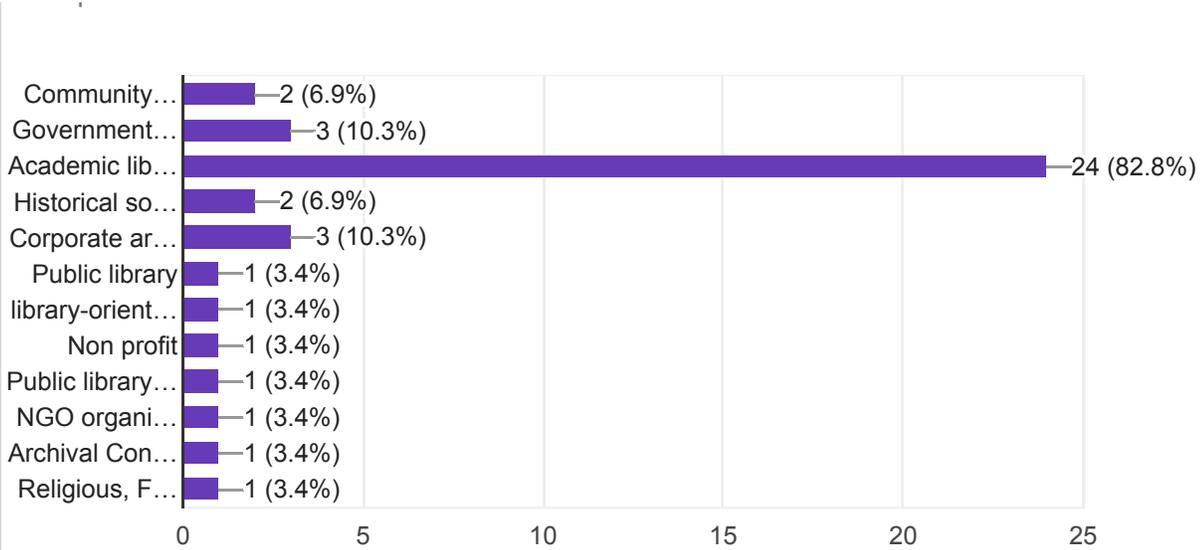
How many years have you worked with archival description?

29 responses



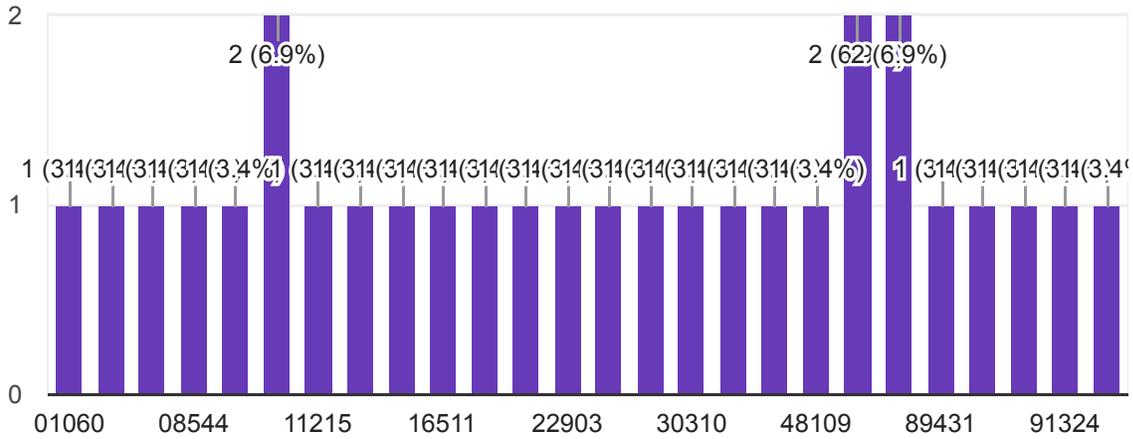
Tell us about where you work. What kind of institution is it?

29 responses



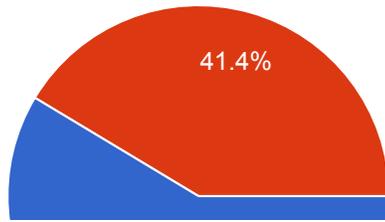
What is your zip code or postal code?

29 responses



What kind of feedback do you want to give?

29 responses



- I want to provide feedback about a specific principle. (You will have the opportunity to give feedback about more than one principle; you will also have the opportunity to give feedback about the

Responding as a group

How would you describe your group and its members?

22 responses

Perry Special Collections, BYU

Kate Crowe's "Advanced Archives" class at the University of Denver

A few archivists and graduate fellows at Barnard and Columbia

Everyone at our institution with primary responsibility for describing special collections

Archivists from an academic special collections library

A group of 7 processing archivists

Archivists and catalogers from the NC Triangle Research Libraries Network, incl. Duke, UNC, and NC State special collections (16 people)

Johns Hopkins University Archives Team

Archivists from a variety of institution types

Archivists with a wide range of years of service

Archivists from the Center for Jewish History, American Jewish Historical Society, YIVO, the Center for Puerto Rican Studies, the Winthrop Group, and an independent consultant.

Archival Collections Management Department at NYU Libraries

The Arrangement and Description Team at the Alexander Turnbull Library

A reading group for Yale archival practitioners

Reading group of special collections department staff

Archives and Special Collections Department staff, including archivists, special collections librarians, a cataloger, and other staff who work with this material

Archivists working at Gates Archive. A mix of archives techs, archivists, assistant archivists, and managers (archive and tech). While we have different roles now, we all have a background in archival arrangement and description/experience processing.

13 individual archival units from one large institution

4 staff at Oregon State University Special Collections and Archives Research Center; facilitate by the archivist who oversees our a/d activities.

2 archivists

The NY Digital Archivists Working Group [NYDAWG] currently has 135 members and is composed of digital archivists, archivists, electronic records managers, information architects, knowledge professionals, teachers and students. NYDAWG was established in 2010 in New York City to provide a centralized repository and network to share knowledge, ideas, challenges, perspectives and stories related to our challenges in organizing, managing and preserving analog, born-digital and digitized materials. Our members work in corporate archives, academic and public libraries, city and governmental agencies, community archives, religious institutions, and with a variety of not-for-profit organizations, foundations and NGOs. We were founded to address the fact that archivists are misunderstood and undervalued, and we anticipated that by articulating and discussing issues among ourselves, we could find answers, discuss strategies and identify best practices that we can implement and share.

Staff of Special Collections and University Archives, University of Maryland Libraries

What was the mechanism by which the group came together to give feedback? (For instance, focus group, reading group, conference session, etc.)

22 responses

Focus group (4)

Reading group (3)

In-class discussion/assignment

Lunch and chat

Facilitated group discussion

focus group

Group meeting and discussion

we held a "summit" and discussed all the principles in small groups, and then as a whole

Regularly monthly team meeting

Small group

Facilitated discussion as part of a regular staff meeting

Hybrid reading/focus group.

focus group meeting

We met for about 1 hour for a focused discussion about the revised principles using the suggested discussion questions.

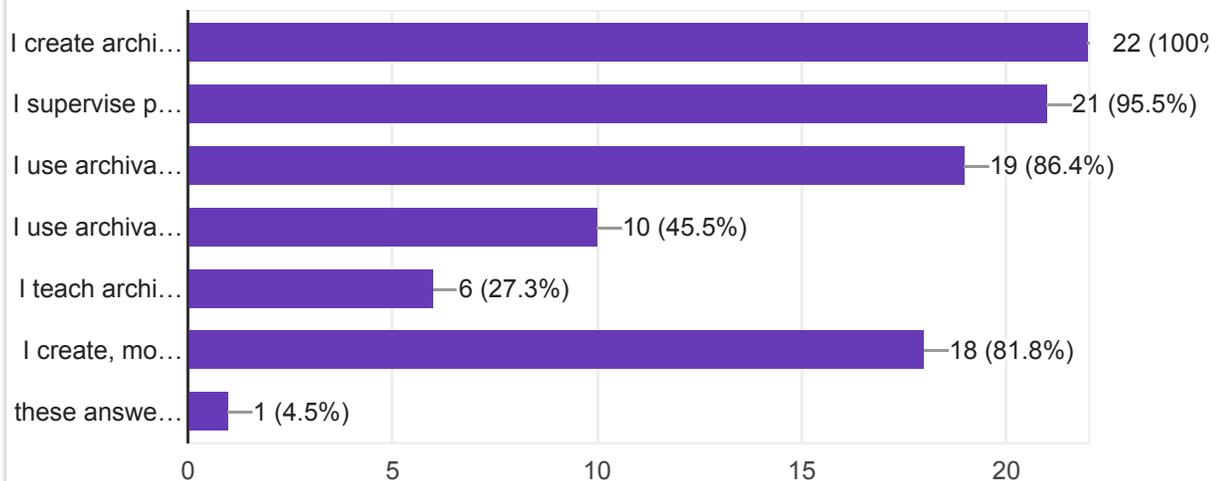
Several informal discussion sessions

A small group of NYDAWG members who work in a variety of different types of archives (academic, not-for-profit, religious, corporate and city agencies) met on six different occasions and corresponded regularly by email and phone. One of our members is a professional archivist and an instructor of library staff and interns.

Group discussion

In what capacities do you all interact with archival description?

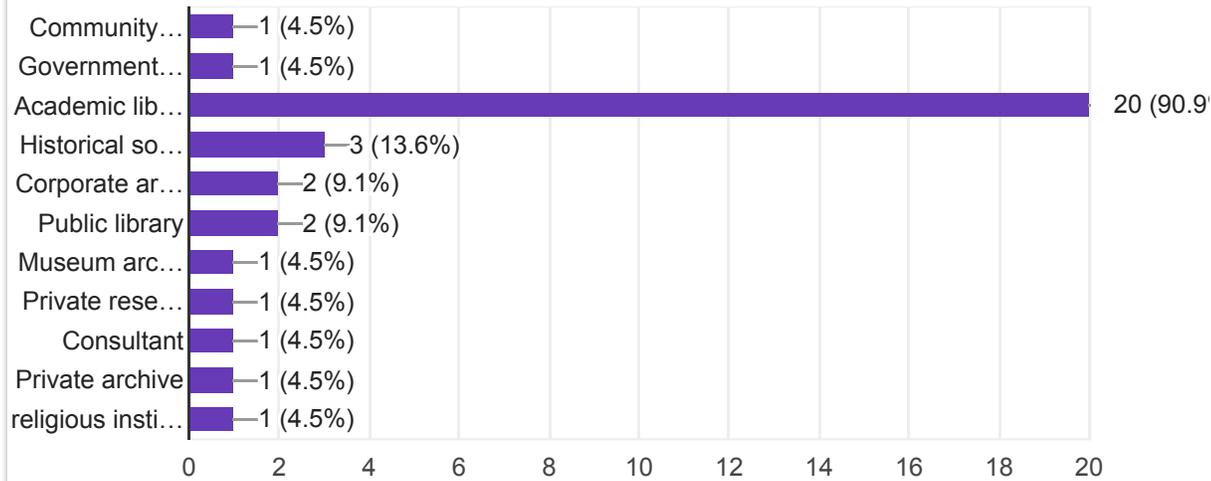
22 responses



Tell us about where you all work. What kind of institutions do you

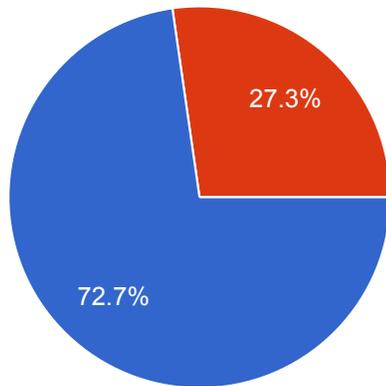
represent?

22 responses



What kind of feedback do you want to give?

22 responses

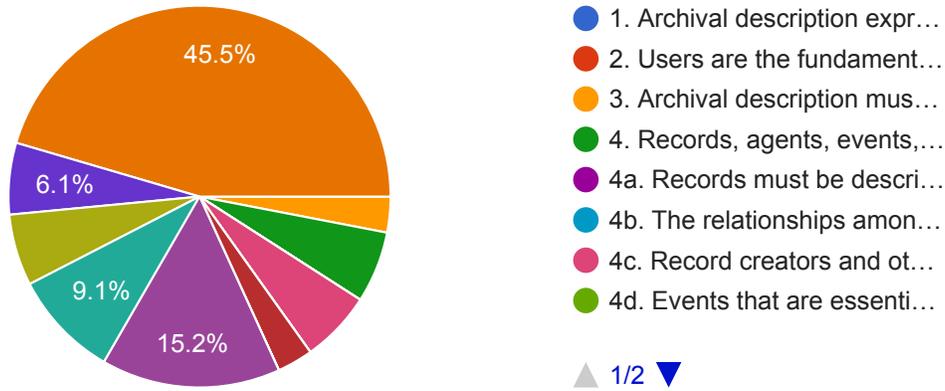


- We want to provide feedback about a specific principle. (You will have the opportunity to give feedback about more than one principle; you will also have the opportunity to give feedback about the principles as a whole, if yo...
- We only want to provide general feedback about the principles as a whole.

Respond to a principle

Choose a principle

33 responses



1. Archival description expresses professional ethics and values.

Principle 1: What ideas in this principle do you think work well? How will they positively affect archivists or users of archives?

15 responses

The idea that all collections should have base level description and control is essential. I think it will help archivists to make more intelligent decisions in the future as well as enhance access and general knowledge about collection holdings.

I appreciate the way this principle and the overall revisions place users and usability at the forefront of best practices.

Good overarching principle to start these - helps us think about what a principle is.

Overwhelming support for this principle in the group. The SAA code of ethics doesn't mention description at all, so there was a sense that this principle fills a needed gap. Including ethics explicitly in the descriptive standard will help us as practitioners to embed ethics into practice and provide rules for doing that consistently

We acknowledge that all of the first principle is true, but we can't ensure that all legacy archival description meets this principle and we think that is a stressful/uncomfortable place to be.

As a whole, we agreed with the inclusion of this section in the principles.

We think that this principles helps to connect our day-to-day activities to larger ideas that shape the archival profession.

This principle positively affects overall access to materials by encouraging archivists to think about

archival description in a holistic manner. It respects archivists' professional labor and expertise, and by grounding the work of description in core values empowers archivists to build and exercise their judgment.

We agree with section one, particularly the bullet points relating to ethical and values-based description.

We agree that our values do--and should--inform everything we do.

Even though this is ingrained to many of us, we also agree that this should be articulated in the principles.

We generally agree with the bulleted statements, especially re: trust in and between users, archivists, and repositories.

The principle validates that the practice of archival description in general is a professional undertaking.

We liked that the principle had bulleted points to make it clearer; like the emphasis on values and holding archivists accountable to users; liked the idea of documenting what you're doing and why enshrined in a core principle

By making a statement of ethics the first principle, it forces the profession to engage with these ideas.

I like the idea of professional ethics, but I don't think it works well. As a profession our Code of Ethics may change and has changed over time. Does that mean our "principles" must change as well? One version of our code stated "Archivists must uphold all federal, state, and local laws." (2005). As David Wallace has pointed out, sometimes the law can oppress people to reinforce existing power relationships with no bearing on morality or justice.

Honest description, including where language comes from donors and other outside sources. Acknowledging that we don't get to put names to creators and subjects of records without welcoming their input, and that responding to concerns in this area is part of being a responsible archivist. Highlights trust in archival description.

Principle 1: What ideas in this principle are unclear, or do you possibly disagree with? What changes would you like to see to this principle?

16 responses

This line "Once all collections in a repository have been described at a minimum level, archivists may choose to add more description." perhaps asks too much. The implication is that no further descriptive work can be done on any collections until ALL collections in a repository have had the base-level work done. This is not exactly practical for institutions which need large backlog projects just to address this issue and which also already have processing or other descriptive priorities. Furthermore, it may happen that users or public services staff notice essential and helpful (particularly user-driven) enhancements to description which may need to be done to one record which should not be stopped just because some collections in the repository may be lacking that minimum level just yet. Of course, addressing these user-driven enhancements is in the spirit of this principle, and yet it can in practice often fly against the letter of the principle. I would change the wording of this line in particular to be a strong suggestion or guiding

thought, rather than an "If, then" sort of statement.

The current wording of this principle is a bit harsh and inflexible. Could be interpreted as a call to keep all description minimal unless a repository suspends or somehow finishes their acquisition activities. Iterative descriptive practice is already covered in revised Principle 11 much more eloquently and flexibly, perhaps rendering this principle redundant.

We would have liked to see a definition or more precise language about the "diverse archival record." This may be implicit, but archival description alone does not encourage a diverse archival record; the braided practices of appraisal, donor relations, access/reference, etc. also impact the shape of the archival record. (As an aside, it would be interesting to reference or point to parallel standards in those areas, but that might be out of the scope of these principles.)

What principles or ethics might this be referring to? Not everyone in our group was aware of SAA's code of ethics as a potential starting point. Would like to see explanation of or links to examples, especially to help those newer to the profession who might not know where to look.

One member of the group had some concerns that this set up the DACS principles to be more of a code of ethics than a set of descriptive principles, worrying that this opened the door for DACS as a standard to become less useful as an objective, interoperable, consistent descriptive standard

What if it is an old description that we don't like very much? Are you ethically responsible for describing every collection perfectly? It is not possible for everything to be processed the way it ideally should be.

The team spent a long time talking about what *wasn't* included in the revised principles (as compared to the earlier document). The revised document seems consciously scoped to discussing description, but we felt that this should be addressed directly by stating that, "These principles have been revised to focus specifically on description." This overall sentiment relates to principle 1 directly because it references professional ethics and values without dictating what those ethics and values should be. We felt this section should reference those other documents (SAA Code of Ethics? Others?) to note that, while the DACS principles relate to description, numerous other principles/statements/etc. provide background and context to these principles.

I think it leaves open the question of what professional ethics and values are. My values could be different from yours. Should this point to an SAA statement on ethics. The bullets kind of say what "ethical" behavior is, but they seem somehow incomplete. Maybe because the word "values" isn't used again. I think that the content is mostly there, but maybe there is a smooth transition missing between the principle and the description. And honestly a lot of the other principles are essentially and ethic or value. The bulleted list is too small to represent all of professional ethics and values.

The roles and responsibilities of donors and records creators are conspicuously absent. We also suggest that approaching a notion of ethical description must also take into consideration the persons being described, rather than solely based on the ethics of the American archival profession. We are somewhat uncomfortable with the claim that ethical description "encourages a diverse archival record"; while description undoubtedly plays a role in such an effort, a diverse archival record cannot exist without concerted acquisition, appraisal, and internal management and prioritization. Even the most principled archival description cannot promote a diverse record in an institution that primarily collects the papers of the privileged or prioritizes those collections for arrangement and description. We assume that the "professional ethics and values" specifically refers to SAA's statements, and if so, think that should be more explicit.

We suggest considering adding a citation or citations to this principle. We also ask for clarification on the statement that ethical description "encourages a diverse archival record" – we weren't certain how precisely TS-DACS sees this happening, and YARG members had several different interpretations of this (e.g. through improved description of already diverse records; through building trust; through improved empathy). It may be worthwhile to draw this out.

If ethics are named in these principles, WHICH ethics needs to be defined. Not all archivists share the same ethics and values. If it is the SAA Core Values of Archivists and the Code of Ethics for Archivists that are intended to be referenced here, this needs to be explicit (and a link or footnote included) and the principle needs to better and more explicitly mirror those documents. Also, those documents were purposely written as ASPIRATIONAL documents – this principle should be aspirational, as well: "Archival description SHOULD TRY TO express professional ethics and values."

Our group was not sure how this principle helps us understand DACS as a standard. Possibly concrete examples would help. Where does description according to DACS outwardly express archival ethics?

We were unclear also why those ethics listed in the bullet points were called out, while other aspects of archival ethics as stated in the SAA code of ethics (such as privacy and security) were not. Why are THESE ethics most important in archival description?

Practically speaking, what does it mean for archivists to be "held accountable"? How does this happen in real life? .

It sounds excessively harsh. Suggest "values accountability" or "facilitates accountability" rather than "holds archivists accountable."

We suggest including a reference to or a statement about SAA's Core Values Statement and Code of Ethics. Without an articulation of what the ethics and values are this principle has little meaning.

This principle is currently too general. Unclear in what ethics and values this principle is referring to/based upon.

We also have a question about what "responsible" means in this context. What is irresponsible description? Perhaps another word to more clearly express the meaning and/or an example could be included.

I wonder if description alone can "produce" trust. That seems like a much larger project and positing that description can accomplish this may trivialize the actual work involved in trust-building. Maybe "strives to produce" or "is central to the work of building trust." I would also add donors to this list of stakeholders.

As stated above, our Code of Ethics and our Core Values change over time. As Verne Harris points out, our ethics codes "define tension rather than suggesting an appropriate way of resolving it." Shouldn't our Principles be based on the fact that we are professionals and are accountable for providing unbiased and accurate descriptions. Shouldn't our Code of Ethics address Collecting Policies (as it did in 1992), so that our Archives are not accessioning collections without the resources to provide the processing?

Also, how do revisions to Code of Ethics apply to different institutions (e.g. public colleges and universities are obliged to actively promote open and equitable access to records because they are public institutions supported by government funding, but private institutions have no similar requirements unless they receive support from the government. Business archives and

private business records need not be made accessible to the public.)

Is it implied that archival description is inherently ethical? Could clarify or rephrase as “is informed by ethics” or “strives to be ethical.” Assuming a shared ethics may be problematic: To whose ethics are we accountable? And, how to provide a historical perspective on archival ethics? This principle could also acknowledge ethics in balance with legal responsibilities. “Privilege” may be a more difficult term than (e.g.) “prioritize,” even while acknowledging that description is a political practice.

Principle 1: Is there anything in this principle that contradicts your understanding of existing archival theory? If so, what literature can you point to? What would you like us to think about to reconcile these ideas?

6 responses

No (3)

The principle does not contradict existing archival theory so much as archival praxis in how users and public services may point out a **necessary** enhancement to access through descriptive work or a user-driven enhancement to description which should or must be done before ALL collections in a repository have been described at a minimum level.

No.

Yes, our Code of Ethics may change. Should our descriptions of records change based on laws and shortsighted ethical decisions?

Ethics and the Archival Profession: Introduction and Case Studies by Karen Benedict (2003).

Our Code of Ethics changes. The most we can do is ensure that in making difficult decisions we do it in an appropriate way. But the ethics of archivists in Colleges & Universities may be very different than the ethics of those who work in corporate archives. Richard Cox once claimed that business archivists have no ethics. How can the ethics of the majority of archivists (or the majority of the TS_DACS composing these Principles, be applied to ALL archivists?

Principle 1: Is there anything in this principle that will require a change in your practice or the practices of other archivists you work with? What do you think of this change?

8 responses

The principle, if followed to the letter, would ask processing projects to halt in service of base-description for lacking legacy work.

This feels overwhelming to try to meet this principle for all of our collections.

No, though this section did encourage us to have a much larger/productive discussion about the ethics of repurposing description (e.g. dealers notes), especially when this description is inherently biased (e.g. written to encourage purchase). More on this in principle 8.

Will require archivists to stay abreast of current developments in professional ethics and values, which is a good thing!

Yes, lots of potential for change in practice. We would need to ask ourselves, does our current level/form of description express our professional ethics and values? Does it privilege equitable access and accessibility? Is it holding our archivists accountable?

We generally think this is a good change, but do recognize even the most basic changes require additional resources to implement.

I'm hopeful it will give us something to point to when description somehow violates trust.

See above. Changes in our Code of Ethics should not affect arrangement and description.

This will impact how we appraise records, set processing priorities, write description, and make it public, e.g. considering how to provide minimal description in keeping with standards and ethics? The principle reinforces changes we feel a need to make anyway.

Principle 1: Are there important ideas central to archival description that you don't see here? What would you like to see added?

6 responses

Nothing to add.

Importance of provenance in clarifying why we have things; Old description can be helpful in different ways, even if flawed

Under "ethical description," the first bullet should say that ethical description "produces trust in and between users, archivists, repositories, *and communities/donors/creators.*"

No, because this principle is more about archivists values and ethics in general and less about description.

Yes, arrangement and description are both required for digital and analog records.

No

Principle 1: How would this principle help you instruct archivists-in-training?

6 responses

The principle re-enforces the importance of the previous principle's call for workflows of establishing base-level description and control to incoming collections at the point of accession.

It is a constant reminder that our work is bigger than list making

This is fundamental to archival training--our ethics and values should inform all of our work, including description, and be kept front-of-mind both when a student, but also throughout one's career.

It will provide a context for discussing issues of ethics at all, which otherwise might seem like a possibly inappropriately personal pedagogy within a training situation.

Discussions of our Core Values and our (current) Code of Ethics and changes in the Code over time will distract from the skills archivists and archivists-in-training need to develop.

We would need to better prepare those who work with records (including students and volunteers) and better understand their backgrounds. We also need to consider whether and how archival principles resonate with anyone who isn't an archives student in the MLIS program next door: Why should that person care?

Principle 1: What else?

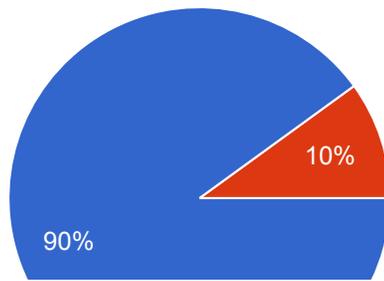
2 responses

We were wondering if some word-smithing would clarify our thoughts on this: Instead of "expresses" use "is informed by"? Or ""Archival description reflects professional ethics and values past and present."

Ethical decisions related to free flow of information (e.g. "Information wants to be free" and open access are highly valued in governmental organizations and in colleges and universities-- especially those that are publicly funded. Should those values be used to impose "ethics" on corporate archivists as well?

What do you want to do next?

20 responses



- Provide feedback on another principle.
- Provide general feedback on the principles as a whole.
- I'm done!

2. Users are the fundamental reason for archival description.

Principle 2: What ideas in this principle do you think work well? How will they positively affect archivists or users of archives?

12 responses

This is a particularly effective principle for addressing archives in different formats. Since the focus is being put on the users, can apply that criteria to any institution type or format. Also helps us get out of our heads, moving away from a gatekeeper role and thinking about the reason for our choices: to provide the best user experience.

We agree on the principle, but we are stuck on the meaning/definition of "user."

This principle listed as the favorite of several participants. We love the responsiveness and accountability towards users expressed in this principle! We also like that this principle acknowledges that archivists make descriptive choices and that those choices affect users.

This principle is both succinct and easily understandable, especially from a training perspective. It will help orient new archivists and archivists-in-training to the goal of archival work, and will be useful in the thought processes of more experienced archivists as they make decisions about the appropriate levels of arrangement and description. It could also be useful in determining processing priorities at individual institutions, or even an impetus to renegotiate deeds of gift if existing agreements contain language about access or use restrictions are not satisfactory in this regard.

I agree with the principle and the high prominence placed on it. That said, I have a simple wording suggestion for your consideration. To keep the language consistent with principles one and three, which are also foundational to rest of the document, I think it could be written "Archival description is completed to facilitate use." I suggest this because the word "User" in the current wording begs the question "Who is a user" and what types of use are we supporting, which to me introduces an unnecessary ambiguity.

This is an excellent and important principle, succinctly stated.

We agree with this principle and see how it could positively affect many different users and archivists.

We agree with the ethos of this principle (and the revised principles as a whole) and hope that it will signal a change towards a more service-oriented, user-centric way of doing archival work.

This principle validates and provides clarity about the primary reason we undertake archival description in the first place. Too often, archivists get bogged down in unnecessary and/or overly detailed description that does not really help the user understand the collection or use the collection. This principle will encourage archivists to focus on discoverability and a deeper engagement with users. Also, this would discourage restrictions and encourage more user studies. This principle should be our guiding principle in all we do.

We like the focus on users ... as the fundamental reason for description, with attention focused on "end use", not the collections themselves (which seem to be primary focus of the current principles).

Just essential.

Without a definition of users (primary or secondary?), I find this principle to be misguided, confusing and shortsighted.

We really like this principle. It's expansive enough to include both current and future users and also gives us permission to change practices in the future.

Principle 2: What ideas in this principle are unclear, or do you possibly disagree with? What changes would you like to see to this principle?

12 responses

Users may be creators of collections. What is the creator's role in description? Should we be transparent about whether the creator was involved in description (or vetted it)?

The team generally questioned whether it would be worthwhile to have non-archivists and/or new archivists review these guidelines for clarity. Direct sentiment expressed was, "The principles are well written, but I'm a 'practicing archivist,' what about the wider community?" This also bled into a discussion over whether or not there should be some cursory discussion of basic principles/definitions at the outset of the document (e.g. "What is an archive? What is arrangement?") or a link to the forthcoming revised SAA glossary.

We talked a bit about the fact that "users" aren't defined in the principles, and thought that maybe this is something that could be pointed out in an introduction. We don't think the principles should define users, but it should be clear to archivists that they need to do that work themselves. By distinguishing between "archivists" and "users" the principle may appear to say that archivists are not users of archival description. We were unsure whether or not this was intentional.

We suggest the second sentence be clarified whether the principle calls for a need for understanding of awareness of user behavior at the institution or information-seeking behavior more broadly. In keeping with the values that permeate this document, we think it important to be more explicit about the variety of user communities we serve - or hope to serve - and the differing needs or expectations they bring with

them to the archives. We cannot assume that we know what our users want, or that all of our users want the same thing. And while we agree with this principle, we think that there is a distinction to be made between prudent and responsible use, and use that is damaging to the materials.

In respect to my first point, I think it would be helpful if the detailed statement added the staffred words "Archivists must have an awareness of how users **of their repository's holdings** find . . . " to acknowledge that all use takes place in a different context

I think there's a lot of tension in this principle, but I'm not sure how it could be rewritten to reduce some of that tension. There are varying levels of awareness about our users and varying abilities to change what we do and how our users operate.

We would like to qualify the statement that all "archives exist to be used " as there are considerations that need to be taken into account such as:

- * Protocols for traditional knowledge of indigenous communities eg. unwittingly inappropriate use of or access to indigenous information can sometimes be dangerous to the users as well as to the information itself and the communities who generated it.
- * Protection of information relating to sacred knowledge that needs to be managed within the source community
- * Privacy considerations
- * Safety for vulnerable populations eg. protestors, people of minority religions, genders etc

We would also like to consider potential users as well as current user communities, with a particular consideration to those who have been under-served and/or excluded

It would be great to add a very short example, pulled from research, about what description that is successful for users looks like. What elements make description useful for users?

Users can mean different things (different user personas). May be useful to clarify that a user isn't just a researcher, but could also be a donor, a community member, other archivists, etc.

We agreed with this principle but think it can be hard to put into practice; it can be difficult to try to be all things to all users

How do you define users? Are these the primary users who are making use of records for their evidential value? Or are these "users" the secondary or tertiary users who are using records for information? Are we describing records for current users or for future users? Aren't the records or the collections themselves the fundamental reason for arrangement and description?

User interest changes with time and we archivists cannot predict their future interests or concerns. Though the records themselves and the information may remain unchanged, over time they can be recontextualized and re-interpreted to provide new insights and knowledge.

Yes, if "Users are the fundamental reason for archival description" then are they primary or secondary users? Are they using records for evidential purposes or for informational purposes (primary or secondary values). What functions and activities are documented by records, and how are they described? We need a better understanding of the roles of the users. While new technologies may offer new and unimagined possibilities of interaction with finding aids, archivists may benefit from undertaking surveys of their users. But perhaps focusing on the users will prove inefficient because, as we know often happens, sometimes users do not know what they need either.

Unless you help us define who the users are and what they need, this will not help instruct archivists-in-training. Description could serve two usergroups: the archivists, as managers of the records, and patrons as consumers of the content of the records. Without a thorough analysis and understanding of the targeted audience-- that is, the nature and characteristics of the audience, the model would inevitably be inaccurate, if not completely wrong.

None

Principle 2: Is there anything in this principle that contradicts your understanding of existing archival theory? If so, what literature can you point to? What would you like us to think about to reconcile these ideas?

5 responses

No

No.

no

How can we serve user needs without understanding who users are, and what users need? Shouldn't we describe records based on functions and activities?

Margaret Hedstrom "Descriptive Practices for Electronic Records" in *Archivaria* (1993) .

David Bearman "Record-Keeping Systems" *Archivaria* (1993).

David Wallace, "Managing the Present: Metadata as Archival Description". *Archivaria* (1995).

Wendy Duff, "Will Metadata Replace Archival Description?" *Archivaria* (1995);

Heathe MacNeil, "Metadata Strategies and Archival Description: Comparing Apples to Oranges" *Archivaria* (1995)

Description serves two user groups: the archivists as manager of the records, and patrons as consumers of the content. While finding aids may serve both groups, without a thorough analysis of the targeted audience, their nature and characteristics, then our focus on user needs may be inaccurate or completely wrong.

A Schellenbergian response might be that there are reasons for the existence and preservation of records (e.g. legal obligations) that aren't tied to their being used by researchers.

Principle 2: Is there anything in this principle that will require a change

in your practice or the practices of other archivists you work with? What do you think of this change?

6 responses

We have had some experiences lately working with faculty who incorporate archival materials into their teaching where the archivist has to direct the faculty to resources based on the archivists' personal knowledge of the collections because the description is insufficient for them to find it on their own. Would need to assess what improvements would be required for the user to find what they need independently.

The third sentence might suggest that we should systematically understand researcher needs through more communication, understanding. Can be difficult to communicate when Tech Services is in separate location from researchers.

Possibly, as discussed in other principles.

Putting the user first may be a paradigm shift for some archives/archivists (from archives existing to collect and preserve materials to archivists existing to be used) but we welcome this change.

User-centered design/workflows can be more time consuming to execute. Taking time to be aware of how users find, identify, select, and use records (researching this, testing, etc.) could impact how quickly descriptions can be produced and be made available. Ways to mitigate this include borrowing workflows and ideas from other professions that are more user-centric than archives traditionally have been.

Yes, we need to determine if secondary users will require archival materials for evidential purposes or for informational purposes (primary or secondary values).

This principle affects how we spend our time – focusing on material people can use – as well as appraisal decisions – should we take something with a 75-year embargo? How can we find ways around blanket restrictions? We have a sense of how users find and use our stuff; we've just chosen to ignore it (this needs to change). Need to reconsider the added value of e.g. subject headings in balance with limited time and other constraints.

Principle 2: Are there important ideas central to archival description that you don't see here? What would you like to see added?

4 responses

How do we create a feedback loop about how collections are being used? A way to enhance description? Include the word iterative. This doesn't capture the way that multiple types of archivists are involved (collectors, research services, instruction).

No.

What functions and activities are documented by records, and how are they described? We need a better

understanding of the roles of the users. While new technologies may offer new and unimagined possibilities of interaction with finding aids, archivists may benefit from undertaking surveys of their users. But perhaps focusing on the users will prove inefficient because, as we know often happens, sometimes users do not know what they need either.

One of our goals is expanding a user base beyond traditional uses and users of archives. Would like to see that reflected if it's in keeping with this principle.

Principle 2: How would this principle help you instruct archivists-in-training?

5 responses

This will require training archivists to think like users and to identify user needs. We need to be better prepared to teach not only A&D, but user experience

This principle emphasizes the collaborative nature of description

Importance of understanding how archives are used in order to successfully implement all other aspects of archival work.

I have made this a statement of purpose in the SAA workshop that I teach. I return to it often throughout the day long course.

Unless you help us define who the users are and what they need, this will not help instruct archivists-in-training.

Principle 2: What else?

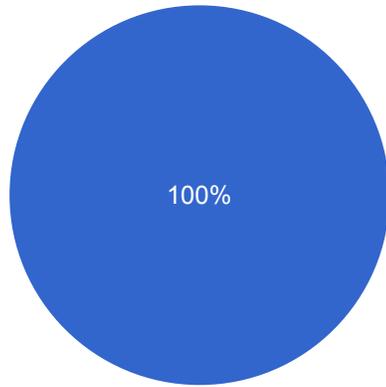
1 response

Users are important, but they are not the ONLY fundamental reason for archival description. The records or archival materials themselves are an important reason for description-- especially when described based on their origins and creators.

Please clarify who you believe are the users. Are they records and archival materials creators? Curators? Donors? Researchers? Historians? Genealogists? Protestors? Law enforcement? How many types of users are fundamental?

What do you want to do next?

17 responses



- Provide feedback on another principle.
- Provide general feedback on the principles as a whole.
- I'm done!

3. Archival description must be clear about what archivists know, what they don't know, and how they know it.

Principle 3: What ideas in this principle do you think work well? How will they positively affect archivists or users of archives?

12 responses

I much prefer the use of "honest" over words like "accurate" or "precise".

Speaks to the growing understanding of how important it is to be transparent. Our researchers often see us as figures of authority and so it is important to be clear about how confident we are in what we put in the description and the source of it.

We like the premise of this principle, but are held up by the word "honest."

It is important that archival description does not imply that archivists or finding aids are all-knowing. I think acknowledging the important of honesty will benefit users, because it will make them more aware and critical of the descriptions they use.

The idea that all description is, in some way, limited because it is a human creation is really useful.

This principle does a good job acknowledging the role archivists play in shaping collections and how users will access, use, and understand them. It emphasizes the importance of documenting not only the decisions archivists make, but the reasons behind those decisions.

Title is good. Use of the term "clear" works.

We think that too much focus on objectivity can sometimes prevent honest description, and are glad to

see this principle articulated.

Archivists are humans, humans are biased. We agree that while nothing can ever remove this bias, honest description mitigates the risk of human bias and the limitations of our expertise and knowledge.

We think a shift away from the "try to be completely objective" when writing to description towards being honest in what you know and don't know will be helpful to users, who may not even know what an archivist is/does.

We agree that transparency is important.

It's helpful to acknowledge the limitations of knowledge in a field that has been hindered by real and perceived alignment with objectivism.

This is putting too much responsibility on archivists, especially since new archivists or archivists-in-training may not have the knowledge that is required to describe the collections. This will lead others to question our capabilities. Perhaps this will lower expectations of the work we are assigned...

This principle is clear and common-sense.

Principle 3: What ideas in this principle are unclear, or do you possibly disagree with? What changes would you like to see to this principle?

19 responses

We think this principle could go further--archival description is not neutral (and comes out of specific, colonial traditions of record-keeping), and striving to be honest does not necessarily mitigate human bias (maybe it acknowledges it?).

What does it mean to be clear about what we don't know? Considered if this might be about indicating level of certainty in information we are providing in some way. The explanation of the principle focuses on what we know and how we know it. We'd like the explanation to include something about the "what we don't know" part of the principle.

Does this principle do enough to address instances of "creator-generated" description? Particularly with digital collections (and to some extent analog ones), file and folder names are inherited from creators but not always meaningful or understandable to users. To what extent should archivists impose "meaningful" description and when should they allow the transcription to be transmitted "as is," in order to preserve context? My guess is the archivist would use professional judgment to do either, but would be transparent about their methods. These questions may be too granular or implementation-related to be covered in the principle, but I thought it might be worth acknowledging somewhere that archivists aren't always creating description, but are sometimes transmitting it.

Maybe not disagreements, but questions about application-- how do we do this practically, and how granular do we go with citations. Where do we apply this- bio note, scope note, item? How do we express that we learned something from a conversation with a donor? Is an archivist's knowledge ever considered

authoritative? How do we disentangle authority and truth in a way that is easy to convey to researchers?

How honest can we be? (i.e. This collection is garbage! This was full of mouse poop!, etc.)

I think it is unclear exactly how honest description is implemented. Does it just indicate a notes field? Does it imply a larger reimagining of description? This has the potential to confuse users who read the principles and might not understand what this means for them, the user looking at a description created by an archivist. Where should they look for this information, and where as archivists should we put it?

There was a lot of conversation, but no consensus, about whether "honest" is the word that accurately describes what this principle is trying to get at.

We are uncomfortable with the term "honest description" for a number of reasons, and are far more comfortable with terms like accountability and transparency. To us, "honesty" carries a value judgment, makes this principle less actionable, and in some ways makes the principle on the whole contradictory. While a certainly worthy goal, this principle implies that intention alone will obviate the issues of erroneous, insensitive, or patronizing description. Acknowledgement of bias or privilege alone will not result in change if these biases and systems of oppression are not also deeply interrogated and confronted. We also have concerns that this principle applies specifically to individuals, but that institutions must also be part of these efforts.

Use of the word "honest" in the remainder, when the word "clear" in the title is there and more useful. "Honest" posits that less than ideal is "dishonest" which is volitional. Rather, less than ideal clarity is simply "unclear" which may not be intentional. We should not cast aspersions on intent.

Again, I have a simple wording suggestion. While I personally agree with the statement "all people are biased" I also think it is unnecessary to word it that way in the standard since in general the term has a negative connotation. Instead, I would say something like ". . . and all people work from a particular background, set of experiences, limitations, and perspectives" I think this is a more positive way to put the point.

This principle needs to be much clearer. In our discussion group, there were three different interpretations. Possibly a few practical examples would help illustrate the meaning. One suggestion was to reword the principle as "Describe archival materials as they are" – assuming this is the correct interpretation of the principle. Another suggestion was to try to articulate more clearly (again, assuming this was the correct interpretation), "Try to be unbiased in description but recognize that being unbiased is impossible." It was unclear to some in the group how this principle is different from principle 10.

We did not like the use of the word "honest," which seemed needlessly judgmental and accusatory. Possibly "transparent" or "unbiased" (used in an aspirational sense) would be better.

We wondered what guidance the principles could offer when our work conflicts with a principle such as this. If we are working under strict donor or funder limitations (which we may have inherited or had forced on us), how honest should we be in description? What if that honesty is against donor or funder wishes?

It was unclear to us how this principle would be used in a practical way. How do we communicate through archival description that "archivists are people," or what the limitations of our knowledge are?

RE: Citing sources: Does this also mean citing specific sources from within the collection? Agreement that citation of sources is important, but this could take an inordinate amount of time.

Would be helpful if for example information gained from the donor could be noted as such for help understanding where it came from. But we questioned how to effectively delineate what knowledge comes from the archivist and what came from the community/donor. How do we even provide honest description? It is good to point this out but we don't know what to do about it. To what degree is good enough?

Maybe include a statement about how knowledge can change over time and archivists need to consider that and what we knew when the collection was processed might be different from what we know in the future.

We struggled with how to articulate this idea to you. Sorry that it is not very well-formed.

While a nice lofty goal, we're not sure how this would work in practice. Definitely a "guiding principle" rather than a descriptive standard, or just a little fuzzy. How much do we need to document the archivists' understanding of the collection's scope and content or provenance? Does this really help the user?

We aren't clear how archivists demonstrate our biases? Is it sufficient that the name of the finding aid author is available publically?

We thought there might be a better way to phrase bullet 2 to make it clearer

I'm having difficulty parsing this - I support the intent but there is a lot of confusing and potentially contradictory statements here. How do you know if you are describing honestly? This is getting into known knowns and known unknowns territory.

Archivists sometimes describe records created in recordkeeping systems they do not understand. (I'm thinking of audiovisual materials as a for instance, so commonly misunderstood.) I wonder, do we proceed to describe such records and make a statement of that unfamiliarity? Or do we strive to collaborate with those who do understand in order to better describe collections? In other words, would it be helpful to change the last line to "acknowledges archivists' expertise, or lack of expertise, in particular records, recordkeeping systems and documentary forms"

Institutional memory based on provenance can be captured to facilitate documentation of knowledge. If archivists alone are responsible for description, then that may lead to greater bias based on background and socioeconomic conditions of the particular processing archivist.

Arrangement based on the original order and respect des fonds should make it easier for archivists to describe collections accurately as they capture contextual information based on the original usage and users. The usage of the words "honest description" sounds strange given the fact that catalogers may be facing considerable time limitations and could be encouraged to create descriptions that are "honest" but not complete, concise or accurate.

Metadata is essential if archivists are to maintain the integrity and authenticity of evidence of activities or actions. While archivists would not advocate the collecting of data for potential future genealogists through birth registrations, should they advocate altering metadata to meet future descriptive needs? Should archivists shape metadata to meet the needs of secondary users, or will this endanger the impartiality of the records? How similar are the descriptive needs of primary and secondary users?

Do users want minimal or broad descriptions or would they prefer item-level access without many levels

of descriptions? Do they need broad context provided by fonds and series-level descriptions, or will metadata systems that link content, context and structure remove the need for high-level description? Would they know the difference??

This may not belong in a principle, but concrete examples would help flesh out this idea.

Principle 3: Is there anything in this principle that contradicts your understanding of existing archival theory? If so, what literature can you point to? What would you like us to think about to reconcile these ideas?

8 responses

We use hedging language when we don't know facts. Maybe "transparent" is a better word choice. What is dishonest description?

Many users (and general public perception) indicate that they trust the authenticity of archives largely because of the role of archivists of gatekeepers and appraisers. Would acknowledging uncertainty endanger that trust between the user and the archivist?

This principle triggered a conversation about objectivity and the "factuality" of archival description. While most of us felt that archival description is not and cannot be objective, a few self-described "old school" archivists were somewhat taken aback by this idea, which is to say that although there's nothing in here that contradicts existing archival theory, there may be some lingering misunderstandings in practice.

The approach to bias privileges postmodern theory, which is one, but not the only theory available. In my opinion, being honest about bias does not mitigate bias; it simply declares it, which is passive. Mitigation would require an action to overcome bias. Even if you don't believe in objectivity, archivists should still strive to reduce rather than just declare bias. Overtly biased description is less useful.

No.

no

Yes, archival description should reflect arrangement. In the era of Big Data, we should be seeking ways to capture descriptive elements than rely on archivists who may be limited by what they know, what they don't know and how they know it.

As stated above, I'm unclear on the use of the term "honest." If we refer to the MPLP article, the terms that Greene-Meissner used was "most meaningful, concise and accurate information possible." Who is the judge of "honesty"? A description could be honest, but not accurate and/or could also withhold additional information that would be useful for "users."

I would suggest re-reading Greene-Meissner's "More Product Less Process" (2005) essay that calls for "a new set of arrangement, preservation, and description guidelines that 1) expedites getting collection materials into the hands of users; 2) assures arrangement of materials adequate to user needs; 3) takes

the minimal steps necessary to physically preserve collection materials; and 4) describes materials sufficiently to promote use."

Group was split on to what degree description should strictly reflect what's actually in a collection. On the one hand: "You learn about the collection from processing it, so description is organic." On the other hand: "Nothing's organic. Nothing's natural."

Principle 3: Is there anything in this principle that will require a change in your practice or the practices of other archivists you work with? What do you think of this change?

10 responses

We love the idea of acknowledging the authorship of archival description, but it's difficult to think about where and how this authorship can be declared in existing descriptive structures (beyond saying who wrote the finding aid and including citations for sources).

We have inconsistent practices across our different departments for citing sources. Some have concerns about how time intensive this would be, i.e. if trying to do detailed footnotes for a biographical note when combining information from many sources. There may be instances where we would cite sources at a more aggregate level to balance the time against the importance. We do feel this is something that is worth doing.

This will definitely require a change; it is not typical practice at our institution to cite our sources. Overall we thought it was a positive change, but there was a consensus that we will need significant additions of rules for applying this principle consistently.

Do we have a way for researchers or others to challenge the description, beyond factual errors? To say that we have glossed over important events or people, or that the bias of the archivist is problematic?

Citing sources more clearly--we do not have a procedure for doing that locally, and I'm really not sure how it would look/work.

Being more deliberate/transparent in description will take more time/effort, but the benefit it will provide is worth it.

We will also need a better way to describe and record this information-- not just a free text field in EAD/encoding/finding aid.

What EAD field would hold this information?

Can we learn to consult with others who might understand certain records, recordkeeping, and forms better when we do not understand them, to create better description? should that be a requirement?

Yes, this requires an abandonment of the important role that arrangement plays in our ability to minimally describe things. We should not ignore or abandon respect des fonds which has worked well for physical arrangement simply because there may be multiple provenances with digital records. Though admittedly there may be problems with blind allegiance to original order, the primary usage of records should still carry some weight in our descriptive practices-- through arrangement.

Perhaps you can cite your sources for using "honest" instead of accurate.

Institutions are reluctant to say e.g. "there are 20 linear feet missing" because it shows poor stewardship. But in a situation like that, we _have_ made a decision about the collection that needs to be documented. This principle prompts us to bring back citations in our finding aids, to look for ways to preserve web-based citations, and to be up-front about where there are gaps in material or related material at other institutions is more extensive.

Principle 3: Are there important ideas central to archival description that you don't see here? What would you like to see added?

4 responses

Is a finding aid the right place to tell researchers that finding aids have bias?

The principle as stated reads: "Archival description must be clear about what the archivists know, what they don't know, and how they know it." I would like to see added: *when* they know it, or put another way, the context in which the description was created. Many of us are creating description amid a rapidly evolving language landscape with many of the communities that we are describing not in agreement or alignment about what language is preferred or acceptable to use. Perhaps this is already covered within the concept of "what they don't know" in the current language, but I thought I would suggest a temporal notion here for consideration. I know I've created description as recently as five years ago that was acceptable for the time but that used language I probably wouldn't use today given language evolution and fuller understanding of how communities talk about themselves.

The principle of respect des fonds which is the basis of arrangement and description. Arrangement also helps to determine the level of detailed description required-- depending on the levels of arrangement (fonds, sub-fonds, or series,etc.)

Also, the concept of the record life cycle or the records continuum are key to arrangement and description. Records may have different functions and values over time. How would an archivist describe a record without trying to capture information related to its original evidential value?

Archivists play an important social role, and if they can articulate goals, develop strategies, employ appropriate mechanisms and exploit the techniques and new technologies, then they will command respect.

No

Principle 3: How would this principle help you instruct archivists-in-training?

2 responses

This suggests that any beginning or early career archivist will have a lot of work to "fix" once they become more familiar with their collections. Would they need to go back and update the descriptions to re-describe what they know and how they know it?

Archivists-in-training may be even more reluctant to reveal or highlight what they don't know, but we can make it easier for them by modeling this principle ourselves.

Principle 3: What else?

7 responses

Last bullet point seems to discuss something very different--honesty about our expertise rather than our limitations. Is this principle really about acknowledging that we are not neutral arbiters? Some archivists still consider themselves to be "neutral." First and third bullet points could be combined, i.e. archivists do have knowledge and expertise, but should also understand their limitations.

We appreciate this section, particularly mention of honest description and acknowledgement of bias and limitation, and the goal of building a culture of accountability and trust.

We think that simply sharing these principles with users is a good way to establish what archivists know/don't know, and that we're being transparent.

Also, we should be clear that being honest does not mean placing our own judgments on to the materials and into the description.

We appreciate that finding aids need to present less "certainty" and more of the nuance and possible ambiguity.

On a practical level, this might conflict with principle 2

This also opens archivists to the idea that our descriptive practices may be biased.

As stated above, I'm unclear on the use of the term "honest." If we refer to the MPLP article, the terms that Greene-Meissner used was "most meaningful, concise and accurate information possible." Who is the

judge of "honesty"? A description could be honest, but could also withhold additional information that would be useful for "users."

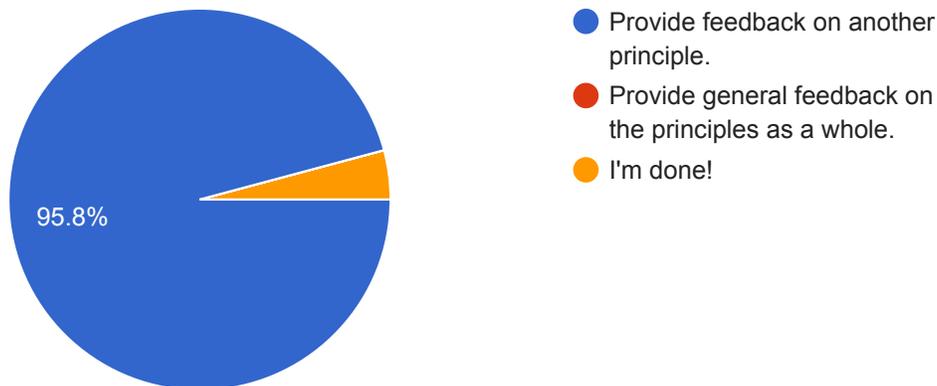
"Archivists develop a structural understanding of phenomena and look at them as the result of deliberate and complicated processes that must be reconstructed and understood. While these processes may change over time, the archivist is ideally suited to see their development through changes in the records. The records of an organization or the papers of an individual have as much to do with external regulations, policies and traditions as with the immediate peculiar circumstances of the single agency or person....

Archivists ask very different questions: How were the records kept originally, and how can that original system be reconstructed so as to enhance rather than obscure meaning? How can the earlier recordkeeping practices be explained to present-day users so they can draw information from them, perhaps in answer to entirely new unforeseen questions?" Richard Cox

As a group, we're quite good at this kind of honesty when doing reference, less so in writing description. We also agreed that libraries are far more honest about this kind of thing – books are "missing" – although the expectation with a library book is that it could always turn up.

What do you want to do next?

24 responses



4. Records, agents, events, and the relationships between them are the four fundamental concepts that constitute archival description.

Principle 4: What ideas in this principle do you think work well? How will they positively affect archivists or users of archives?

12 responses

The articulation of "the four fundamental concepts" provides an intellectually inclusive (or comprehensive) mean for addressing basic ideas. I like the assertion that archivists "reveal" and "expose."

Consensus that this is an extremely effective encapsulation of what archival description is (or should be) and what entities it covers. One participant noted that this is the most useful statement she has ever seen to explain to librarians how archival description is different than bibliographic description and that she will start using it immediately in conversations with our digital library architects about how archivists think about collections and contexts and to show what relationships we need to be able to represent in our digital repository.

This is flexible enough to give the archivist discretion on deciding what is essential. But, could be used as a way to over-describe and it might be helpful to add "acknowledging capacity" or "at minimum" or something.

Use of the term "agents" brings in more flexibility to description of creators.

The concept is sound.

We appreciated the shift from language of "hierarchy" to language of "relationships."

This is essentially all of the current principles condensed into this one new principle. It provides a model for description (more like PREMIS)
Works at macro and micro level.

The group's response was generally positive about this and felt it synced with their current understanding of the principles of archival description.

We liked the emphasis on relationships between agents and records!

The idea of relating concepts to each other makes sense and I am pleased about the move toward relational description as a core principle. that is a truly important advance.

There is so much in this principle. It really describes what is unique and valuable about archival description.

I like the mention of records and relationships, but I am unfamiliar with your usage of terms like "agents" and "events. Perhaps it comes from the open source software (ArchivesSpace and/or CollectiveAccess)?

Principle 4: What ideas in this principle are unclear, or do you possibly disagree with? What changes would you like to see to this principle?

19 responses

Add nuance and avoid hyperbole: No matter how "sufficient" our archival description is, we won't ever "fully understand the meaning[s?]" of records."

There was a request for some clarification of the statement that an agent can be a machine-- give an example of what that means or looks like

Must is a strong word. Too much context can give too much interpretation and prevent user from coming up with their own; they'll get bogged down in too much; too much description can be misleading.

I would like "activities" to be included in addition to events. "Events" implies discrete or unique historical events and, to me, precludes regular cyclical activities that produce iterative series of records, such as financial and administrative records.

"Agents have the right to define their identities." I don't disagree with this statement, but what about when an agent identifies themselves in a misleading way -- a hate group for example. Should there be some language in there about balance and perspective, or do we think that would create a chilling effect?

The phrasing of this principle sounds somewhat jargon-y and potentially privileges ArchivesSpace users. We would like clarification on how events are described here, and wonder if events must be related to the actual content of the records or bring information not tied to the materials in the collection? We think it would be helpful to distinguish between the history of creation of records and custodial history.

It would be helpful to recognize that creator identities may change over time, and the historical context of an identity may not align with current terminology or descriptors.

The language is unclear, particularly the use of the word "agent".

This principle might do with starting with some definitions for records, agents, and events. "Events" was particularly troubling to me until I reached the very last sub-point, so I think starting with some parameters may help orient the user/reader.

We suggest striking "fully" in bullet point three.

Some members of the group thought it might be worthwhile to address arrangement here. This principle touches on description in aggregate, but the principles don't address aggregate arrangement or groupings here or elsewhere. It may be worthwhile to consider adding language about identifying and forming intellectual groupings as part of the sense-making that archivists do as part of archival description.

This principle is too long and confusing. Our groups thinks that it can be more succinct, and also that the "Records must be described in aggregate" bullet point should likely be its own principle (Although keeping in mind that DACS can apply to single items, it should read "Groupings and/or collections of records should be described in aggregate.")

We also suggest that the current principle heading text be entirely deleted and replaced with the first two explanatory sentences beginning "Meaning in archival records" and ending with "the relationships between [or better, among] them." Those two sentences resonated with meaning and clarity for our group.

"Agents" and "events" are terms that not all archivists are familiar with in the context of archival description. They should be clearly defined here. Our group liked the term "agents" to describe a broader

group of influencers than just creators.

The bullet point stating "Record creators and other agents must be described sufficiently to fully understand the meaning of records" should be aspirational, perhaps with "where possible" added, as archivists do not always have sufficient information about agents. It is also unclear who needs to "fully understand" the records' meaning: is it users? Other archivists? Readers of the description in general? Needs to be defined.

The paragraph beginning "A category of agents" should clearly state that that category is "creators." The paragraph is a definition of "creators" and that should be clearer.

It is unclear how archivists can practically offer agents the right to define their identities in every circumstance. Living agents can be asked, and legacy description can be reviewed for out-of-date language or language known to be offensive. But what if an agent's preferred identity is not accurate, or hides an aspect of themselves that is present in the records? How do we reconcile this with the principle of honest description? Which principle takes precedence? In general, how do archivists reconcile conflicting principles? How do we reconcile self-definition with controlled vocabularies that may conflict with preferred identities and language?

It may be useful to clarify here that the use of the term "record" is referring to archival records (i.e. collection material), not descriptive records (e.g. a finding aid).

Agents' right to define identities-- what about their right to remain private?

Focus on privacy is missing. We also need to recognizing the rights of the donors and creators, not just the users.

Privacy also missing from principle 8.

The way this principle is presented is somewhat unclear.

We thought there should be more clarity when it comes to the meaning of "events." If historical events, we need to balance how much we include in the finding aid, as we can't do researchers' work for them.

I know that "agents and events" are very common in archival standards language, and I still feel like it's difficult to explain them to someone who isn't steeped in the rhetoric of archival standards writing. How would you explain "agents" to a 5 year old? This explanatory definition needs to be front and center. The way it is currently written assumes everyone knows what is meant by "agents" and "events," and I think this is a pretty big assumption to make.

I do not understand the introduction of "event" as a core archival descriptive concept. In this respect, the concerns I have relate to some earlier comments I made regarding the lack of mention of provenance in this draft, so you may want to read my thoughts below along side my earlier commentary..

There is so much in this principle, it took me a long time to digest. When I finally did I realized I agreed with all of it. The bit about records being described in the aggregate seems like an outlier in this principle. It might work better as a separate principle, so that the parts of this principle elucidate the main principle, which seems to be mainly about getting beyond describing records.

What are "events?" Is this vocabulary coming from somewhere external to the archives field like from

software? If so, please identify where this term is originating. It is given great importance in this document but is completely alien to all past DACS principles. Is it synonymous with activities or transactions?

What are "agents?" Are all agents users? Do they include creators, compilers, maintainers, and researchers as well? Later this document states that "Agents may be human or machine." How do machine agents affect and interpret archival descriptions?

Why are functions and activities not referenced? The word "function" appears with reference to agents (as people), but not to the records themselves. Is this a mere oversight, or have you found some literature that ignores the functions of records?

Overall, we had a hard time with how closely the language in this principle and sub-principles maps to ArchivesSpace processes and concepts, when ASpace is far from universally adopted, not to mention a permanent fixture of archival practice. Jargon is insufficiently defined and inconsistently used. It also doesn't account for the ambiguity of terms like "administrative," which have different meanings in and out of the profession and could make this principle confusing to read for non-archivists. We don't believe it makes sense to introduce an entirely new set of terms for the who/what/when/where/why of records, which has always been a part of archival description.

Principle 4: Is there anything in this principle that contradicts your understanding of existing archival theory? If so, what literature can you point to? What would you like us to think about to reconcile these ideas?

5 responses

To my mind, agent has two uses, representative (as in a literary agent) or in computer science (as a software component.) It appears to be used in another way here. This is particularly confusing as the SAA glossary only has the first two definitions as well. I would suggest "stakeholder" or another word that would better delineate the concept.

Yes, see response above. This principle does not seem to acknowledge the rights of the agent/creator to privacy and confidentiality.

Looking at both ISAD(G)/ISAAR(CPF) and the new Records in Context draft, each provides much more emphasis on the concepts of activities and functions. Activity is also one of the main concepts in the PROV-O ontology. In any case, both activity and function these are much more expansive in scope, and also more easily related to record aggregates. They can refer to something that is pursued over a very short period of time, years, decades, even centuries. An event, however, is much shorter in duration, and events themselves can be related to or undertaken as part of pursuing particular activities or functions. In this respect, I think it would make more sense to make the fourth principle "Function or Activity". I do wonder a bit where the idea of introducing events as a core archival concept came from, since I don't really see it that way. Obviously, PREMIS has the idea of events, and this notion was introduced into archival management software such as AT and ArchivesSpace. But it really has nothing to do with descriptive metadata; in PREMIS events are implicitly defined as having a preservation metadata purpose,

to represent a particular preservation action taken on a digital object. In this sense, I feel it the concept of event has been somewhat falsely conflated into have a purpose for descriptive metadata, but I don't really feel it is necessary. Things like birth dates, death dates, graduations, formation and closing of units in an organization. All of them are important, but can be recorded as attributes of particular agent records. Similarly, if a resource was created on a particular date, the event date is simply an attribute of the resource, I don't see what is gained by having a separate event concept or object class to deal with and link. Another point to keep in mind is that Marcus Robyns and the Australian series system have developed models for provenance of function/activity, so in this sense it would be much better to have a data model that accommodates this type of description (linking of functions/activities in relationship to records and agents than linking specific events). This is, in my opinion, a more fruitful direction than an emphasis on the relatively specific and discrete notion of events. I could go on at length about this, but should probably stop now for now. IN any case, I'd like to thank the group for its work and look forward to reading more.

I'm more familiar with functions and activities, and also the relationship between records, the activities or transactions that led to their creation, and their offices of origins. These relationship are useful for understanding the "original order" and constitute archival description. Physical arrangement can facilitate access and allow archivists to apply access restrictions based on the types of records and the information contained within.

This principle contradicts some of our fundamental concepts of archivy such as arrangement, respect des fonds, and original order. While I understand your reluctance in the digital era to focus on "original order," Terry Eastwood made a compelling argument that "Archival arrangement is essentially a process of identifying relationships, not a process of physically ordering and storing documents." (:Arrangement and Description of Archives," Archivaria, 2000).

While there is little doubt that some records may have multiple provenances (especially when considered from the Australian records continuum model), we should not abandon our historical principles for academic pursuits such as textual criticism, authorial intent, or Big Data algorithmic mining. Like it or not, as Heather MacNeil wrote "archival arrangement seeks to reconstruct the "authentic" meaning original, order of a body of records." ("Archivalterity", 2008)

No

Principle 4: Is there anything in this principle that will require a change in your practice or the practices of other archivists you work with? What do you think of this change?

4 responses

Helpfulness may depend on display, structure, location – wanting to keep information as close to the materials as possible. Carefully doesn't say anything about display but it might be helpful to suggest that display allows info to be where it is most helpful. Change of practice: some of the burden of biog/hist description should perhaps fall on the collectors; this can't really be all on TS.

This is essentially a conceptual model for archival description (similar to PREMIS). We do think that this is a bit of a different way of thinking about and representing description and descriptive systems, and while

it is logical and makes sense to us, it is a different approach and will most likely require change in practice for many.

Yes, if you are going to use terminology like agents and events, we need to know how they affect the records. I don't like this change because your definitions of "events, whether biographical, historical, or administrative" do not make much sense when looking at corporate records especially when seen in the context of "helps users understand how the records were affected over time by the actions of various agents following their creation."

As written, this will eliminate provenance, the fundamental means by which archivists protect the relationships the bind records within a fonds to each other, to the activities in which they participate, and to the entity that created them, or as Terry Eastwood described it: as a record of what occurred and how it occurred and the context in which it occurred.

No

Principle 4: Are there important ideas central to archival description that you don't see here? What would you like to see added?

5 responses

The great weakness of these revisions is the failure to integrate ideas from old principles 2 and 3 into the discussion of wholes and parts. We identify what we designate as wholes and parts working from some fundamental concepts or principles. The phrase "original order" has been a source of great confusion for students (and many working archivists) and I don't call for its revival here. Rather, a more sophisticated explanation of how records (on any significant scale) usually fall into groupings that can be identified by practiced archivists and/or created by them based on common filing patterns, the uses to which the records were put, the nature of their creation, and other discernible factors.

SHOULD THE COLLECTOR WHO BROUGHT IT IN HAVE THEIR NAME ON THE FINDING AID NOT JUST THE ARCHIVIST WHO PROCESSED IT? (*groundbreaking moment in our summit*) Transparency of all the hands that touched it, particularly who brought it in, would be helpful to researchers and archivists.

Yes, see response above. This principle does not seem to acknowledge the rights of the agent/creator to privacy and confidentiality.

Yes, description reflects arrangement, and arrangement involves the identification of groupings within the material. In addition, ICA Principle 2.1 "Archival arrangement is based on system of hierarchical levels" and 2.2 "Levels of description are determined by levels of arrangement" and 2.3 "Description takes place after arrangement is completed." While I understand that with digital files, arrangement may be more malleable, we archivists also have to consider the physical arrangement by fonds, provenance or records creators, etc., because occasionally we need to be able to prove authenticity and integrity by showing an unbroken chain of custody.

The implicit connection between original order and final intentions draws on an affinity between records and their creators in which the arrangement of the records act as a mirror of the entity that produced

them. In the Dutch Manual: "an archival collection comes into being as the result of the activities of an administrative body... and it is always the reflection of the functions of that body."

No

Principle 4: How would this principle help you instruct archivists-in-training?

5 responses

The way this is written it seems to assume audience understands flexibility but many may see this as prescriptive; may lead to glacial pace but may make it hard to get to principle 6, everything needs description. This might be helpful in describing the biog/hist to interns and archivists-in-training; could see using this principle as the structure of the discussion but with the same caveats we've listed above.

This would be significant for me in talking to students about context, within archival materials and when describing them.

This gives me some ammunition in the odd debate about describing audiovisual material in finding aids. It helps elucidate the value of archival description for archival objects, and the insufficiency of bibliographic description for same.

They will need to understand your definition of events and agents-- especially the contention that "agents may be human or machine." Does this mean AI agents?

Relationships and context would be key concepts to highlight if using this principle to teach or train new archivists.

Principle 4: What else?

6 responses

People were very glad to see administrative events included. In the section about describing agents there were questions about who we cede naming authority to-- just the agent? The agent's family or partner(s)? Where does the (desirable) mandate self-definition start to open the door for a donor's legacy-grooming?

When the agents aren't available to define their identity? What is the archivists' responsibility to keep up with identities?

This might be overall feedback, but something our group noticed is that use of the word "user" in the principles is more similar to a persona or user stories (i.e., the idea may reflect many different users; NOT just one type of user). This could be confusing for folks who may just be thinking user = researcher.

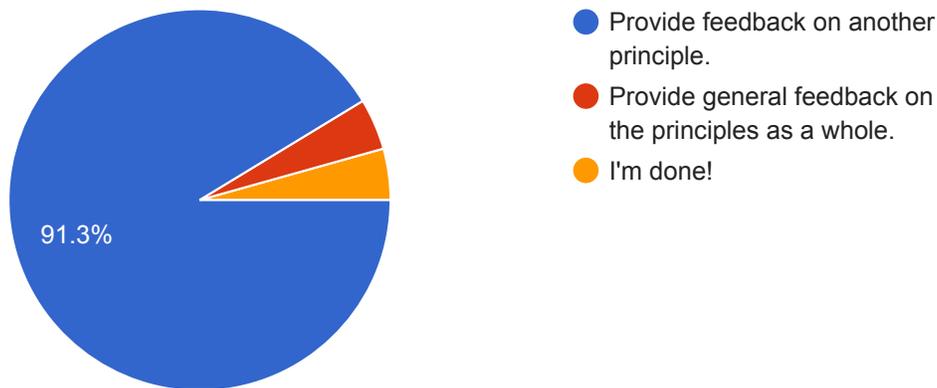
This principle seems to imply an expansion of the biog/hist notes. Our question is: How do we balance appropriate context for the materials with the risk of "doing the researchers work for them" -- especially in a repository like ours where most of our researchers are undergraduate students.

Need to balance documenting all of these entities with desire for collection-level records and minimal processing

The relationship of records to the original creator, its functions or activities allows an archivist to judge the authenticity of the records, distinguishing those that are genuine from fakes or forgeries. With this specialized knowledge, an archivist can recognize anomalies in a way that someone else may not-- especially if examining one record, of many, at a time. Establishing intellectual and physical control lies at the heart of the organizing function, whether in libraries, archives or museums. Archivists know they must be able to achieve this control over their holdings, even those materials that are difficult to describe and understand.

What do you want to do next?

23 responses



4a. Records must be described in aggregate and may be described in parts.

Principle 4a: What ideas in this principle do you think work well? How will they positively affect archivists or users of archives?

2 responses

We felt this principle articulates and supports the practice of iterative and extensible description by starting with aggregates and allowing for more granular description as necessary.

I think this is an important point especially when descriptions are presented from the general to the specific, with levels of description that are appropriate.

Principle 4a: What ideas in this principle are unclear, or do you possibly disagree with? What changes would you like to see to this principle?

2 responses

There was some discussion of how this principle might interact with the current DACS notions of minimum and enhanced levels of description. Ultimately we came to the conclusion that there was no inherent conflict, but that there may in fact be possibilities to expand or otherwise revisit the existing model.

According to Chris Hurley, "When records are still in the environment of their creation, there is much contextual knowledge about the circumstances of their creation and use that is known but not written down. It exists only in the minds of the creators of the records-- the living finding aids. When the records leave their native environment that understanding is lost. The records become, like the email message, [intellectual] content without meaning."

Principle 4a: Is there anything in this principle that contradicts your understanding of existing archival theory? If so, what literature can you point to? What would you like us to think about to reconcile these ideas?

1 response

Luciani Duranti points out that "given the continuous partial transfer of materials from the creating office to the archives, the whole fonds never exists in the custody of the creator, and thus there is no original physical order for the entire fonds. This implies that the principles of respect des fonds and original order can be observed only intellectually, that is, by means of description. Thus, description neither precedes physical or intellectual arrangement any more, nor does it treat the documents separately from their contextual relationships, but begins to act as a "representation," rather than a surrogate, of the material in its intellectual order; description becomes one with arrangement. That is why, more and more frequently, the levels of arrangement proposed by archival theorists seem rather to be levels of description." Duranti, "Origins and Development of the Concept of Archival Description." *Archivaria*, 1993.

Principle 4a: Is there anything in this principle that will require a change in your practice or the practices of other archivists you work with? What do you think of this change?

1 response

Arrangement as a means of logically grouping and simplifying bulk or batch description could improve our workflows and control by informing archivists how detailed descriptions would be needed. This would also facilitate control and decisionmaking about disposition and/or retention and access restrictions.

Principle 4a: Are there important ideas central to archival description that you don't see here? What would you like to see added?

1 response

These proposed principles are putting too much emphasis on description! From the perspective of diplomatics (which predates archivy by hundreds of years, but should not be seen as mutually exclusive), Professor Luciani Duranti argues that description has never been an archival function. Instead it is used to accomplish the only two permanent archival functions: 1) preservation (physical, moral and intellectual) and 2) communication of archival documents, that is, of the residue and evidence of societal actions and transactions.

Principle 4a: How would this principle help you instruct archivists-in-training?

0 responses

No responses yet for this question.

Principle 4a: What else?

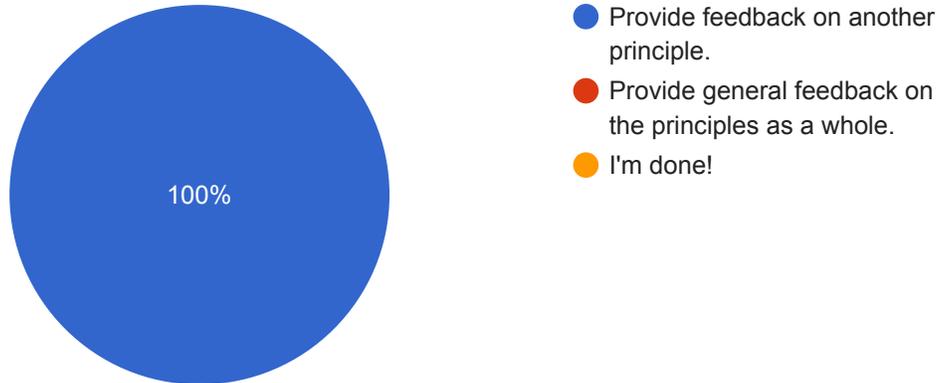
1 response

Definitions of description have always been a point of contention. Fredric Miller used a process- and content-oriented description by stating: "Archival description is the process of capturing, collating,

analyzing, controlling, exchanging and providing access to information about 1) origin, context, and provenance of different set of records, 2) their filing structure, 3) form and content, 4) relationships with other records, and 5) ways in which they can be found and used. Miller, Fredric. Arranging and Describing Archives and Manuscripts (Chicago, 1990).

What do you want to do next?

2 responses



4b. The relationships among records, agents, and events are essential to understanding archives and must be described.

Principle 4b: What ideas in this principle do you think work well? How will they positively affect archivists or users of archives?

1 response

We liked that this principle broadened the notion of what kinds of relationships can exist in records. Specifically, we were pleased to see that the word "hierarchy" has been eliminated from the principles as a whole.

Principle 4b: What ideas in this principle are unclear, or do you possibly disagree with? What changes would you like to see to this principle?

3 responses

Some in our group are concerned over having "must" in this principle because we are unsure how to apply it in situations where the relationships are unknown. Is this principle expecting extensive research if that information is not known, i.e. in the case of a disorganized and varied manuscript collection? We do see how this ties back to Principle 3 about being clear of what we know and don't know. Perhaps there are occasions where can fulfill this principle by simply indicating don't have information but must at least say that? Or perhaps the explanation could clarify if it is about providing available information rather than expecting the archivist to investigate outside of donor conversations and what is in the collection.

The word "agents" was unfamiliar for some and there was some discussion of this, with some pointing out that the term is defined in the principles.

I am unclear on the usage of the terms agents and events and the removal of terms like functions and activities or actions. Since manuscript and archival materials are often produced as an unconscious byproduct of human activity, they may address a variety of subjects. For example, a single letter may speak of family matters, business affairs, hobbies or interests, and random thoughts of no apparent significance.

Archivists need a more reliable principle for organizing their collections than museum curators or librarians, so we use provenance and then adds original order, or some logical order so that correspondence can be easily searched and retrieved by person and then by date (for example). The physical arrangement of the records gives fundamental clues as to why they have been created and how and why they may continue to be used.

Principle 4b: Is there anything in this principle that contradicts your understanding of existing archival theory? If so, what literature can you point to? What would you like us to think about to reconcile these ideas?

1 response

In Heather MacNeil's "Archivalterity: Rethinking Original Order" (Archivaria, 2008) uses the term "archivalterity" to refer to acts of continuous and discontinuous change that transform meaning and authenticity of a fonds as transmitted over time and space. She points out three key insights:

1. Arrangement of a body of records is not fixed at a single point in time. (e.g. records are in a continuous state of becoming.)
2. Archivists do not preserve or restore the original order of a body of records so much as they construct and reconstruct a so-called "original order" in accord with nature of records and current conventions of arrangement & description.
3. While an understanding of the functions of records fulfilled in their original environment informs our

understanding of how to treat them over the long term, such as reminding us that records may no longer fulfill those functions. (records may have been created originally to serve personal or administrative purposes, but they are preserved primarily to serve cultural ones.)

Principle 4b: Is there anything in this principle that will require a change in your practice or the practices of other archivists you work with? What do you think of this change?

1 response

Yes, relationships between creators, records and functions or activities are more important than relationships between poorly-defined events and agents.

Principle 4b: Are there important ideas central to archival description that you don't see here? What would you like to see added?

1 response

Where is arrangement? Where are functions and activities of records? You are putting so much emphasis on machine agents that you appear to be reducing the fact that origins and functions of records matter to users-- even different users over time. We cannot merely look at records for their intellectual content-- if we do, then we run the risk of biased interpretation based on personal, systemic or algorithmic biases.

Principle 4b: How would this principle help you instruct archivists-in-training?

0 responses

No responses yet for this question.

Principle 4b: What else?

1 response

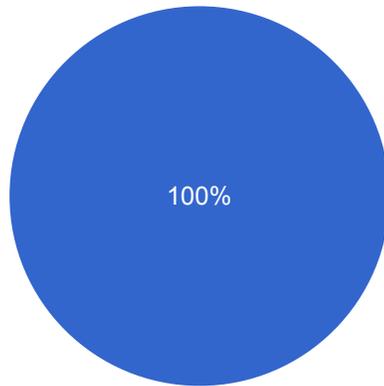
Original order may also be a logical order, and provides aggregations of records which can be described

and organized accordingly. But it is important for archivists to understand that records may change over time and, even though the intellectual content may remain static, the meaning found within the records may need to be reinterpreted over time.

I'd recommend re-reading "The Power of the Principle of Provenance" (Archivaria, 1985-86) by David Bearman and Richard Lytle which states that "The key to the archivists' contribution to information management lies in their unique perspective provided by the principle of provenance as it concerns organizational activity, especially how organizations create, use, and discard information." They make the argument that provenance does not have to be limited to hierarchical arrangement to be useful.

What do you want to do next?

3 responses



- Provide feedback on another principle.
- Provide general feedback on the principles as a whole.
- I'm done!

4c. Record creators and other agents must be described sufficiently to fully understand the meaning of records.

Principle 4c: What ideas in this principle do you think work well? How will they positively affect archivists or users of archives?

3 responses

We liked that agents were explicitly called out as being either human or machine. This principle seems like it will result in more structured description about agents, which has a lot of potential benefits for users of archives as well as archivists.

If I understand you correctly, it seems like this will improve the transparency of archivists' records

stewardship by describing who/what has created, worked with, or otherwise affected records over time.

This alludes to the fact that the records creators' original arrangement may be important.

Principle 4c: What ideas in this principle are unclear, or do you possibly disagree with? What changes would you like to see to this principle?

6 responses

The meaning of agent was unclear to some in our group. Agent suggested an action, so initially some interpreted the relationship of an agent to a record as being the one that made an assertion of rights. Would like to see that term defined better somewhere.

Some initially read the right of an agent to describe themselves as meaning archival description should only include how an agent describes themselves. Could see situations where we would want to also describe how others define an agent, i.e. an organization that describes itself as a patriot group but that others classify as white supremacist. We would like the explanation of the principle to include more on what that right is - is this a right for an agent to have their self description included in archival description among others, their self description be the only thing in the archival description, or something else?

We thought there was some overlap in the terms of "Describing these agents requires archivists to document agents' roles, functions, occupations, and activities," and some expressed confusion of what "activities" meant in this context.

"A category of agents, those responsible for the creation, compilation, and maintenance of records, is particularly important and must be described"--I would add *whenever possible* because there are occasions when you simply cannot find information, in the archival material or external to it. Describing that fact is also important, I think. I'm also wondering where the last paragraph is coming from, mostly "agents have the right to define their identities, which may change over time"--has this caused tension in the field? I feel like this sentence might need a little more explanation to go with it?

It took me two or three readings to understand - I think - what was being conveyed: archivists should describe creators, technology, records stewards, and others over the course of the records, and those agents or activities can happen even under our care. If that's not what you meant well... I missed it.

While I agree with the principle as a whole, I'm a bit unclear about the concept of a "category of agents" at the start of the second paragraph. Does a category mean a type (human v. machine), the activity of the agent (creation, compilation, maintenance), the specific categories of things like roles/functions/occupations/activities, or something discretionary to the repository? I would like a more clear explanation of what "category" is referring to in this case.

"Agents may be human or machine."

Does this mean that machine agents archivists must "recognize that (machine) agents have the right to define their identities, which may change over time."

Rights are granted by governing bodies. Who grants agents these rights? Also, is this a good idea? This statement assumes the subaltern as the de facto agent, when, in fact, we would probably not be so keen

to permit the powerful to define their identities. The statement appears to be dictating a form of passivity to archivists.

Principle 4c: Is there anything in this principle that contradicts your understanding of existing archival theory? If so, what literature can you point to? What would you like us to think about to reconcile these ideas?

2 responses

Perhaps this will be redundant with EAC? or is this an intersection with EAC?

How do machine agents define identities, and how would those change over time?

How do machine agents affect and interpret archival descriptions?

Are all agents users?

If machine agents are used to surveil and are amassing and interpreting inaccurate information (e.g. cameras with clocks that show the wrong date and time), then are our archival descriptions inaccurate?

Principle 4c: Is there anything in this principle that will require a change in your practice or the practices of other archivists you work with? What do you think of this change?

1 response

This is a slight shift in how I think about records documentation, although at its heart, it's just codifying the documentation that archivists know we should do, or that would be helpful to do. I like the change, but I am not sure I fully grasp what the principle conveys.

Principle 4c: Are there important ideas central to archival description that you don't see here? What would you like to see added?

1 response

Yes, archivists should focus on human users. EXIF information could be inaccurate.

How can archivists describe the "occupations and activities" of machine agents, and what level of detail

do you think these Principles will require? How can agents have the right to define their identities which may change over time?

Principle 4c: How would this principle help you instruct archivists-in-training?

2 responses

If archivists-in-training are machines too, then this could be helpful since they would be empathetic to the needs of their machine overlords. It's hard to know what is sufficient description for machines.

Principle 4c: What else?

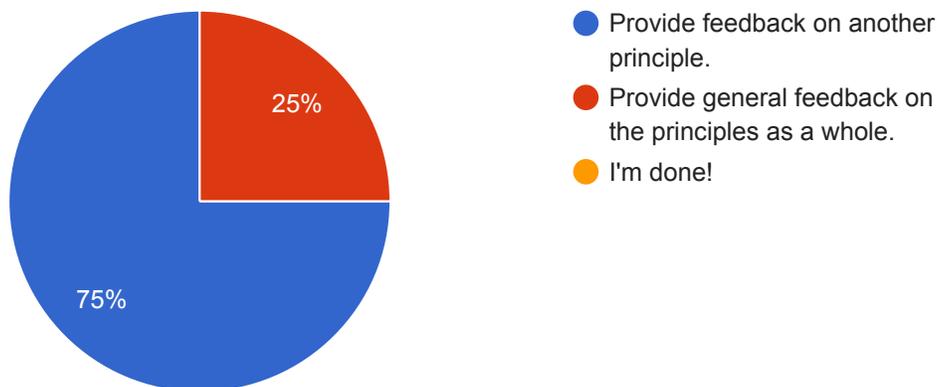
2 responses

Why does this section of 4 indicate "sufficiently" while the others just say describe? Concern that adding sufficiently sets an expectation for a level of description but gives no way to measure it. Is the sufficiently necessary? Or will the DACS rules describe what sufficiently means so you know if you've met it?

It's hard to know what is sufficient description for machines.

What do you want to do next?

8 responses



4d. Events that are essential to understanding records must be described.

Principle 4d: What ideas in this principle do you think work well? How will they positively affect archivists or users of archives?

0 responses

No responses yet for this question.

Principle 4d: What ideas in this principle are unclear, or do you possibly disagree with? What changes would you like to see to this principle?

3 responses

We appreciated the call to describe administrative events, but what does it mean to "describe" historical and/or biographical events? How far can or should this go without coming into conflict with principle #3? When does it become interpretation? Taken too far, it could potentially rob the creator of their voice in the collection.

Another lofty goal that might result in too much effort creating overly descriptive biographical and historical notes, which, in our opinion, is often why archivists spend far too much time creating finding aid. Perhaps re-worded "that are ONLY essential".

How do you define events as they relate to corporate records? I can understand how events in the manuscripts tradition may play an important role for personal papers and/or archives that are acquired by College & University Libraries, but how do "events" relate to records created within corporate archives? Are these administrative events? Wouldn't it make more sense to focus on activities and/or functions so that we can see the forest for the trees?

Principle 4d: Is there anything in this principle that contradicts your understanding of existing archival theory? If so, what literature can you point to? What would you like us to think about to reconcile these ideas?

1 response

Yes, archivists should focus on describing records for human users, and administrative events may not exist in corporate archives unless the Principles is suggesting that "events" are "activities." If that is the case, why avoid the term activities?

Where is the important role of functions? Why do we put more emphasis on describing events and agents at the expense of a functional analysis?

Principle 4d: Is there anything in this principle that will require a change in your practice or the practices of other archivists you work with? What do you think of this change?

0 responses

No responses yet for this question.

Principle 4d: Are there important ideas central to archival description that you don't see here? What would you like to see added?

1 response

Functions or activities instead of "events".

Principle 4d: How would this principle help you instruct archivists-in-training?

0 responses

No responses yet for this question.

Principle 4d: What else?

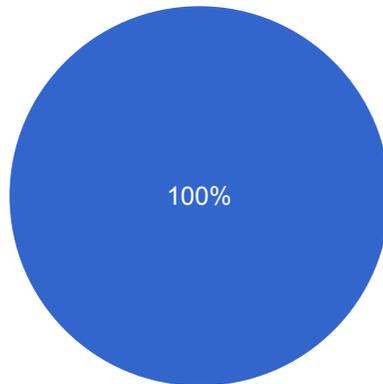
2 responses

We agree with section, and would like to emphasize that description of events should be grounded in an awareness that choice of words can perpetuate bias and/or 'write' history.

I am still unclear on how you define "events" as they relate to institutional or corporate records. What is the function of an event? Where did this term come from?

What do you want to do next?

4 responses



- Provide feedback on another principle.
- Provide general feedback on the principles as a whole.
- I'm done!

5. Archival description privileges intellectual content in context. Descriptive rules apply equally to all records, regardless of format or carrier type.

Principle 5: What ideas in this principle do you think work well? How will they positively affect archivists or users of archives?

11 responses

Can't argue with "common set of descriptive rules" and "consistent description" that also are flexible.

Find cognitive load a helpful way to think about the effects our descriptive practices have on users.

The option to be sensitive to cultural contexts while still engaging in standardized description was compelling to our participants.

Trying to understand how these records were created and how they were used by the creators and representing that

We like that this principle is very forward-thinking in that it encompasses file formats and carrier types we don't know about yet, and allows for some stability of practice in the context of rapid technological change.

We noted that this principle is particularly helpful in the context of dealing with electronic records, where there is a tendency to feel that we need to work at the item level. It gives us permission and a framework from which to make a decision to treat electronic records as we treat other records. We also like how this principle calls for empathy with creators.

We agree that standards must be flexible enough to accommodate all the ways that human experience is recorded.

A common set of descriptive rules regardless of format/carrier will help with producing consistent description across all materials.

For archivists, more control over intellectual content, less stress on formats

- Intellectual content in context
- Regardless of (preservation) housing/storage, those within the same context are described, arranged and presented together
- Easier for users to find materials from a certain topic/event/etc.

Focusing on description of content helps users understand materials/collections better

This is a positive principle that should help archivists understand that archival descriptive principles apply equally to AV and Born Digital. Far too often, archivists describe special formats at the item level, or spend too much time describing the physical media.

Both of the main ideas in this principle are important.

intellectual content in context... regardless of format or carrier type. However, if we focus too much on carrier type, we may do so at the risk of ignoring (in the case of digital video) various codecs that may affect our access over time.

Continuing to encourage looking at standards beyond DACS for non-paper formats is a plus.

Principle 5: What ideas in this principle are unclear, or do you possibly disagree with? What changes would you like to see to this principle?

20 responses

The statement "archival description privileges intellectual content in context" is far too abstract for me. I don't know what it means and the following paragraphs do not help.

I'm stuck on the phrase "lowers cognitive load for users." I'm fairly certain I know what is meant here - that standardized archival description, if consistent within and across repositories, is easier for users to understand and use - but I think "cognitive load" is too jargony and that this could be stated in much plainer language. I also think that it comes a little too close to pre-judging the cognitive abilities of users.

I'd prefer language about increasing usability rather than decreasing intellectual requirements.

We had a lot of conversation about this. It seems aspirational to try to describe any record of human experience with archival description. And maybe important to acknowledge the limitations of description that comes out of a Western (and even more particularly, a U.S.) archival tradition. There are materials that record human experience that we don't even pretend to describe, because they have not been considered part of the archival record.

And this is minor, but not sure about why you'd need to include "carrier type." "Cognitive load" seems unnecessarily wordy.

Would like to see this principle reworded to clarify the relationship between the ideas in the two sentences. Does this mean that description privileges intellectual content over format? As written, it sounded like two unrelated ideas. Our initial reactions were that we didn't understand what the first sentence was saying and that the second sentence seemed to not be leaving room for differing levels of description (from "descriptive rules apply equally").

The first line "Archival description privileged intellectual content in context" wasn't clear to one participant. There was also some concern that flexibility is a double-edged sword, so hoping for some guidance on how to provide

This seems a bit wishy-washy: have a standard but be flexible. What does this ultimately mean – when does it make sense to do enhanced description, and when is it alright to leave it?

The majority of our team was strongly opposed to the term "cognitive load" as they felt it was jargon without a clear meaning to most individuals consulting these principles. The team felt that the entire principles document should be reviewed and target an 8th grade reading level (as is the practice with writing for the web), to avoid such problematic jargon.

I find the transition from the first sentence to the second sentence unclear. What does the importance of archival context have to do with format or carrier type? I think the second sentence could stand on its own and be much less confusing. The use of "privileges" is also strange to me, and to me implies that the second sentence is meant to correct or supplement the first sentence, which I don't think is the intention.

The principle refers to carrier media, but that doesn't come up in the description. I think I know what this is about, but some plain language might help. "...all the ways human experience is recorded" is vague. Are we talking about limitations or choices around the use of technology or accessibility? That makes it sound like I won't describe letters because I don't like them over diaries, for example, which isn't really about carrier media.

There was some debate about whether the term "carrier type" was jargon-y, but none of the participants were able to suggest a better alternative. "Media" was felt to be so overused a term as to be meaningless. One participant suggested that the phrase "accommodate all of the ways that human experience is recorded" might be too tall of an order and suggested instead "any of the ways that human experience is recorded".

We are unclear about and would like clarification about the phrase "lowers cognitive load" in this context. We have concerns that a recommendation for "consistent description across formats" is somewhat ambiguous and may result in practices that are in fact contrary to the spirit of this principle. We think that the statement about flexibility to ensure respect for cultures and communities deserves further treatment

and guidance.

The paragraph of bullet points beginning "Consistent description across formats:" is a little unclear to me. What is meant by "formats" in this context? Formats of the materials being described or formats of the descriptive content?

The first sentence of this principle, "Archival description privileges intellectual content in context," seems problematic and probably unnecessary. The following sentence is very clear and introduces what we understand to be the core idea of the principle in a better way. Possibly that first sentence could be moved to Principle 9, or elsewhere.

We found the principle of "universal description" to be a good one, but did not feel that it was articulated clearly here. As we understand it, there are 3 concepts: 1) description across formats, 2) flexibility of description across cultures, experiences, and technologies, and 3) the importance of articulating context in description. Could this be re-written in a clearer way?

These sentences seem disjointed. Why are they in a single principle? Yes, it is important that archival description privilege intellectual content and that it be in context. How is that directly connected to the principle that descriptive rules apply equally to all records regardless of format or carrier type? Why are these two together? The sentence about the importance of flexibility to accommodate the ways differing ways communities may document is buried here. Highlight the importance of understanding different cultural contexts for creating records

Some staff interpreted this as a requirement to describe material at a level of detail that is not realistic, e.g. certain formats that are very labor-intensive to describe, such as videos that one would need to watch to understand the content.

While we agree that description should generally be format-agnostic, we thought that this principle could be read as a little heavy-handed in its articulation of this.

We had a discussion on the idea that sometimes the format is the context, and the format can convey a lot of meaning about the creator, who they were, how they lived, where they lived, etc.

We would like to see an acknowledgment of this idea-- that formats sometimes need to be highlighted and/or treated differently because they can be significant in and of themselves.

We aren't sure what you mean by "cognitive load".

We found the wording of this principle to be confusing. It readings like it's conflating two different and separate problems: describing materials across formats, and respecting creators' practices. We think it could be rewritten to make it clearer; it seems to conflate format and cultural context. Maybe include two separate "points" for these two ideas.

This seems like 2 principles to me. The bit about content in context is a separate concept than the bit about formats, which is what most of the secondary text in this principle seems to be about (formats). Also, the line about "reducing cognitive load" is a really powerful concept here, but it reads like shorthand for something that needs to be elucidated further.

Physical and intellectual arrangement are as important as intellectual content, if not more. The physical arrangement of paper records, for example, can be used to control access. The same goes for digital or

electronic records in which access restrictions can be established based on the origins of the records. By the same token, digital records that contain PII should be separated from records that do not.

The principle and its description aren't a great fit, seeming to shoehorn multiple ideas into one principle. What does description privilege intellectual content _over_? Physical arrangement may not be a core practice going forward, but it still exists and was historically practiced. Failing to mention it may make these principles less transparent than they could be for users trying to understand archives.

Principle 5: Is there anything in this principle that contradicts your understanding of existing archival theory? If so, what literature can you point to? What would you like us to think about to reconcile these ideas?

4 responses

How much attention and emphasis do we give to the outlier formats that don't represent the meat of the collection?

No.

What happened to arrangement? How would archival description help with maintaining security and control of mass quantities of documents (electronic and/or paper) that may require specific access restrictions based on the office of origin. Wouldn't the record group or fonds help with records retention and disposition scheduling?

No

Principle 5: Is there anything in this principle that will require a change in your practice or the practices of other archivists you work with? What do you think of this change?

5 responses

Digitization and changing technological demands do require flexibility but it would be helpful if the tech folks could also be flexible and allow for weighting things differently

It can be challenging to even know what the content of some formats are if special equipment is required to access it by the archivist and the user.

No. We essentially follow this principle now.

In regard to Personally Identifiable Information, some institutional records generated by departments may collect those items, and access restrictions could be applied at a batch level—as opposed to item-level description. How would minimal processing descriptions help maintain security responsibilities?

No

Principle 5: Are there important ideas central to archival description that you don't see here? What would you like to see added?

4 responses

"Descriptive standards must recognize that not all cultures and communities document in the same ways, and our descriptive standards must be flexible enough to accommodate all the ways that human experience is recorded."

This should be its own principle, rather than buried under principle five, which is about records and formats, rather than people/cultures. We would also like to see an acknowledgment of cultural considerations relating to indigenous knowledge, at risk languages, and different documentary practices.

The use of the word "accommodate" is not adequate. Archivists have the opportunity to do more than simply accommodate "all the ways that human experience is recorded". In the case of languages and communication modes which have been put at risk by colonisation, oppression and suppression, good description can support revitalisation efforts.

No.

Yes, physical arrangement. can improve intellectual control.

According to David Bearman in "Archival Strategies": The object of archival description should be to document the contexts of records creation and use, not to describe all the records in their particularities.

Archivists should focus on the functional requirements for recordkeeping as opposed to attempting to describe records consistently.

No

Principle 5: How would this principle help you instruct archivists-in-training?

4 responses

Describe it based on content not format, and don't let format dictate description

This is another place in the draft principles I can point to to stress that AV materials shouldn't be removed from collections and described separately at the item level, which is such a common practice.

Intellectual content should be understood in the context of functions or activities.

We're concerned that this principle may not be meaningful to anyone outside of archives.

Principle 5: What else?

5 responses

We would really like to have tribal archivists and others working with less commonly held record types weigh in to see if this feels actionable.

We think this is suggesting we treat things according to their importance and use by content, and not by format (e.g. don't always totally separate erecs and a/v) – understanding we still have to be flexible and pay attention to format when that is important. But this also seems to be applying description in the same way as opposed to differently both to format and to types of collections/communities/use, which feels like a lot and isn't totally clear. First two paragraphs don't seem to match rest of principle.

Not explicitly calling out formats could hinder user experiences (they could want to see oversize material/media/etc. without knowing the format - could be more time consuming for the archivist to pull and will be a different experience for the user)

We are in agreement with the this principle.

Carriers and codecs in the case of digital video and for some other file formats that are tied to specific software.

What do you want to do next?

22 responses

6. Each collection within a repository must have an archival description.

Principle 6: What ideas in this principle do you think work well? How will they positively affect archivists or users of archives?

16 responses

This statement serves as a long-needed professional standard for archival repositories.

Really important! No backlogs!

Agree strongly with this principle while acknowledging we are not fulfilling it well at our institution. We believe this is critical to having user-focused description so that nothing is hidden from users. We acknowledge that researchers could be frustrated if they see description for a collection they cannot access, so it will be important to have access information clear in the description. But we think it would be better for the user to know where a collection is, even if they can't access it, than to be searching various archives' holdings unable to find out where someone's papers are held.

We also think this principle is important in terms of the stewardship benefits of knowing our own collections, such as capturing collection-level information early after acquisition so that information isn't lost due to staff turnover and using holdings information to guide future acquisition decisions.

This will be a huge boon for users and administrators alike. It is key to know that resources exist.

This is good for researchers because it lets them know what an institution has in collections. This is good for researchers because they can plan where to do research. This creates a sense of accountability once material is collected (a good thing).

We like that this principle essentially outlaws having an undescribed backlog. In particular, resource allocators present at the focus group were thrilled to have some principled backing for extensible processing projects which seek to reduce these undescribed backlogs.

This principle could positively affect archivists' ability to advocate for resources and support to better manage their collections through description. Having a mandate from a recognized professional body could be very useful in shifting institutional priorities.

Privileges collection level description is positive.

What I would LOVE to see happen is that we actually follow through on this principle.

We are all enthusiastic about this principle and agree with it wholeheartedly.

This will positively affect archivists and users, and we see so much potential in essentially closing so many backlogs and undescribed collections. This has impacts throughout archival work-- from donor relations, appraisal, accessioning, processing, access, etc. Positive impacts. We are excited about the possibility of more archivists knowing more about their collections. Not to mention more users knowing more about collections, too.

Also like the articulation that it is incumbent on repositories to deploy resources accordingly. We all felt like this would be a great outreach and advocacy tool for having real convos with donors and admins about processing collections.

This further supports/strengthens the idea that archives are for users, not institutions.

Baseline/minimal description of all collections should be #1 goal for repositories. It is unethical to have un-described collections "hidden" from users

A principle that should help us prioritize our work.

We agree that all collections need description in order to be used -- and it is essential that archivists realize that when they accept materials, they are making commitment to process and describe them. However (see below for concerns/caveats). It is a benefit for users if all collection have ADEQUATE description.

We agree with this principle

This strikes me as a great distillation, 12 years on, of MPLP.

This principle suggests that every collection requires archival description but does not address the fact that some collections may require only a one word description and others may require longer more detailed descriptions.

This puts up-front that, as archivists, we're providing access to our collections at a minimal level. It's consistent with archival ethics and values.

Principle 6: What ideas in this principle are unclear, or do you possibly disagree with? What changes would you like to see to this principle?

14 responses

As discussed in my comments on principle 4, the failure to analyze the concept of "collection" (or "whole") leaves this principle on very shaky ground.

We felt some need to push back on this principle for small institutions, for whom description might not be a priority (over access, outreach, exhibition, etc.). But if the definition is sufficiently broad, we think it could work.

We think the archival description should have to be discoverable to users, not just available internally to staff, or it will not be in alignment with Principle 2 and will be missing a lot of the potential benefits of

creating description for all holdings. If discoverability was the intent of this principle, that was not clear to us in how it is worded. We would want to see discoverability be part of the principle itself, not just the explanation.

There was disagreement in our group about the last paragraph in the explanation for this principle. Some felt it was too focused on implementation to be part of a principle while others felt it was important to include because it answers potential concerns that this principle would be too hard to follow. Perhaps the idea of needing to deploy resources differently to meet a principle applies to more than just this one and should be part of introductory text instead.

How much description to include in collection level description?

There was a conversation about how this principle interacts with user access to records, with some participants asking whether or not this applied to records restricted from public access. Although we felt like the principle requires some level of description regardless of conditions governing access, we also thought that could perhaps be stated more explicitly.

We have concerns that this principle as written could alienate and negatively impact the morale of archivists at institutions with very limited resources or leadership who might not be convinced by this mandate. While we appreciate the aspirational spirit of this principle, many institutions will not be in compliance with it, and we have concerns if this principle is so removed from the reality of many archivists. This principle also promotes a specific archival ideology; we might suggest a revision to say "should strive to create description for all collections."

"Must" is overly prescriptive. I'd like to see "should." I also wonder about the consistency of use of the word "collection" here versus elsewhere in DACS. I'm thinking particularly the meaning of "collection" when forming titles, as opposed to Records, Papers, etc.

This principle doesn't address timing--when does this basic description get done? When does it become available to users? Are there distinctions between internal, staff users and external, researcher users--should there be in these principles? There's a physical piece involved to descriptive work, and I'd generally like to see more in the literature about this aspect of MPLP and generally about processing collections.

Across the board we took issue with the overuse of the word "must." While principles can and should be aspirational, this word comes across as judgmental and may be off-putting for those many archivists who cannot meet the principles, but are doing the best they can.

Regardless, we appreciated this principle and its intent. Our only question was whether "archival description" here means only publicly available description, or if it can also mean institution-only description. We assume it means both, but if so this should be clearly stated. Also, this could be problematic for some corporate or religious archives, where institutional goals and policies make publicly available description impossible.

We also felt that the last paragraph of this principle should be removed, as it is unnecessary and needlessly judgmental and negative.

Something that might be unclear to some is what constitutes a collection, or what the minimal acceptable level of description will be. Of course, this will depend on decisions made at the repository level.

We disagree that "no matter how basic a description is, it is better than no description". Incomplete,

inaccurate description is a dis-service to users and to the archivists who assist them.

I think this is a really important principle. Are these ordered in any particular reason? Because it seems to me that this is important enough, and so much flows from it, that it should be higher in the order.

What about arrangement and description? Levels of description should be appropriate and correspond to the levels of

arrangement, and they should be acknowledged (e.g. general to specific).

If every collection must have archival description, then our backlogs will drive our workflows. If our principles were to

encourage arrangement as description, we could address our backlogs in a more methodical and systematic way, as

opposed to force archivists to write a variety of minimal descriptions just to get through the backlogs.

Could this be a better fit following Principle 2, to emphasize that archives exist to be used?

Principle 6: Is there anything in this principle that contradicts your understanding of existing archival theory? If so, what literature can you point to? What would you like us to think about to reconcile these ideas?

4 responses

No.

no

In non-academic institutions, the record group or fonds can provide information to researchers (users?) of the types of records and series that may be contained within that higher level. The detailed descriptions, which are very useful, should depend on the complexity of the levels.

No

Principle 6: Is there anything in this principle that will require a change in your practice or the practices of other archivists you work with? What do you think of this change?

7 responses

Our institution has a significant undescribed backlog. This would require us to allocate time to describe everything at the collection level at the expense of detailed processing projects. Some in our group saw

this as an important change to make. Others did not feel it was realistically going to happen in their department.

This will require a huge change for most of the profession, and there are real, practical barriers for many organizations, but it is absolutely right for this to be what we aspire to and actively work towards.

If an institution has a steady stream of incoming materials that cannot be culled or refused; this is a lot to do with a limited staff. Implementation of this principle would change workflows throughout many institutions, starting with acquisition through access. Could encourage more selective collecting, better appraisal.

Yes. This will require significant work to better understand resource allocation /re-allocation. Archives will need to figure out a way to efficiently ramp-up archival work and implement flexible workflows to do this.

Archivists must get better at data/statistical analysis, reporting, budgeting, and management.

We welcome this change!

I like how this describes the potential for description to interact with and influence other core archival functions - reference, appraisal, collecting. Where I work this doesn't happen enough but is beginning to happen more, which seems pretty healthy.

There is a reference to "basic description" which is not defined. Is this an allusion to MPLP, or is it simply the 4-5 metadata fields that can be viewed in many DAM systems (e.g. Property, Type, Date, File Format, etc.) Is "basic description" sufficient? Will a basic description for today's user be useful for tomorrow's users or agents?

This highlights for us the usefulness of having abstracts for everything: collection assessment, collection development, and donor relationships in addition to access and use.

Principle 6: Are there important ideas central to archival description that you don't see here? What would you like to see added?

4 responses

No.

Not description, but insofar as the principle relates description to other core functions, maybe we could work something in about collection care. Allowing some collections to go undescribed in my experience often goes hand in hand with collections being left to languish in substandard storage. (Again, may relate mostly to AV and other special formats)

Does every collection require an archival description, and how would an archivist know which ones require greater detailed descriptions. Is this "Principle" setting us up to create more backlogs and encourage more minimal descriptions which are faster but have less value?

Some way to indicate that specific communities of users exist could make this principle inclusive of

different kinds of archives e.g. a corporate / closed archive differs from academic and from community etc.

Principle 6: How would this principle help you instruct archivists-in-training?

3 responses

Ideas that: processing is constant, processing is iterative (building blocks), standardization of basic description, time and resource management, flexibility and readiness

I've used this draft principle in the AV A&D workshop to talk about bottlenecks in processing of AV in collections - that overdescribing steals resources from other collections. Also, there is no excuse for not describing AV material. I've had students who've told me they don't describe collections they can't technically provide access to. I recognize this as a policy choice but I don't think it's okay to hide material in your collections in this way.

If we instruct archivists-in-training in how to do MPLP for ALL collections, they may begin to develop bad practices.

Principle 6: What else?

9 responses

This principle might make more sense as Principle 3. It is closely related to the ideas of user driven description and archivists describing what they know, and it would make it more prominent.

Acknowledge that there are practical barriers here, but like it as an aspirational guiding principle (and user studies support users not caring about level of description and just wanting to get their hands on stuff). In the blurb it might be good to nod to administrative and collections management (as well as access) reasons that this is really important-- the loss of information when we don't document and describe accessions upon receipt can cause major headaches down the road.

Could be bad for researchers in the sense that a "lightly processed" collection may provide "false hope" .. the collection may not be useable without further processing.

This seems like it should be higher on the list. It's a basic concept and is a wholistic principles, more so than the specifics about component description, agents, etc.

I'd use this principle to discuss with *staff*, not just archivists-in-training.

This principle in particular outlines the tension between describing at a base level and the availability of resources

We would not want people to understand and or implement this principle as "description for description sake." The description, however basic, must still be useful (and in accordance/agreement with the other principles)

For almost 10 years (beginning in the mid-2000s and ending in 2015), our repository followed two overarching principles for our collections: 1) all materials were available to users upon accessioning; 2) minimal collection-level descriptions were available for all collections regardless of processing status with a goal that more detailed processing would be completed in the future. We changed our approach because: 1) public services for minimally described materials was challenging (and in some cases impossible); 2) preservation issues had not been addressed; 3) the potential for delivery of confidential materials was high; 4) the work required at the time of accessioning to make materials available to users was not sustainable; and 5) we rarely had the time/resources to go back to the minimally described materials to do more detailed processing. So ... since early 2015, we do not make new collections (or additions to existing collections) available to users until they have been fully processed and described and we no longer create minimal/preliminary descriptions. However, we have continued our practice of creating collection-level guides for collections less than 1 cubic foot (which is many collections).

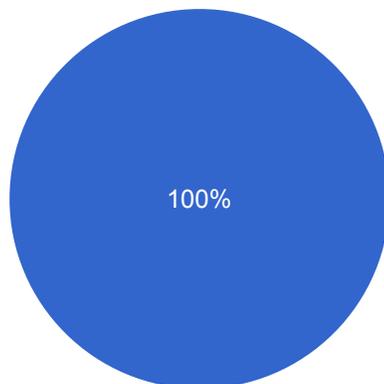
Grammar is a bit wonky!

What about closed collections? which cannot be accessed. Shouldn't users know that they exist even if they haven't been described? What about administrative descriptions related to security and whether or not there are privacy issues related to PII or institutional records? This seems biased towards providing open access to records.

According to Greene-Meissner's MPLP essay: "descriptive activities should be flexible should vary from collection to collection (and even within collections) and should strive first and foremost to provide general descriptive information about all of our holdings, rather than minute description."

What do you want to do next?

19 responses



- Provide feedback on another principle.
- Provide general feedback on the principles as a whole.
- I'm done!

7. Archivists must have a user-driven reason to enhance existing archival description.

Principle 7: What ideas in this principle do you think work well? How will they positively affect archivists or users of archives?

12 responses

I love that this principle takes a horizontal view, making DACS applicable across a repository's entire holdings, not just one collection at a time.

We love this one. It keeps the focus on the user while giving the archives a rationale for allocating scarce resources for archival description wisely. It supports archivists in doing less description initially when that seems appropriate and then adding more later if it turns out there is a need, rather than having the mentality that description is final and so everything has to be included the first time or it never can be, resulting in too much description sometimes.

This principle is very important and will benefit archivists by giving us a metric for making decisions about the work that we do on collections, and a way to communicate why we do or not do additional work to our supervisors and stakeholders.

We think this principle gives archivists a framework for making decisions about when and where to enhance existing description, and bases it on user needs rather than personal preference.

Rationale for providing more description is a good concept.

HOW DO WE GET STAFF TO UNDERSTAND THIS PRINCIPLE? Seriously, there is so much inertia and resistance to this concept, to the idea of trying to make *all* collections available including unprocessed materials in the backlog. I don't know how to fight that.

I think for many repositories, most repositories, even 99% of repositories, Principle 7 is spot on.

User-centric design. Agile/responsive processing puts the user first
In time, minimizes asks to reference/access staff

It is facts-based and the most efficient and clearly defined way to proceed with processing projects. It is logical. You put resources where they are needed most. Using user-feedback to set goals and priorities is good.

It is an efficient and responsive way to do do this work. Why work on stuff no one will ever care about. That being said, must have that kind of stuff also (minimally described) so you know no one cares about it. Principles 6 and 7 must work together. Must be implemented together to be successful.

We agree that different collection need different levels of description to be useful and accessible.

I think this is great. But I also think it would be a fantastic principle to end on. Consider moving towards the end unless there is an ordering reason that isn't apparent.

This principle provides an important practical rule of thumb for the constant decision-making between being efficient and being granular. It helps justify letting go of details that do not serve users, which is a huge pitfall for AV description.

None.

Principle 7: What ideas in this principle are unclear, or do you possibly disagree with? What changes would you like to see to this principle?

20 responses

I might change the wording of "This choice must be based on demonstrated user needs or the goals of the repository." Perhaps it is getting too nuanced, but I don't think a simple demonstration of user need is sufficient. This can be misinterpreted to focus additional description on existing users or user communities at the expense of additional description that will serve new audiences. I'd be happier with something like "This choice must be based on an equitable appraisal of demonstrated user needs or the goals of the repository."

Does the "minimum level" in this principle correspond to a specific definition? The DACS minimum required elements? Or something else?

In the description of the principle, having "goals of the repository" as another reason to enhance description seems to dilute or even contradict the principle. However, we do agree that there may be administrative reasons to enhance description and as written the principle itself seems to be excluding anything besides user-driven reasons. We would like to see the principle changed to archivists must prioritize user-driven reasons to enhance description, elevating user needs over other reasons but still allowing for them.

We would like to see more description of what demonstrated need entails. Some in our group read this as just meaning reference statistics, which could perpetuate the status quo of which collections are being used, rather than using other evidence such as emerging research trends that suggest new ways users might want to access collections that enhanced description would support.

"User" should be defined somewhere (intro, perhaps?) to make it very clear that archivists and internal users are users and our needs and use can be taken into account. Also, is "or the goals of the repository" in conflict with user-driven or superfluous? If the repository is a user then this is already covered. Maybe change to mission of the repository rather than goals of the repository?

There are several scenarios/reasons why materials receive enhanced description (many are user-driven), but what does "user-driven" mean?

Many members of the team had strong negative opinions to the second paragraph of this principle. They felt this was too draconian of a requirement to be stipulated in a community-wide document. Similarly, we

felt the principles should be limited to just that - principles or guidance - not statements of required practice.

The combination of the specificity of "demonstrated user needs" and generality "goals of the repository" seem to work against each other a little.

We also had some conversation about what "demonstrated user need" looks like, and what are the ways in which user needs can be/are demonstrated. In general, archivists tend to think of user needs as requests for material, so it may be useful to articulate some other ways in which user needs can be demonstrated such as new methods of inquiry, community conversations, surveys, etc.

We agree that this is a goal worth striving toward, but feel that it is likely out of reach for many archivists and institutions.

We are unclear how "user-driven" is used in this principle, and feel that there are in fact many reasons for enhancing existing archival description that may not be categorized as user-driven. Examples include extremely damaged or vulnerable collections that must be described in advance of receiving conservation treatment; collections that need improved description for the purposes of digitization; getting control over collections for the purposes of moving materials for physical renovation, etc. While we hope that the needs and expectations of users are always carefully considered in our work, we worry that framing the principle in such a way may be unhelpfully narrow and a barrier to other kinds of useful work.

I struggle with coming up with a "non" user-driven reason to enhance description. So the statement seems a truism to me. If you replaced "must" with "will" I think it would still be true.

Is this principle in fact including unprocessed backlog material? Should that be clarified?

The first sentence of this principle says that archivists need a "user-driven reason," but the last sentence says "user needs or the goals of the repository." The last seems more reasonable, and should be put up front. We also wondered if what was intended was more that archivists should have user driven (or other good) reasons for PRIORITIZING what collections receive enhanced description. Prioritization seems like an important concept to include here.

The last paragraph of the principle read as too prescriptive, in that while ideally all collections in a repository receive basic description before fuller description of any collection, that is highly aspirational, and unrealistic for most institutions for many reasons. Also, it is simplistic, in that an institution lucky enough to have multiple staff can be working on collection-level description at the same time as some collections receive fuller description (often for very use-driven reasons!)

We also wondered if this principle should simply be merged with Principle 11.

I am not sure that Principle 7 makes sense for all repositories. Yes, a majority of repositories have a backlog. But there are institutions/archives without a backlog, corporate repositories who MPLP most collections, etc. While I don't work at one of those repositories currently, I am not sure this makes sense for smaller, private, or corporate archives. Also, can archivists be considered users? Because certainly some collections are heavily used by archivists but may not be collections that users think that they're interested in.

"Once all collections in a repository have been described at a minimum level, archivists may choose to add more description." My question is: how are we defining "minimum level?" Or, how should we define it if it isn't? Since this is in the context of DACS, I take that to mean minimal level DACS-compliant description

(which we create at our institution, then expand from there), but it could also be interpreted as at the discretion of the archivist or the repository. If this is an intentionally vaguely-worded choice, I am okay with that. I would like to have the discretion as an individual archivist and/or to have the best practices at my institution dictate the how we define the minimum-level (since we would consider that DACS or DACS+ compliant). However, if the intention of the principle is to suggest DACS minimum level, I think that should be clearly stated.

We questioned the use of the wording "must have a user-driven reason." How do you measure a user-driven reason? Sometimes user expectations are not reasonable. While user needs have been undervalued in the past, this wording seems to suggest an opposite extreme. It also implies that *repository* needs are an invalid reason for enhancing archival description. We think this could be a bit more balanced.

Don't think the word "comprehensively" is necessary and the first sentence could simply read "When deciding how to describe a collection, the goal should be to maximize the availability of all collection materials to users."

We think this is redundant with #2.

We feel it is unrealistic for all collections to have minimal descriptions before any collections have enhanced description (see our comments on principle #6).

strike "or the goals of the repository." Stick to your guns!

How can there be a user-driven reason without understanding or studying what users need? Does this mean the current, past or future users? Does this principle require archivists to talk with their users to learn more about the practices of genealogical researchers who may make use of some of the records for very limited purposes?

Unfortunately at present, archivists know little about the needs of their users or of their intellectual perspectives or capabilities. Should we assume that most users will execute successful searches by using a taxonomy or a controlled vocabulary? Or do we have so much faith in the power of computers that we anticipate that the datamining machine agents will make professional archivists irrelevant?

This overlaps with Part 2 of Principle 6 – should they really be separate? The last line, "...or the goals of the repository," completely undermines the user-driven focus of the rest of the principle. If these principles are meant to be aspirational, why this break in tone? It could help to clarify whether donors, records creators, and institutional or corporate actors are considered types of users. If so, this principle might be able to acknowledge legal and other obligations that aren't strictly institutional "goals."

Principle 7: Is there anything in this principle that contradicts your understanding of existing archival theory? If so, what literature can you point to? What would you like us to think about to reconcile these ideas?

5 responses

Only “user-driven” reasons to enhance description? We need to know there is a desire to use materials from groups beyond donors, curators, or other small groups. There are many other forces that might warrant enhanced description

No.

Not theory, but other DACS rules. Somewhere in rule 4 DACS suggests including things like recording speed and recording standard in description of audiovisual material. This in no ways serves users! If the rest of DACS conformed to this principle it would be fantastic.

What does “user-driven reason” mean? Who are the users? Are these agents: human or machine? Or are they creators? Aggregators? Researchers?
Doesn’t take into account institutional context.

A different perspective, if these were public records, would an archivist have an ethical responsibility to hide some PII data from government surveillance or from the institutional snooping? There is an obvious bias towards providing open access to records possibly to serve the needs of college and universities, governments and nonprofits as evidenced by stating that “the goal should be to maximize the availability of all collection materials to users”. That may not always be the goal—especially in corporate archives and, in some cases, with governmental records.

No

Principle 7: Is there anything in this principle that will require a change in your practice or the practices of other archivists you work with? What do you think of this change?

5 responses

Yes, the second paragraph would change existing practice.

There was some concern that this principle might restrict the activities of processing archivists, who are used to making judgment calls about how granularly they describe collections. However, when the basis of those decisions was interrogated, it seemed like ideally archivists were making decisions based on user needs, or at least perceived user needs.

Data/feedback gathering (formalization, tools/methods).

Reporting and statistical analysis

Agile project mgmt principles and techniques (“user stories”)

What can we learn from other industries? Customer service, user-centered design, etc.?

Second paragraph is too proscriptive. It's veering away from descriptive principle to management principles, especially the last sentence.

Are we focusing about on the near term or the present, or future anticipated "demonstrate needs"? Overall, temporal concerns seem to be glossed over in this document. What is the horizon? Obviously the mission and the goals of the repository play an important role, but if their mission changes, will that require mass revisions?

No

Principle 7: Are there important ideas central to archival description that you don't see here? What would you like to see added?

6 responses

This principle is in response to the changing nature of access to archival materials.

A simple change would be to modify the principle to "Archivists must have a user- or goal-driven reason to enhance existing archival description." Description may relate to a move or a commitment to community archives, collections that users aren't yet asking for.

No.

It's important to match the level of description applied to a collection to the minimum necessary for the materials to be used ... and this may vary within a collection. (series-level description of some materials and item-level of other materials in the same collection).

How do you define users, and how are their needs controlled or restricted by our semantic environment and/or our technological ecology? Should archivists focus on the describing the evidential value of the records that were created for the original users?

Should the principles of archival arrangement and description be applied equally to materials created and used by individuals, families, or organizations. How can we focus on users needs when we are unable or unwilling to learn what users need?

No

Principle 7: How would this principle help you instruct archivists-in-training?

2 responses

Customer service mindset, project and program management, organizational goals and goal setting, reporting, statistics, analysis, internal advocacy, resource planning. Accepting feedback and learning from it.

Maybe this would lead archivists or administrators to learn more about what current users need, but that is no guarantee that future users will need the same things.

Principle 7: What else?

5 responses

Use-driven description leads to more user description. Where does it go?

Again, this is something I'd use with staff, not just archivists-in-training.

We agree that description enhancement decisions must be based on user needs. However archivists should actively make efforts to contact and converse with historically underserved and excluded communities of potential users. This may uncover user needs that would not have been considered otherwise. Another consideration is that we cannot anticipate all future needs in a changing world.

New way of thinking for a lot of archives/archivists

Listen to users, process based on what you hear from them

Archives have the power to put resources into what they find important, too

Need to keep data about user requests, so can make informed decisions

Fundamentally, archives need to understand what they have

If users provide funding, perhaps archivists should enhance descriptions.

What do you want to do next?

22 responses



- Provide feedback on another principle.
- Provide general feedback on the principles as a whole

8. Archival description should be easy to use, re-use, and share.

Principle 8: What ideas in this principle do you think work well? How will they positively affect archivists or users of archives?

12 responses

Absolutely agree. This is another way to think about our users: if description is hard to use then we have failed them. It will also help us broaden our user groups. And understanding how our data can be consumed will help archivists create description that can be better aggregated with description from other institutions to further increase their discoverability and usefulness.

Strong agreement that this is a good principle and excitement about centering the value of re-use and sharability of our description

This principle is great

We had our best discussions surrounding this principle (especially as it relates to principle 1). We also appreciated the focus on linked data concepts that seems to underlie this principle, and the concept that archivists may be empowered by transparently tying their description to authoritative sources.

We think this principle is great! In particular, we like that it says that the maintenance of description is part of the archivist's responsibility.

We really like this principle - it's extremely understandable, is easy to teach, and will be useful in discussions about resourcing and collaborations with allied professionals (e.g. archival description created in a collections management system being displayed in a discovery portal). We think it will facilitate use for researchers as well as archivists working with legacy description, and stands as an important shift in explicitly understanding archival description as data.

We loved this principle!

We like that this articulates that description is itself a resource that can be used and shared.

This emphasizes discoverability. Let's agree to not just keep our description in static documents!

Yes! Amen!

This is the first time principles have reflected the fairly recent reality of the way metadata functions and

it's great. It's all too easy to create bad code because of a history of bad local practice. This will hopefully give archivists who are involved with programming all the functionalities this principle refers to the leverage to correct and rein in poor local practices.

Archival description should facilitate use, re-use and sharing.

Really well done with clear definitions and a hierarchy of expectations according to an archivist or repository's ability.

Principle 8: What ideas in this principle are unclear, or do you possibly disagree with? What changes would you like to see to this principle?

12 responses

We're not clear on the difference between machine-readable and machine-actionable.

The "Archival description is an archivist's primary primary intellectual output" line drew some concern--there are archivists who do little description and whose intellectual output is primarily something like user services policies but who are still archivists.

Going forward this is a good principle, but may be difficult to retroactively implement.

In our shop, not all description is the "archivists' intellectual output". We routinely repurpose existing description, some of which (e.g. dealer descriptions intended to encourage a repository to purchase items). We wondered aloud how one ethically repurposes someone else's description. Is stating "derived from dealer notes" sufficient?

There was some question as to whether "machine readability" needs to be defined, and whether it is a single point or a continuum. Some felt this could more effectively be accomplished in DACS rules rather than principles.

We discussed some concerns about whether archivists in all types of repositories see these principles applying to them. We understand what the drafters meant by users, but we want to make sure it is clear to anyone who reads the document that "users" can be defined narrowly to users of a specific repository.

It might be useful to expand on the issue of licensing for those archivists who are less experienced with it.

A user is not computer literate or has a disability where they need special accommodation with machines.

This seems a bit fuzzy to me.....many repositories do not have resources to fully implement this principle. And if it is only referencing "easy to use" by users, then redundant with #2.

"Archival description is an archivist's primary intellectual output" is a wildly exclusionary statement that erases the intellectual contributions of non-processing archivists. Where would a reference archivist see themselves in this statement? And while archives that are open to the public should absolutely make archival description discoverable, this statement also needs the qualifier of "public" - many corporate

archivists who work in non-public repositories would find this statement highly exclusionary.

The question this raises is for whom? Is archival description supposed to be easy for creators, users, agents, researchers, etc.? As David Bearman pointed out, we should adopt systems design principles to capture the knowledge users bring by incorporating their descriptions into our databases. "The objective is to capture the full richness of the provenance information-- the structures, processes, and activities of organizations-- and to make routine inferential process which permits a user to locate information which has been or is being created by organizational activities. The power of the system will be its ability to retrieve present as well as past information created by organizations; in fact, extrapolations to information yet to be created could be made within certain constraints." (Principles of Provenance, 1985)

This is the first use of "should" in the principles. Is this a deliberate shift after using "must" everywhere else? Why the shift here?

Principle 8: Is there anything in this principle that contradicts your understanding of existing archival theory? If so, what literature can you point to? What would you like us to think about to reconcile these ideas?

3 responses

It does not consider the privacy of the creator/third parties.

Archival description is not merely a "form of data." It is descriptive information that provides contextual information-- unless we are merely trying to capture large collections of EXIF data for re-use and sharing by machine agents.

I would recommend we refrain from using the term "easy" to describe our professional work. (See 107 below for more contradictions)

I'd recommend looking at Greene-Meissner's MPLP about flexible descriptive activities, and "most meaningful, concise and accurate information possible", as well as at International Council of Archives Principles stating that "Archival description is based on the principles of multilevel description... from general to specific . . . appropriate to level of descriptions... relationships between levels of description must be clearly indicated.

No

Principle 8: Is there anything in this principle that will require a change in your practice or the practices of other archivists you work with? What do you think of this change?

5 responses

For lone arrangers this may be difficult

Archivists will have to become more aware of the systems and tools in which their description is created, used and reused. That is a good thing - we are information professionals!

Yes... the standards we use for encoding description (and an understanding of how to properly use them) might need to be refreshed.

But we all think this change would be GREAT! And it's already happening. People just need to understand that they can't put a finding aid up online and call it done.

Shouldn't we focus on the value of the description? Not simply that it is discoverable and structured data, but also, and more importantly, that it is

--accurate

--consistent

--reliable

I am also confused by inclusion of "available under an open license". Many of the clients with whom work are not allowed nor do they want or need to make their resources available via open license. Should our Principles cast aspersions on corporate archivists who may have to deal with information security policies??

No

Principle 8: Are there important ideas central to archival description that you don't see here? What would you like to see added?

4 responses

The idea of users being able to use the metadata in ways we cannot imagine

A consideration towards the privacy of the creator/third parties.

Yes, Creators of archival materials, as well as the materials themselves must be described. This reminds me of the problems with "honest" descriptions from your earlier proposed Principle 3. Without capturing information about the "Creators" and the original/logical arrangement, information can be reinterpreted inaccurately.

No

Principle 8: How would this principle help you instruct archivists-in-training?

3 responses

Use open-source tools

More emphasis on encoding standards and data (structuring, models) in instruction.

Before the revision came out, I had a section of my AV A&D workshop where I talked about keeping code clean. Now it's actually part of the standard and not just a personal rant.

Principle 8: What else?

4 responses

It might be interesting to say that versioning description also makes it more usable.

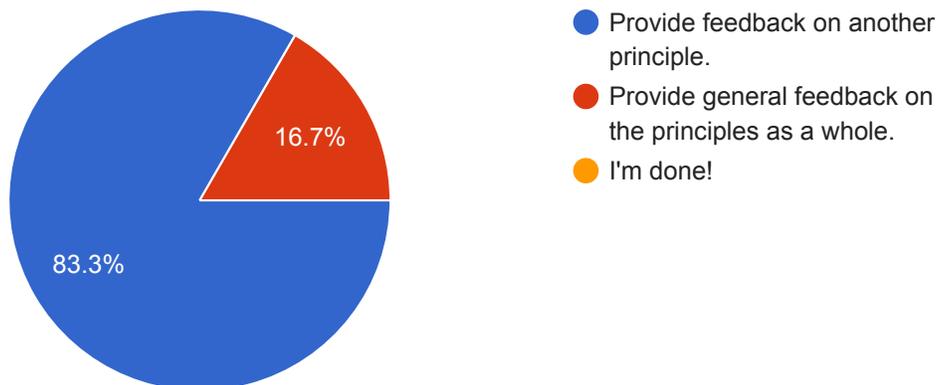
The call to make description as open as possible means we need to be especially accountable for what we say and to whom it is attributed (see comments with regard to principle #3).

We have applied a CC-BY license to our finding aids ... and have worked with consortial partners to explore ways to encode this information in a machine-readable/actionable way.

Can you replace "people" with humans in the last line, or include a glossary of terms and definitions?

What do you want to do next?

18 responses



9. Archival description is accessible and intelligible.

Principle 9: What ideas in this principle do you think work well? How will they positively affect archivists or users of archives?

8 responses

The idea of intelligibility here was really appreciated-- the idea that we need to be understandable to our users and that may mean that archival description takes different forms.

Seems influenced by community archives movement

We like the inclusivity that is baked into this principle a lot. We also think that idea of trust is important, and we're glad to see it in this principles.

We believe this to be a very important principle, and think that it should be expanded and explained further. Concrete, perhaps bulleted examples of specific barriers that archivists create would be helpful. We also found the second paragraph to be jargony, and needs to be more clearly explained. How can archival description engage creators and communities? What about creators who are deceased? How does one document fluidity, for example? How does this practically play out within description?

Focus on accessibility would help archivists and users very much. For example, having transcripts / subtitles available for audio and video recordings would not just help those with hearing loss but also pretty much everyone. It's faster to read a transcript and you can ingest more info more quickly. Being able to read v. listen or watch is also helpful to people who just learn better/prefer that method

Using language and communication method that is the same as the user/community will ensure that their records are accessible and intelligible to that same community-- very important. It will positively affect users of archivists. It would also help archivists better understand how and why folks use them and when they aren't using them, perhaps the reason is because they don't understand what they are (because the description is outdated or outmoded, is incomplete or incomprehensible, or simply not available to them in a format they can access.

Great for donor relations.

This principle expresses two important ideas. One is about accessibility and the other is about the way archives engage with creators of records. Both of these are important but

Wasn't this addressed in Principle 8 with the bullet points on archival description? How do you define accessible and intelligible? Also, how do you define communities being documented? From a corporate archives perspective, would that be individual departments or divisions, or users, stakeholders, etc.?

The open-endedness of what constitutes accessibility and intelligibility is inclusive of different archives, if not of different users.

Principle 9: What ideas in this principle are unclear, or do you possibly disagree with? What changes would you like to see to this principle?

14 responses

I don't disagree that barriers to accessing archival description may be "physical, technological, linguistic, or geographic," but that list should not be presented as comprehensive. Barriers could be financial, cultural, intellectual, etc., etc. I'd be happier if that list of barrier types was open ended.

The explanation of the principle used "creator", while rest of principles use "agent." As a consequence, some in our group read this to mean the creator was the creator of description (the archivist) and the relationship being described was between the archivist and the community. Clarify this is talking about an individual or community creator and/or subject of records?

What does it mean to say archival description engages: is this about a community understanding description? Being involved in creating it? Being reflected in it, i.e. using terms that are familiar to them and not offensive? This wasn't making sense to us.

One person read this as "dumb stuff down and don't use jargon" so this may need to have more practical usage guidance- for example be clearer that we mean that if the creator is Latinx we need to describe things in English and Spanish to be intelligible to a primary user community

Does this imply or explicitly recommend doing description in language of creation? This is ideal, but many practical concerns here.

This principle stuck out to me for being much less sparse than the others, without many examples. I agree with the sentiment, but think it needs to be made clearer by elucidating what "clear and intelligible" means, and how archivists can create clear and intelligible description. Is it making machine readable descriptions, or avoiding jargon? Is it including description in multiple languages?

Some thought that the sentence "Accessible archival description..." could be reworded to improve clarity.

We would like to see some mention of how this principle could apply to materials that have already been collected or described. We worry that ideas in the second paragraph could potentially create roadblocks to clear and intelligible description.

We suggest adding the word "should" in the second sentence: "Archivists should limit or remove these barriers to finding and interacting with description."

Of the revised principles, this one seems the weakest/to need the most work.

What does accessible and intelligible mean? They mean different things to everyone. Are there are additional barriers that should be mentioned. Something along the lines of barriers to comprehension or understanding.

What about users with physical and mental disabilities? Equal Opportunity compliance. This could be huge for archives.

Access--physical access but also digital access. Not everyone can come in to a repository. Not everyone can get online. How do you meet all needs?

Also, this talks about intelligibility and access to DESCRIPTION ONLY. What about intelligibility and access

to the records themselves, or surrogates of the records? What does it mean, and is it responsible to have accessible description but inaccessible materials? Is that ethical?

The last two sentences are a little unclear. How? What does this look like? A little too nebulous. We agree in principle but it seems very idealistic.

Not really sure what this means - well written?

Must of this principle is vague.

I'm not sure why they belong together in this way. Combining these concepts seems to dilute them both. The piece about "Accessible archival description engages creators and communities being documented to reflect their complexity, nuance, and fluidity. It builds trust between archives and those being documented." is so important, but it seems to be an aspect of principle 1. I would separate these concepts into two principles. I would also like to see a statement that clarifies the distinction between creators and communities being documented. Often communities have been documented without their consent, and there are cases where they should have some control over, and input in, the description of such records.

This appears to be related to the bullet points above. I disagree with the fact that accessible archival description "builds trust between archives and those being documented." Why must it do that? If an archivist is hired to work on the papers of Adolph Hitler or some powerful, lying mass-murderer, leader, would it be "ethical" for the archivist to "build trust"?

Shouldn't our ethics (to get back to Principle 1) encourage us to make personal choices that prove that "No man is bigger than an archives?"

Curious about the decision to use "is" here rather than "should be" or "must be."

Principle 9: Is there anything in this principle that contradicts your understanding of existing archival theory? If so, what literature can you point to? What would you like us to think about to reconcile these ideas?

3 responses

No.

Sometimes archivists have to process collections of materials or people with whom they disagree. Should our descriptions be biased towards the owners simply so we can build trust and, conceivably, continue to receive adequate funding? Is that ethical?

In the case of Boston College Belfast Project in which they recorded stories of IRA members, should confidentiality be granted to the interview subjects? Should those interview recordings or transcripts be made accessible and intelligible? Does that build trust with people, or what about the trust between

institutions? And should archivists be put at risk because an earlier code of Ethics stated that we must follow the law?

No

Principle 9: Is there anything in this principle that will require a change in your practice or the practices of other archivists you work with? What do you think of this change?

5 responses

Should there be explicit statement to avoid jargon, abbreviation, etc. or is this better left to rules section? If creator is involved in description, how to acknowledge/disclaim that involvement? What are the limits of indulging creators in descriptive process?

Implementing would necessarily require closer interactions with curators/TS staff and creators. A good thing.

Oh my yes! accessibility-- so much happening right now and we all think new legislation around these issues will cause archives to majorly rethink how they make their description available and accessible.

These changes will be necessary, but will be difficult to implement at scale.

We are working towards basic compliance with basic accessibility laws in our online description and access to surrogates. It's a daunting task and I'm sure we're not unique. Having this concept in the principles is a good reinforcement that we need to maintain this commitment.

This poorly-worded principle suggests that archivists must simplify their work to make it accessible and intelligible. The question is: to whom? Which users? Do we have to use a simplified terminology to make it intelligible?

The idea of building trust suggests that some archivists may be too biased to work on the collections of people or politicians with whom they disagree. Shouldn't we be able to build trust in the fact that our institution can acquire collections that may be controversial?

We'll need to put significantly more thought into usability and assistive technology in the archives in order to mitigate the intersection of ability x archival experience.

Principle 9: Are there important ideas central to archival description that you don't see here? What would you like to see added?

5 responses

Second part is aspirational; how will it shake out in specific DACS rules?

No.

There is a lot in the first sentence elucidating this principle that needs to be unpacked.

Yes, in addition to access and intelligibility, an effective archival description helps to establish physical, administrative, and intellectual control over archival materials. This is easier to do when records are arranged appropriately. Otherwise, archivists will be stuck trying to describe large aggregations and collections in an object-oriented programming world, a world that is more attuned to computers and machine agents.

No

Principle 9: How would this principle help you instruct archivists-in-training?

1 response

Accessibility is an important topic right now and I think it will become even more important over the next few years. New archivists and archivists in training should have this on their radar.

Principle 9: What else?

7 responses

These seem like two separate ideas that should be their own principles. We are not seeing how they fit together. The first concept explained for this principle is about accessibility in terms of if users can get at and use the description, and this is what the statement of the principle meant to us.

The second concept in the explanation focuses on the individuals and communities who create the records or are the subject of them and seems to be about the inclusivity of the description. We agree this should be a principle, incorporating ideas coming out of community archiving initiatives and ideas of cultural competency, but feel it is hidden under a principle about accessibility.

Does building "trust" = always documenting creator's intent/perspective? Does this subtly imply re-thinking the finding aid/catalog record as primary access tool?

This seems very similar to me to numbers 1 & 2. I wonder if it should be placed on the list closer to them? that might improve overall flow (similar to my thoughts on principles 6, 10, and 11)

"Archivists limit or remove these barriers to finding and interacting with description."

Archivists have a responsibility to actively remove barriers by creating connections with creator communities. This may be achieved by digital repatriation of items removed from source communities, and initiating and maintaining engagement with communities to create/improve archival description, and change practices where recommended by source communities. For example the National Library of New Zealand (of which the Alexander Turnbull Library is part of) is a partner in the creation and ongoing development of the Ngā Upoko Tukutuku/Māori Subject Headings thesaurus, which we include in our finding aids. <https://natlib.govt.nz/nga-upoko-tukutuku>

More information about specific words, e.g. intelligible--what does that mean to you?

At this point in the principles it begins to feel like some principles could be combined and/or there is some redundancy happening. Can the TS work to really get these as crisp and precise as possible?

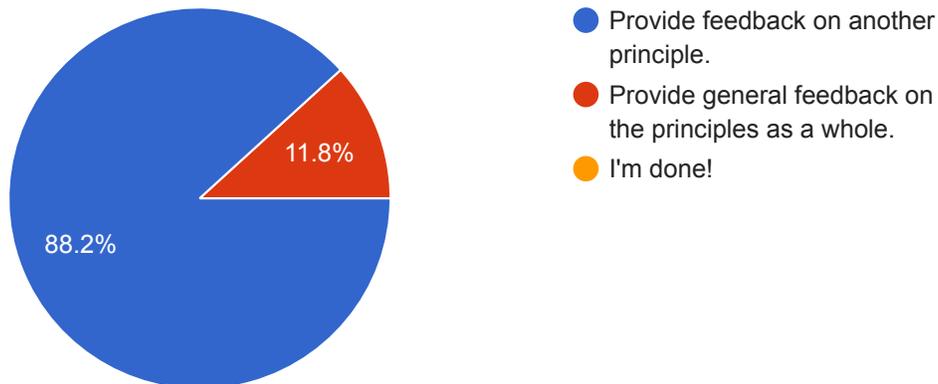
Using language from user communities-- will have to change over time.

While I feel you on the technological barriers, our reliance on online modes of engagement traps us behind them. I'm a little bit at a loss as to how description itself can overcome the technological requirements of its own pre-set environment.

How is this different from the previous principle? Is there something specific about the usage of "intelligible" or "accessible"?

What do you want to do next?

17 responses



10. Archivists must document and make discoverable the actions they take on records.

Principle 10: What ideas in this principle do you think work well? How will they positively affect archivists or users of archives?

10 responses

Despite concerns we have about the logistics of implementing this principle, we feel it is critical. It supports the growing understanding in the profession about the need to be transparent. For example, our researchers often assume they are looking at everything a creator produced if we do not explain appraisal decisions.

Yes, "make discoverable" is key piece. An obligation (yes), not optional.

In general, we are very supportive of this rule and think it will help make visible archival interventions in records, which will in turn improve the visibility of archivists' labor and help both users and archivists better understand records.

We think this principle has a positive value for both the archivists and the users, in addition to being easily put into action.

Accountability/transparency in what we do to the records

Who is performing actions? What has been done? What has been REMOVED or NOT DONE?

Essential to be able to understand, especially in larger context of what an archivist does

Increased understanding of materials - bringing things that have affected the material to light

We appreciate the goal/intent of this principle.

We loooooooved this principle! We also wanted to point out that this documentation not only establishes trust with users, but also provides guidance for future archivists who are working on the materials.

I wish we did this more. There's an assumption that no one reads processing notes, so we have a tradition of only documenting certain kinds of actions. Glad to see it included and hope it will lead to more attention to this piece of description and how we could use it.

This should encourage achivists not to spend much time on the actions and/or on describing those actions.

We have work to do in terms of how best to balance documentation and transparency with an amount of information that meets users' sometimes very simple needs.

Principle 10: What ideas in this principle are unclear, or do you possibly disagree with? What changes would you like to see to this principle?

10 responses

Participants wanted to see interventions taken by custodians before the archives reflected here as well.

How does documenting interventions scale to large collections? Need good examples of good arrangement, processing, provenance notes in specific guidelines to help with implementing this principle

We had some conversation about *when* the rules deriving from this principle would go into effect, and whether it starts as early as appraisal. Our general consensus was this principle supports adding robust information about appraisal, but it might be good to be explicit about that.

We would recommend expanding upon this principle by suggesting that archivists not just document their actions but also explain why they were made and how they were enacted.

The use of "thoroughly" in describing archival interventions has me a little concerned because it's one of those non-specific words. What is "thorough"? What does that look like? One person's thorough is not going to be the same as somebody else's.

We agree that this principle is important, but find it problematic in practice, as many archivists probably do. Archivists struggle now to even articulate processing levels, or what "processing" means. Describing collecting, accessioning, and appraisal actions is even more challenging. This could and should be its own descriptive standard, or possibly expanded within DACS.

Records do not come pristinely from creator and go directly to users

Knowing variety and range/spectrum of bad practices in archives - how to rectify this?

Guidance will be needed about what needs to be included. What is most helpful to users?

I'm unclear on why some actions would be considered an essential part of archival description. Can you provide an example, or would this refer to creation of a controlled vocabulary, taxonomy and/or metadata schema? Does anybody really care about transparency in those cases?

Or perhaps this would refer to decisions about disposition and/or retention. But wouldn't those decisions be part of appraisal as opposed to description, and captured within the institutional policies? Or perhaps it refers to describing conversion of digital assets or magnetic media?

None

Principle 10: Is there anything in this principle that contradicts your understanding of existing archival theory? If so, what literature can you point to? What would you like us to think about to reconcile these ideas?

3 responses

No.

I'm not certain that archivists' interventions are an "essential part of archival description"-- unless, perhaps, it relates to ignoring original / logical order and simply accessioning or migrating a wide range of records at the same time without using write blockers, and causing confusion due to changed MAC (Modified Accessed Created) times in the new system. Perhaps you can provide an example?

On the other hand, if acquisition is considered part of the actions, then an archivist may have an obligation to explain to a donor that a sector-by-sector disk image was created of his/her system, and now deleted files and emails were recovered, accessioned and preserved and conceivably could be made accessible and intelligible in the institution forever...

Woods, Kam, et. al. "Extending Digital Repository Architectures to Support Disk Image Preservation and Access. (2011)

No

Principle 10: Is there anything in this principle that will require a change in your practice or the practices of other archivists you work with? What do you think of this change?

6 responses

We do not currently document many of our actions internally, let alone in archival description available to users. Of all the principles, this feels the scariest to us to implement in terms of the time and resources it could require. We also haven't had researchers ask for this information, which makes it harder to justify expending resources.

That said, we do think this is an important principle. We discussed ways that some things could be documented at a collection or even repository level as a way to start doing this at our institution.

How do we disclaim description and potential for bias? ("this is just one person's perspective")? Need some sort of boilerplate language: "written by humans", "description provided by archivists using best judgement, etc."

Although the underlying idea expressed in this principle is one that archivists agree with, it was clear from our conversation that practice has very much lagged behind. This may in part stem from the fact that the descriptive elements supporting this principle are somewhat buried as sub-elements, and may need to be elevated. We also talked about the need for some rules defining where and how to describe these interventions.

Will require implementation of structured data to document these actions, not just a free text field in a finding aid.

Perhaps this should be re-worded (if needed) to state that archivists and agents (e.g. machines and operating systems) must document and make their actions discoverable. Would this mean that everytime an archivist moves or copies files from a portable hard drive, it would need to be noted? Is that how we

should spend our time?

I'm unclear on how to make these actions discoverable.

Better understanding user needs and behaviors in terms of discovery/research and the iterative nature of both is another area to investigate.

Principle 10: Are there important ideas central to archival description that you don't see here? What would you like to see added?

4 responses

No.

So much of my processing work is re-processing work. Perhaps some acknowledgement of the legacy of actions taken prior to the work at hand.

I think this is a little vague, but I understand the logic of archivists documenting elements of their workflows and methodologies for their own use or for training others in the future. I don't necessarily believe that "all" actions need to be documented and made discoverable. I'm unclear on how one would determine which actions would need documentation, but I assume those decisions could be left to the professional archivists.

No

Principle 10: How would this principle help you instruct archivists-in-training?

2 responses

This makes us articulate what we are actually doing and why-- which is hugely useful for a new practitioner to have to be able to explicitly describe and defend their actions

This would help instill concrete ways for archivists put principles like accountability and transparency in place. We think it could potentially help stop people from over arranging if they need to justify their arrangement and intervention.

Principle 10: What else?

5 responses

This is another area where there was strong consensus that the principle is important and valuable, but that the community will need good rules to support this and provide examples as this is, in many ways, a key shift that is very actionable but guidance is needed

We should make collecting policies, institutional initiatives, projects more transparent in description. Why were these records collected? Example: "This collection was acquired as part of an initiative to document X, funded by Y, starting in 2015, etc."

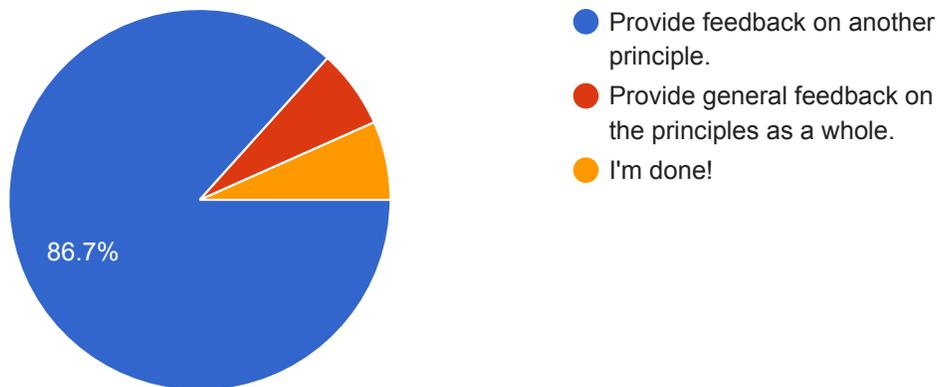
Again, this seems aligned with principle 3. Maybe change the order? I found myself kind of jumping around in terms of concepts through the whole list rather than feeling like the list flowed.

We actually think this should be ranked higher in the list of principles. Maybe it would fit after #3.

From your perspective, which "users" would be interested in discoverability of these actions? Would this potentially leave individual archivists liable for making mistakes? Do we need to include this within our principles, or wouldn't this simply be best practices?

What do you want to do next?

15 responses



11. Archival description is a continuous intellectual endeavor.

Principle 11: What ideas in this principle do you think work well? How will they positively affect archivists or users of archives?

13 responses

While I concur with the records continuum model that records are always in a state of becoming, I fear that these proposed principles will require archivists to update continually any and all actions and events they take on the records. (2)

This is an important change in mindset from the current principles, from "do it once and be done" to "never finished." It provides further support for iterative description, starting at a higher level and then working deeper as needed.

This is fantastic and needed. It allows us to be responsive to changing scholarship, research interests, and societal and cultural norms. An example was given of a project where one of the participants went through all of the finding aids at her previous institution and replaced all negro subject headings with African American because researchers weren't searching "negro" and couldn't find anything

Yes. "Iterative" is key piece here. Continually revisit based on new information; evidence of use.

We like that this principle creates a parallel between the work of archival description and the products of that work; both are active and continuous. Archival description is never done!

We think this is a mature and sophisticated understanding of archivists' role(s) in regards to their collections, and an important reminder that our work is never truly finished. We find this to have both practical applications for overall collections management (e.g. prioritizing baseline levels of description for all collections) as well as more conceptual opportunities with regards the intersections of information environments in a broader social context. We are curious if TS-DACS thinks this principle also incorporates an element of principle 10 about being transparent about changes made to description?

We fully support this principle!

We love this principle and implement it at our own repository as one of our main tenets of how we do our work.

This supports minimal level processing strategies very well.

Yes! We agree.

Coupled with principles 6 and 7, this principle is good practical guidance in the context of MPLP-driven practice.

This feels like the right takeaway: Description is not the end of the story / the work of an archivist is never done.

Principle 11: What ideas in this principle are unclear, or do you possibly disagree with? What changes would you like to see to this principle?

8 responses

How do you define events? If archival description, knowledge, practice and values, change over time, is the archivist responsible for making updates? As terminologies and methodologies change, will archivists be responsible for iterative updates? If so, how will those requests be triggered? (2)

Does this imply usefulness of some kind of version control for archival description? Would researcher be interested in how description has changed over time; the ability to see previous versions of description? Note about why description has changed? (like commit notes?)

We suggest changing the second sentence to "It continually reflects evolving understandings of agents, records, events, and the relationships between them." -- this is less evaluative and more accurate, we think.

Balance of dealing with backlog and dealing with incoming materials = challenge!

Can this principle be used as a scapegoat? Archives may not be able to do every principle, but being iterative makes that ok - as long as archives don't take that as ok to not take principles

Again, this seems a bit redundant with #2.

This is vague. The statement "It continually reflects deeper understandings of agents, records, events, and the relationships between them." appears to contradict Statement #7, that additional archival description should be user-driven. If the only deeper understanding available for further description does not in any way benefit users, then should it still be added or not?

As in Principle 4, agents, records, events, etc. struck us as jargon.

Principle 11: Is there anything in this principle that contradicts your understanding of existing archival theory? If so, what literature can you point to? What would you like us to think about to reconcile these ideas?

4 responses

No.

Not every aspect of archival description should be considered as changeable. For example:

- principle of provenance asserts the authenticity of records
- principle of respect des fonds asserts the archival arrangement based on original usage
- principle of chain of custody asserts the ownership of records
- principle of integrity asserts the management of records
- principle of privacy and confidentiality asserts the rights of individuals, creators, owners and users.

Richard Cox states that the "Evidential value of a record can only exist if the content, structure and context are preserved."

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No

Principle 11: Is there anything in this principle that will require a change in your practice or the practices of other archivists you work with? What do you think of this change?

6 responses

<revision> notes exists to track these decisions, but is little used. It also requires active reporting (put a note about what you did) and not passive tracking like git for versioning.

This principle may be challenging to sell to resource allocators and/or may require metrics of accomplishment other than linear feet processed.

No.

As written, this principle suggests that archivists may be responsible, periodically and regularly, for responding to changing user needs, knowledge, practice, values (and ethics). With many voluminous needs and without a deep understanding of what our users need, we run the risk of spending excessive amounts of time "fixing" or "updating" our descriptions

This undermines Peter Scott's perspective that recognizes the importance of context and the value of original order as well as the understanding that records follow function and, most importantly, that archivists must be concerned with the protection and preservation of recordkeeping systems." In his groundbreaking article "The Record Group Concept: A Case for Abandonment" (American Archivist, 1966), he wrote "we accept that records and archives derive much of their meaning and value from the administrative (or other) context in which they were originally created; furthermore, we maintain that preservation of the association between archives and their original historic context is vital to a full and proper understanding of the evidence and information they contain."

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No

Principle 11: Are there important ideas central to archival description that you don't see here? What would you like to see added?

4 responses

No.

Creators of archival materials, as well as the materials themselves, must be described. If we focus on user needs without investigating and evaluating their needs, then we run the risk of providing descriptions that have limited lifespans.

"Archivists should find, not make, the information in their descriptive systems." (Bearman, Archival Methods, 1989) In other words, much of the work of archival description should be done early, and should be based on archival arrangement as described by many people (including Terry Eastwood above) stating that "archival arrangement is a process of identifying relationship, not a process of physically ordering and storing documents."

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No

Principle 11: How would this principle help you instruct archivists-in-training?

1 response

I've used this principle in my AV A&D workshop to talk about levels of processing and how they work in practice. We may need to describe something as unidentified at some point, or we may need to rely on our best guess for AV materials, but later when something has been digitized, or when we know something more for whatever reason, we can always go back. I go back all the time and revise, reprocess, as I learn more about sound and moving images in collections. The principle provides a sort of support for records that force us into guesswork because of barriers to access.

Principle 11: What else?

5 responses

Seems similar to 7. Maybe even a little at cross-purposes (7 says don't make changes that are user-driven, but this mentions nothing about user needs). Again, I think the overall list would benefit from having related concepts together.

We agree that description must be iterative and would add that an ongoing conversation must be had with the communities who generate and have the responsibility to care for the information and the information objects.

We recommend that this be the #1 principle ... and that the iterative and flexible nature of archival description be emphasized. We also suggest adding "resources" to the last sentence: ... "changes in knowledge, practice, resources, and values."

Provide any other feedback you have on this principle here.

We cannot simply ignore our archival principles for these revised ones. For more than one hundred years, we have undertaken our work, successfully, with the knowledge that provenance relates to the organization or individual that created or received and maintained and used records while they were still current, and that original order means that records should be maintained in the order which they were created, arranged and maintained by the office of origin.

Yes, archival description and records may change over time, but archivists need to respect the origins of collections and become aware that respect des fonds is the basis of archival arrangement and description.

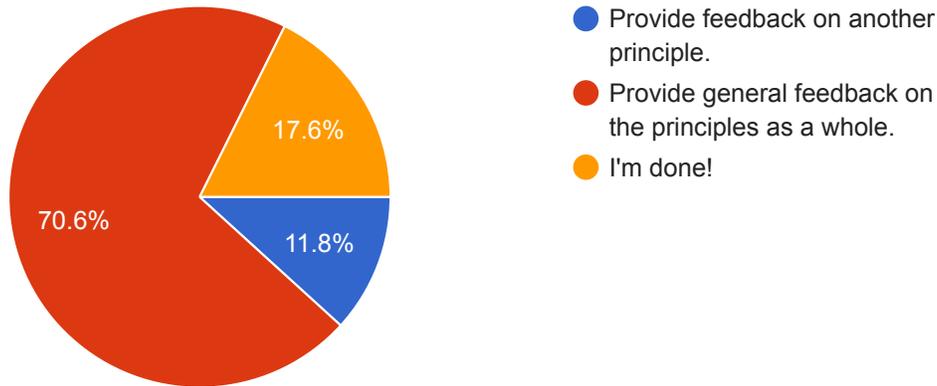
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that original order means that records should be maintained in the order which they were created, arranged and maintained by the office of origin.

Yes, archival description and records may change over time, but archivists need to respect the origins of collections and become aware that respect des fonds is the basis of archival arrangement and description.

What do you want to do next?

17 responses



General feedback

How do you think that these principles compare to the current DACS principles?

42 responses

These are an improvement over the current DACS principles, particularly in clarity of reasoning and ability to be applied across practice.

I appreciate the movement towards usability as a highest value, rather than respect des fonds. While they often guide us to the same arrangement and description, sometimes they do not...

I find it hard to make comparisons, but I generally agree with the new principles.

Less clearly written; more jargon. Omission of such principles as respect des fonds.

These principles are steps forward in many ways, including the explicit linkage to professional ethics and values (#1) and to use and users of archives (#2). New ground is broken in demanding greater transparency by archivists (#3) and (#10).

Key concepts in the initial paragraphs and principle #1 of the old standards are missing. These undergird all archival work and thinking and are needed here.

Many, perhaps all, of the statements of principles call out for more detail. For example in #1 provide at least a link to SAA's ethics and values statement. Principle #2 might add that interviews with in-house researchers and familiarity with user studies in the professional literature are among the means for gaining awareness of user needs and approaches. Principle #3 might add a concept from DACS 3.1 (p. 35): archival description "assists the user in evaluating the relevance of the materials."

This is a much needed update. Knowing many of the people involved with the current and updated principles, it's nice to see how both are reflective of their authors as well as when they were written. The thing I like best about the updated principles is that they so clearly reflect the many conversations I've had with smart colleagues over the past five years or so. They are of the moment, in a good way. Will be very interesting to see how they evolve when someone takes on revising them again in 15 years.

While we appreciated the ideas represented in the document, it did not seem to be a replacement for existing principles as much as a supplemental statement on descriptive practice (a Code of Ethics for Archival Description?). In large part, though, these proposed principles are not understandable without the foundation of the current set of principles in DACS.

All students agreed that these guidelines are more approachable for new archivists/new professionals than the previous principles/guidelines.

- Lack the specificity of old principles. Several suggestions to make the guidelines more specific, while balancing simplicity and easy-to-read nature of new guidelines.
 - They loved the inclusion of language about the archivists' own accountability to the work/ethics of the work.
 - Loved the focus on the user of the archives and on cultural competence/competencies.
 - loved the emphasis on the iterative nature of archives (I can't tell from my notes if this was the iterative nature of description, of processing, or of research – or of all of them!)
- Feedback on specific principles:

#1: Should include the word "inclusive"

-take out "between" or make it clearer that archivists act as agents of the institutions that employ them.

#2: It's REALLY important! (they really liked this one). They loved the focus on users. They also saw this as an extension of Ranganathan (I think it's helpful to note that many of the students are first year library students, so they're probably also talking heavily about Ranganathan in another first-year theory class).

#3: Liked that #3 promotes transparency and trust, and how it talks about thinking critically about how you know what you know.

#4: My notes here a bit muddled, I have "doesn't make enough room for users – as they are used, they should be described." The people who asked about the lack of "respect des fonds" asked if this was the principle where getting at a similar unifying concept was happening (they also asked about whether this was happening in #5).

#5: 1) principle was well-worded and great in theory, but in practice would be beyond what would be possible to implement. 2) How would this be resolved with #8, which seemed to be in tension with #5. 3) Are #5 and #7 preferring users over creators of records and communities documented? That seems like a net negative.

#6: Loved the sentence beginning with "No matter how basic a description..."

#7: Loved the first sentence. One student noted that it seemed "like a catch-all," and was too open. Would like the inclusion perhaps of the word "transparent."

#8: Loved it (no additional feedback, just thought it was great).

#11: Loved it (no additional feedback from most, just thought it was great). They liked the emphasis on the iterative nature of description.

In general, a whole lot better. We missed some of the explicit statements about related practices (appraisal, arrangement, outreach, access, etc.), but otherwise think these are a huge improvement.

We are very supportive of the changes. The current principles read more like a manual than principles. They are more descriptive about what is done without saying much about why, where archivists just do what they always do for any collection and the user isn't considered.

The revised principles get us out of our heads and thinking about the real reasons for our choices, which should be about the user experience. They also appropriately reflect how things like post-modernism and digital archives have complicated traditional concepts like original order and arrangement.

There is a significant (and very welcome) shift from a collection focus to a user focus.

The group had a few reactions. Some were very enthusiastic about the focus on transparency and on users. Others thought that, compared to the old principles, these new ones swung too far away from the methodological and towards the ethical (even somewhat ideological).

Old principles aren't necessarily contradictory; these seem less prescriptive, and more philosophical. New guidelines emphasize users, rather than arrangement, etc. The new principles apply to born-digital, other formats more explicitly. Metadata emphasized, not just physical materials and their condition. The new principles seem written for a holistic, not TS-exclusive archivist, meaning that their implications are broad, stretching across staff and workflows outside of the traditional "technical services" staff.

The team found it hard to compare the old to the new because they aren't presented side by side and do not utilize a similar format. We were left wanting some answers to things like, "Here are the reasons we aren't including original order, etc."

They are much more user-focused and less prescriptive than the current principles. They better reflect current trends in the literature and discourse towards user-focused description and iterative description. However, it strikes me that the new principles articulate the "what" and "why" without explaining the "how." They are a loose set of values and do not provide much guidance for how archivists should implement them in practice, or how users should expect to encounter and interpret archival description. The parts of the current principles that I find most valuable are those that explain key archival theories and practices, such as hierarchical description. Perhaps there is not a place for such ideas in the principles anymore, but

could they be preserved elsewhere in a different SAA document? Perhaps core practices could be separate from core principles. I still think there is a lot of value, especially for users new to archival research, in understanding what finding aids look like and why archivists make them look that way.

I like the broader-reaching approach, and particularly inclusion of aspects of ethics and values as the first principle.

They're more user focused and future looking

What are your general impressions of the new draft?

Will the nature of archival holdings be included? Where will that exist?

Struck by difference in the prose; decidedly postmodern

Emphasis on the user and why archival description exists, for the user! It wasn't in the previous principles, appreciated that

Liked showing agency of archivists as co-creators in the nature of archives, the old version took for granted the role of archivists, was clear about what we know, what we don't know, what it isn't

Loved emphasis on archivists documenting decisions

What do we mean by "honest"? transparent may be a better term (a lot of nodding and agreement here)

Implicit tension between wanting to have a universal languages, universal practices but at the same time placing an emphasis on particularity, implicit contradiction both advocating the particularity of practices that is emblematic of creators of materials (post-custodial) but there are certain lines about universal practices; seems odd. We're trying to have a common language but there are variations of descriptive practice. The challenge with trying to create standards, trying to reach for universality but recognizing agency of creators.

We thought they were very different, but in a good way.

The revised principles are value-based and user focused, while the old principles dealt more arcane concepts like original order. The new principles are more in step with current archival literature and theory. The revised principles talk about the archivist's role in description. They promote proactivity of archivists by using words like "adapt" and "respond."

The language of the revised principles is much clearer, which much less jargon than the old principles.

The concepts are more digestible and as a result the principles are easier to follow.

The new principles help you understand the role of archival description in the context of the archival endeavor.

The old DACS principles were really rigid, fitting unique things into the principles was difficult. the new principles are coming from a more faceted place. THE new principles are more obvious and clearer. Group liked the idea of being user centric, but maybe the document is still not user centric enough, and might not be intelligible to users. Group members were confused if it was a professional document or something we give to users? They liked that it created something accountable, so a user can know what is guiding our decision practices. However, the document is not the only thing that should be given to users, also mediated by an archivist. There was some confusion on how users are defined—is it the creator? There was some talk about the document not focusing on advocacy—how do you advocate for the records when the records change? Also confusion about what ethics and values are being defined and that the archivist code of ethics need to change too.

The group also discussed the idea of "honest description." Does honest description discuss what you leave out? Do you leave out things that are embarrassing? Should archivists be interpreting the documents? As archivists, we shouldn't be making assumptions about the records. In the end, there was some agreement on discussing in description what's there or not there, not privacy matters and

accounting for what you are taking out of the collection.

Lastly, there was agreement that the new version of the principles is much more user oriented and inclusive, and focused on what are we doing to make the experience better for the user, the original ones are more about how to write a finding aid. The new principles also give the archivist an opportunity to look outward-access the endgame, despite roadblocks to processing, as long as transparency is there.

The proposed principles do much more to acknowledge the role of archivists and highlight the value of the labor archivists perform. The new principles shift away from the records themselves, basic definitions about archives, guidance on processing strategies, and foundational concepts of archival theory more generally; rather this draft is strongly grounded in values and tightly focused on archival description proper. We support this shift, but might encourage some acknowledgement of assumed knowledge about the nature of archives and archival work.

I think this set could better be described as a "values statement" for archival description. The former principles more directly relate to and speak to the DACS elements. I think you should keep them as principles and put these in front as "Values of Archival Description".

In general they compare very well, but I am extremely concerned that there is no statement in the principles about the relationship between arrangement and description and in particular not mention of provenance, respect des fonds, and original order. See below.

Great.

Appreciate that they are more aspirational than the current principles; but also appreciate the practicality/clarity of the current principles as a tool for helping teach about archival arrangement and description.

A definite improvement, but there are serious issues with clarity of writing. As written, I think many of the ideas are muddy and redundant. It is critical that the document be absolutely clear.

The new principles strive to bring the conversation out of theory and into practice, which is admirable. I am very happy with the emphasis on ethics, that the principles advocate for more transparency regarding what archivists know and do not know, and that they incorporate into description what archivists do as they arrange, describe, and physically process collections. I have felt for a long time that description should have this kind of information, which is usually kept in-house, if compiled at all. Users would benefit greatly from knowing what happens behind the scenes, and since they will have a better sense of the capabilities and limits of archivists, they will become better advocates for us, our collections, and our institutions. Finally, the incorporation of FRBR-related terminology is a great leap, bringing DACS into the modern age, as well as aligning it with ArchivesSpace.

However, I fear that the revisions throw the baby out with the bathwater. Some theoretical concepts are important for a reason. I am alarmed that the revisions dispense with outlining core principles of the archival enterprise which, to my knowledge, have not been abandoned by the profession en masse as of yet. These are conserving provenance and original order, which have a direct bearing on arrangement and description. The revisions may not be directly arguing for dispensing with these core concepts, but omissions speak volumes about priorities. The complete omission of the word arrangement is also troubling. I know that this was a very conscious decision, as over-arrangement or wrongly-imposed arrangement is a common problem, particularly with archivists who are just starting out in their careers. But these principles, which advocate for transparency, should be transparent about this issue as well.

They should say SOMETHING about arrangement, and explain why it is being downplayed compared to earlier editions of DACS.

In general, the group seemed to think that the principles reflected current values and theory in the field.

Our group appreciated their more aspirational nature.

Looking at the current version of the principles was really interesting. The language is so distant from archivists and users. I can see how, looking at these, the TS would overhaul them so fully in order to address archivists and users by name. I love the proposed principles - they are deliciously archivist and user focused, which speaks to the ethics and true nature of our work, not just tactile work issues like "description reflects arrangement." I see the imprint of the current principles, but through their new concision, clarity, and direct language, they are vastly improved. Archivists already are using our description work to support users, acknowledge cultural practices instead of "correcting" them, and clarifying context and history's effects on our activities as well as that of the records themselves. TS-DACS' proposed principles provide that.

great improvement

In general, the new principles are less jargon-y than the old, and more user-focused. They seem more inclusive of multiple formats (e.g. less use of the term "documents"). RDA is also using some similar language in describing, this means RDA and DACS may be moving closer together.

Some felt they read a bit more like procedural recommendations/best practices, rather than principles.

Do the descriptive standards described in DACS meet the standards of these principles? Are revisions of the rest of DACS necessary if these principles are adopted? There are no rules in DACS currently for citing, for example.

- New principles = user focused
 - o Current principles did not mention user often; "creator" and like words were more present in current principles
- Impact of description with a broader focus; greater perspective
- Description IS vs. description DOES
 - o Current principles focused on theoretical underpinnings
 - o New principles - how is descriptions aiding in access?
- Accessibility/transparency
- Freedom to exercise best judgment, more fluid and flexible
- Description dependent on resources and specific institution - it will be challenging for many organizations to embrace the new principles
 - o What if an institutions is not fully able to embrace new principles (due to resourcing, etc) - will it be doing a disservice to their users?
 - o will NOT be harder for smaller institutions - especially with focus on iterative description practices
 - o However, getting a handle on larger collection with limited resources will take time
- New principles challenge us to think about what aggregate description is, how archives can creatively use resources at hand
- EQUITABLE access (not equal access) - taking into account information/research value
 - o Carefully chosen language
- Digestible, easy to understand
 - o Could be simplified more and distributed to users as a part of what archives do

- User and archivist roles clearer
- Provide more visibility into what archive does
 - Future state with new principles: exposing backlog, but also barebones description
- If users know collections exist, they can request access; prioritize describing that collection
- Generally a good idea for archivists to survey all of their collection to understand broad level and also understand what they might be missing in their mission statements
 - New principles allow more exposure of administrative/decision making - will be more transparency into what archivists do
- Transparency also opens up for feedback (re: processing priority decisions, etc) - reputational risk
 - Lead to a larger sense of community
 - Human-centric: acknowledges the individual user
 - New principles = redundant/duplicative

They are a dramatic, but positive change. We like the shift from a focus on the collection themselves to the end users. We like that the principles are more universal in language and will be more accessible and understandable to non-archivists (e.g. administrators).

We think they are much clearer and more responsive to current needs in the community.

Often times vague, many terms/ideas were not defined; many of the principles were redundant and unnecessary; it lacks practical points found in the current DACS principles; and the proposed principles seem detached from the DACS' rules, and reality. For example, what is "honest description?" Description is organically honest when it is neutral and objective. The proposed principles restate the obvious: archival description should reflect context, be neutral, and serve the users.

Many of the ideologies presented could be stated in simpler terms. Four points that I found the most useful, and would like to see incorporated into the current principles, without all the prose that surrounds each is: 1) Professional ethics are a foundation of archival description; 2) Users are a fundamental reason for archival description; 3) Archivists should cite their sources; 4) Recognize your limitations and biases as writers of archival description; 5) Archival description should be easy to access; 6) Descriptive rules apply equally to all records.

It is striking that only one of the original archivists who helped craft the existing principles was at the table for this revision. Were the others at the very least among folks invited for initial feedback (first look)?

An undertaking like this needs open, large group forums of discussion. Outside of asking for written feedback, was the Regional Archival Associations Consortium asked to try and set up regional town halls to facilitate face-to-face discussion?

I don't think it was necessary to throw out most of the baby with the bathwater for this endeavor. I'd like to see this project back at the drawing board, with new working group members comprised of professionals with long standing experience, coupled with junior colleagues. Their charge would be simply to revisit the existing DACS principles and address ways to update them. Ultimately the document would remain simple and at the same time reflect any of the profession's agreed upon shifting perspectives.

I don't agree that the current principles are difficult to understand, teach or explain. I appreciate that they are "prosaic." They are uncomplicated and to the point.

It was auspicious that Yale could help supplement this enterprise, but it was unnecessary and unprofessional to disparage SAA, in a public report. The organization is a volunteer organization and

supports many endeavors. There is surely a better way to help SAA Council understand the needs of the membership and Task Groups the membership supports.

A radical departure, with a few faint echoes.

Not favorably. We believe that our principles should be high-quality, long-standing and address big ideas on which to build our professional values. Our Principles are not a product, so we cannot settle for a Minimal Viable Product approach. The current DACS principles address many of the topics that we use every day and that we learned in library schools and archival programs-- such as provenance, respect des fonds, original order, arrangement, record groups, series, corporate bodies, functions and activities, etc. The revised principles ignores those foundational terms.

Without providing an introduction or a glossary of terms, the proposed principles adds new terms in an uncontrolled vocabulary without explanation, terms such as users, agents, events, cognitive load and user-driven reason.

After spending two hours putting in my answers, GoogleDocs informed me that my answers were too long. These principles do not compare well with the current ones. The current ones address archival terms with which we are familiar. This one makes up new terms like agents and events and users without clarification.

I do not think they compare well. The current Principles provide far-reaching foundational system of beliefs for archivists. Those principles were based on the literature and were not specific to a time or place, and recognized and respected the close connection between arrangement and description. The proposed revision does not even include the term arrangement or respect des fonds.

There is a lot of terminology in the proposed Principles that is unfamiliar to those of us who have been working as archivists for more than ten years such as events and agents. It is unfortunate as well, that these principles are tied to our

Code of Ethics which, as we know from experience, will change over time. It is difficult to revise our proposals and put such great emphasis on our users without knowing who our users are, and whether they will be looking at records for evidential or informational purposes.

The new principles offer a flexible standard with the built-in ability to make decisions and rethink them later. They also reflect current thinking, especially by acknowledging e-records and involving records creators and communities in description. We also feel positively about emphasizing that description is iterative, user-driven, and easy to use/reuse. That said, this document seems tailored to professionals rather than to other participants in, users of, and stakeholders in archival description. That the principles don't mention provenance or original order could make them more difficult to teach with, by erasing archival history as well as the context for revisions. As with honest description, avoiding something means having to explain why.

DACS Revised Principles Feedback

General feedback

Provide general feedback on the principles as a whole.

How do you think that these principles compare to the current DACS principles?

These principles are actually LESS clear and more subjective than the current principles. The current principles are basic to the archival profession, are EASILY understood and applied because they are principles-- not the rules--and they make sense in the order in which they are written. I read all of the

documents provided regarding the TS-DACS meetings, comments on the current principles, suggestions for proposed principles, etc.—many, many times—and frankly, am a little baffled not only by the content of the “final product” but by the whole tone of the group’s discussion process overall. Especially concerning was the document Report on DACS Principles Meeting 2017. Aside from dissing SAA —outstanding standard-bearers of the profession—the meeting itself leaves a few questions before even thinking about the actual “principles.”

1. How were these 17 archivists (although only 10 listed) chosen to attend this retreat? (Yes, writing, teaching, working with archival description, etc—but who was surveying and how?) And why was this whole endeavor such a closed and secretive process? This does not fit in with the essence of the archival profession.
2. The play-by-play record of the retreat and its activities read like a high school blog, especially the last part about walking to the graveyard to say goodbye to the original principles. I can’t imagine that the “original” principles were evolved in this manner, in the spirit of destroying APPM.
3. The meeting feedback, i.e. testimonials should have been left out if it were going to be anonymous; it was like reading the comments for a weight-loss remedy, except for the last one which was just crude.

What follows is my comments on the comments of the participants in the DACS Principles Evaluation:

- Principle 1: “Records in archives possess unique characteristics.” I think this first principle is a perfect introduction to the rest of the principles, which follow in a logical order. This principle is just a broad description of what an archive is. I felt like Jillian Cuellar missed the point of how broad this principle is supposed to be when she mentioned that non-traditional modes of practice needs to be included in this principle. The principle is really about types of materials and institutions, not really about practice. And even if one wanted to update the sentence that contains “...consist of aggregations of documents (largely unpublished)... to include electronic records and audio-visual materials, there’s no need to throw out the baby with the bath water. The discussion involving Bill Landis, Trevor Owens, and Mary Caldera made no sense to me.]
- Principle 2: “The principle of respect des fonds is the basis of archival arrangement and description.” Audra Eagle Yun thought that this needs to be more clearly written. The principles as they exist are very simple and concise; they are elaborated upon more in other basic SAA publications such as *Understanding Archives and Manuscripts* and *Arranging Archives and Manuscripts*. Not sure why Audra feels that “this principle is the source of a great deal of anxiety for students and new professionals.” Students and new professionals in any field are going to experience some anxiety as they grasp new concepts and vocabulary; when I was a new “archives student” I had a good “basics” class and don’t remember anyone stressing over “fonds,” “provenance,” “original order,” etc. In addition, in the actual Principles, there is a very clarifying paragraph – The Relationship Between Arrangement and Description—inserted between Principle 2 and Principle 3. In the discussion between Audra Eagle Yun, Gretchen Gueguen, and Trevor Owens, Gretchen was right to ask about the source of “anxiety” regarding this principle for self-taught archivists. If that is the problem, then self-taught archivists need to do a little more studying in their field or take a professional course. I imagine a self-taught lawyer or a self-taught schoolteacher would have some anxiety too. Audra’s answer about students not knowing the balance between over-processing and under-processing doesn’t really have anything to do with this process; it’s more a problem with understanding the benefits and limitations of MPLP.
- Principle 3: “Arrangement involves the identification of groupings within the material.” Bill Landis commented that this principle is bunk. “Groupings” is not a vague term; it’s broad enough to include all the possible types of hierarchical groupings in a collection—and the Principle gives examples of several. And as I mentioned in an earlier comment, all these “groupings” are defined more specifically in the basic SAA archival publications, as well as in SAA’s *Describing Archives: A Content Standard*. The comment

about archivists being obligated to say why they know the order is original and why the researcher should care? A “professional archivist” will state in the arrangement note of the finding aid what the original order was—if there was one—and what was done by the archive (if anything) to make the materials more usable. It is also not up to the archivist to be concerned whether a researcher “cares” or not—some will, some won’t. It’s a matter of preserving the integrity of the collection—and at least disclosing any changes made, regardless of whether a researcher cares about the original order or what the archivist’s personal subjective opinion might be. And the comment about the Principle not giving advice as to how archivists should go about determining these groupings of materials—again, not the goal of the Principles to “give advice.” The discussion of this topic between Maureen Callahan, Bill Landis, Dan Santamaria, Dennis Meissner, Trevor Owens, Audra Eagle Yun, and Gretchen Gueguen seemed more in-depth than the previous two Principles—maybe because more people were involved. Bill’s comment about archivists understanding organizational records, but not personal and family papers isn’t true at all. In “Basic Archives” class, we learned all equally and –depending on where you work—you can be dealing with all types of records equally. It’s records managers who would probably understand organizational records more than family or personal papers. Audra’s comment about users not paying attention to grouping descriptions, just keywords—disagree. Many researchers, especially more experienced scholars, like to see a whole “finding aid” at once, so that all of the materials are viewed in context to each other; it’s been my experience that less experienced researchers such as students are more dependent on keyword searches, in which they have to have a definite name or topic in mind and don’t necessarily care about the larger picture. To Trevor’s comment that technology has made the possibility of multiple arrangements that don’t require the physical relocation of anything: Archival arrangement and description has always enabled intellectual arrangement without physically relocating anything.]

- Principle 4: “Description reflects arrangement.” Dennis Meissner says that he stopped caring long ago about physical arrangement—and I assume he means that he stopped caring about how physical arrangement drives description, or vice-versa. Physical arrangement of some sort is necessary just for practical purposes, if nothing else. If all the letters of John Doe are grouped together in the finding aid under “correspondence” (for whatever reason), it’s not “user-friendly” to have them scattered throughout 23 boxes because the archivist could not be bothered to group them together. If, however, the letters are arranged in multiple series in the finding aid—grouped by project or topic or whatever—it’s relevant to keep those series intact. In the discussion, I agree more with Mary Caldera (than Bill Landis) when she said that “Perhaps a better statement is ‘Description reflects relationships,’ because it sounds like a more fluid activity than “arrangement”—but I feel that if the Principle were changed to that vocabulary, it would need more clarification than it does now.

- Principle 5: “The rules of description apply to all archival materials, regardless of form or medium.” Mary Caldera felt that this principle showed bias towards non-textual records, but I think that the principle acknowledges that all records need to be described equally regardless of their medium—and because media and format change continually, the specifics don’t need to be spelled out in the Principle. I think the Principle is pretty clear that “no records are excluded from the description because of their particular form or medium.” And it does acknowledge that other sets of rules may be applied – because there are many characteristics of audiovisual materials and electronic records that require aspects of description that vary from manuscripts, photographs, etc. Her comment about “notes the tension between description and preservation, particularly for digital records”—I don’t read this at all in the original Principle. I agree with Maureen that DACS is not there for telling you all the specific ways things should be described.

I wanted to address the remaining current principles and comments—plus the proposed ones, but ran out of time—so hope there is still room for more open discussion and feedback before anything is actually

“revised.” Continual evaluation and revision is necessary, but throwing the baby out with the bathwater is not usually the solution.

The proposed principles seem really disconnected—and even linguistically detached—from the DACS rules, which currently form the DACS manual. Some of the comments/suggestions from participants had more to do with “rules” or “activities” than principles.

Agreed: Users are the fundamental concept behind creating, maintaining, and publicizing archives. With this concept in mind, keep description as simple as possible (due to resource constraints at the archives) but specific enough that what the user is interested in can be identified and located.

Agreed: Archivists should cite their sources. It’s not always obvious in the finding aid—which is an essential tool for researchers—but the sources for biographical/historical notes and other information should be cited just as any other scholarly works for publication.

What do you think it will look like if archival description is done in accordance with these principles?

Is there anything that you don't see in these principles that you would like to see?

Is there anything about these principles that doesn't work well or you would like to see handled differently?

Please let us know how much you agree with the following statement. "I / we support this new set of DACS principles and would like to see them adopted as part of DACS." *

What do you think it will look like if archival description is done in accordance with these principles?

31 responses

Greater control generally over archival holdings, broader access, and more possibility to plan progressive policy for processing and access.

I think they will instill and clarify useful practice, beyond devotion to incomplete historical ideals like respect des fonds and original order.

About the same.

One would hope that a closer understanding of ethical requirements would lead to greater transparency, while the push for greater uniformity and reuse would contribute to better descriptive practice.

We didn't deal with this question specifically.

Who knows! We are interested to think beyond the finding aid, but also realize that it's important to operationalize a lot of these principles to make them real--either in DACS/other standards or in professional practice.

These principles should lead to description with more, broader, and better access. They push us to act on general platitudes about the user being the most important thing. We see archivists often falling into a mindset that actually becomes focused on our collections and stuff at the exclusion of the user. We can be both responsible stewards of collections and put our users first, and these principles help us think about areas to do that in.

Thoughtful, ethical, and transparent. And it will be hard for a while-- there will definitely be an adjustment period and it will take some time to figure out how we are describing things like relationships and our interventions on collections. In some ways it seems to be a shift from thinking about a finding aid as a table of contents of a collection to thinking about it as a tour of the collection.

Increasingly transparent, way more Colophons with good description of the activities of the archivist (as co-creator of the collection). Archivists would be encouraged to own their description. It is also hoped that archivists would begin to make clear to resource allocators that description is not a technical act. It is a creative act and requires judgement and skill on the part of the archivist. Archival description would also be driven by user needs and user feedback, though some in our group wondered if this could be taken too far. The judgement of the archivist is valuable and should be supported.

Implementing these principles would mean fundamentally rethinking the finding aid and what we want it to be accomplishing. These principles emphasize description's reusability, meaning its ability to be redundant is important. Context, biases, etc cannot fit into existing f.a. structure -- there's too much content and not enough room for "notes". Furthermore, how do we reach communities outside of "traditional" archives users, such as non-affluent communities using our collections remotely or online on their phones? Languages, formats, etc. need to be proactively acknowledged.

Overall the document works well, and we agreed that nothing here is directly at odds with our practice. We appreciated that the principles zero in on description and not the basics. This review made us think about and talk about some of our practices, which was a strong positive.

I think in some ways the new principles could encourage more dynamic and flexible description. In some ways, variable description benefits users and collections by better reflecting unique or idiosyncratic collections that might not be well-served if described strictly to traditional archival theory and practice. But this also presents the possibility that the principles might promote less standardized description, which has the potential to be more confusing for users. This is why I think there should be a section or separate document on key archival practices, and perhaps sample finding aids demonstrating different iterations of the principles in practice.

I think this encourages a more thoughtful, critical approach to archival description.

Description will be generally more valuable and more accessible to researchers

Processing note, showing that somewhere, showing your positionality, where you're coming from as an archivist. I would like to see that used more. I train grad students, this list would be extremely helpful in delineating what we're about and writing scope and content notes and admin history writing. Putting in our finding aids who the people are who wrote those descriptions. I would like to be more clear myself about the identities of people who are doing this work.

Would expect to see more sources cited

Gives archivists a leg to stand on when dealing with materials that are sensitive, to provide confidence that we know what we're doing

Can you talk more about that question?

I think archival description will look more principled if it's done using these new principles. I get back to honest term. The current principles don't give us that ethical or value-driven affirmation for the work that we do. It isn't going to change structural practices but it's going to give us a foundation that supports the work we do, not just for us, but the people we report to and who use our collections. Making sure these principles provide a set of language that we can use for what we all do. A lot of people still have no idea what we do. Something that grounds us in professional values and ethics. We have ethical groundings to our profession and all that that means. That we are a profession, we have standards, principles, goals.

Using it as a tool for advocacy

Everyone: we love "everything must be described"!

We think these principles give much clearer guidance on how to do our work as archivists. The imperatives used both communicate the importance of certain actions while also giving the standard some teeth. (one participant noted that there are organizations that likely will not be able to follow all of these principles)

The principles provide more transparency, archivists noted that they didn't write a processing note until a few years ago. Processing notes are good for researchers to understand what happened to the records. In general, pointing things out in a finding aid is not a flaw, it gives a sense of what was important/what the donor chose to give

Potentially archival description could be chaotic and confusing by removing any mention of arrangement; arrangement and description go together, something to said for provenance, provenance especially since arrangement is important to government and corporate records, they need to know what what department is from-respect de fonds is important. Just having description lends itself to big data and algorithms, but big data and algorithms are not going to save us.

-The use of new language "events" and "agents" brought on confusion and the group felt that could also change archival description. The word events was interpreted to mean either significant dates, or changes of custody. Agents was interpreted as relating to creators, other people that influence the record, custodians for instance, or anyone who is touching the records (can users be agents and vice versa?). If they are going to change the terms, it needs to be clear—glossary with the new and old terms.

There was also a little bit of discussion with how the new principles will apply to born digital materials. Would you need to document every single change made to born digital materials? What does the principles mean when they say human or machine? Born digital? Digitizing? Checksums?

Archival description would be robust. It would be focused less on formats or types of materials and more on issues of content and context. We anticipate that there would be a shift to favoring high-level/collection-level description as opposed to granular description on the item-level. Information about

provenance and provenance would be present and clearly communicated, as would other information highlighting the visibility of archival labor. We anticipate that this will likely impact reference and other types of user services, and would want to be mindful about the intersection of description and public services.

Depends on if the elements change fundamentally. But it may be less unified if there is a less clear relationship between arrangement and description.

I think that we will have more thoughtful and holistic archival description.

Hopefully, it will make archival description more user-friendly and more interoperable.

As drafted, but particularly as I suggest revisions, establishes a commitment to collection-level description of all collections and embeds a distinctive commitment to understanding users.

Regarding transparency, I think description can only become stronger if the principles are applied. But if archival education and archivists begin to downplay the importance of provenance and original order, they could do great damage to the historical record.

I am hopeful these will be useful in conversation with managers and library directors about the work archivists do, why we do it (users!), setting appropriate respository goals, and seeking resources that will help us reach goals, users, and wider communities.

better clarity of the provenance and actions taken by archivists and records holders/creators

Users would use archives more and know more about archives.

Archivists would feel connected to their collections and their users.

Archivists would be able to advocate for resources for processing more effectively.

Donors would feel better about giving their collections to archives.

We think it would be pretty great all around if we were more focused on the user and not so much collecting stuff.

We think this will result in description that is much more user-focused, as well as focused on the relationships within and across collections. The ideas that description should be aggregate, user driven, and continuous/iterative will change how we approach processing; we think people who espouse these principles will be much more likely to gravitate toward extensible/iterative processing strategies.

Acknowledges description as a complex, temporally specific, social context dependent, and professionally challenging process that is rife with uncertainty, partial information, ambiguity, and unknown multiple perspectives of those creating the records, as subjects of the records, and as those impacted by the records . As such these new principles - especially principles 1-4, 10-11 - raises an impossible bar for an archival description to adhere to all the edicts in the new principles, as any description would be too complex and onerous to achieve, while advocating for easy understandability and accessibility. That being said I think the principles in total are essential and worthy as they open archives to the reality that their efforts are always partial, incomplete, and ambiguous, and rife with unspoken dynamics of social and narrative power. In that instance they speak to all archivists they they are not merely capturing or transcribing obvious "facts" when they describe records. Rather these

principles perform an excellent service by letting archivists better understand that their efforts are situated in complex social milieus - culturally, socially, ideologically, psychologically, power- and resource-wise, etc - and that they need to understand their labors in description in this fashion. The point then is to not confound or paralyze description in the face of these challenges - but to recognize this wider complex social envelope within which they work. In that sense then the notion that description is iterative, implicates professional values and ethics, and acknowledges its own absences of knowledge is essential, all the while being realistic with the basic fact that users need this labor to be done, be done well, and be done in a manner that reaches users abilities to make ready access to archival content. So then, archival description will structurally likely look like it already does in many settings, but these principles will push archivists consider content and language and the more complex social contexts in out if which records emerge in their descriptions. That I feel is the real value of these principles - encouraging a new mindset on the nature of records as social agents that live complex lives across primary and secondary uses.

The revised principles is a significant change and will lead to confusion and inconsistencies due to the fact that we cannot serve user needs without understanding what our users need, or at least identifying our primary and/or secondary users. We cannot understand the relationships between our records, agents and events when we do not know who (or what) the agents are, or how you define events. Are they activities? Do they serve a function? When did they become the four fundamental concepts that constitute archival description?

Arrangement is key to description because description reflects arrangement. Our Principles cannot focus solely on description while ignoring arrangement by fonds and original order or chain of custody-- especially as they relate to the needs of the primary users for evidential value. The needs of secondary and tertiary users may be different from primary uses.

I think this will lead to greater backlogs of materials and/or to descriptions of collections and assets that are not sufficient for multiple users. By endorsing these principles as currently written, we abandon our background and expertise and settle for a Minimally Viable Product, but our Principles are not a product.

The revised principles capture many of our goals: What are we not doing that we should be doing? How can we get there? Although the principles are aspirational, discussing them helped point the way to small changes we can make now.

Is there anything that you don't see in these principles that you would like to see?

30 responses

no (2)

It may be obvious after reading the background material (which I have admittedly not read), but I think it would be helpful to make some annotations/citations around to why certain principles were rejected, and perhaps draw relationships between any old an new principles and the reasoning behind their evolution. I have nothing to go on for comparison. For example, a lot of the current principles focus on "arrangement" whereas "arrangement" is not mentioned once in the new principles. Does this mean that "arrangement" is no longer important?

More input from archivists at small institutions. (I didn't know where to put this.)

See my answers to #4: discussion of what constitutes a "collection" and sub-groupings within it.

The foundational principles of archival description are missing (respect des fonds, description following arrangement, inheritance/non-repetition of information, etc.).

-How do these principles account for limited resources and undervalued archival labor? These principles are great, but they need resources and fairly compensated labor to be enacted.

-some people loved the fact that this set of guidelines did not include the phrase "respect des fonds," but others felt that the lack of a similar "guiding/unifying principle" left a gap/removed something foundational. They didn't necessarily think it needed to be filled by respect des fonds, but weren't sure if it was sufficient to remove it and not replace it with something equally foundational, which they didn't seem to see.

Maybe something more explicitly reflective or self-critical about the systems of power that are evident in knowledge production (including archival description).

As we discussed in comments with Principle 9, we would like to see inclusiveness be its own principle.

There are definitional things that seem to be missing- defining who we consider our community of practice is important here- who are these aimed at? How are we defining archivist? Or user? Also a more explicit statement that archival description is not just a finding aid-- that it can happen inside or outside the repository and that collection files and CMS info is also archival description.

Some in our group bemoaned the loss of methodological guidance in the principles. The older principles were more methodological. That said, I can honestly say that a preliminary poll of our group found that almost no one was familiar with the old principles and had never been taught them in library school. That says something, I suppose. One in our group wondered if making description available under an open license might need some discussion.

1. How will these reach outside of TS archivists? Should be broadly distributed, to admins, curators, etc.
2. Restrictions and how to apply them -- medical records, donor-requested restrictions, social media "collecting the now", public distribution without consideration of archival endurance, other access restrictions. Privacy for creators vs. access. Balancing respect for the agents' identities with our commitment to ethics/truth.
3. Ripple effects beyond TS -- don't really address guidelines for donors, gift agreements.
4. No real talk about user-driven/created description -- not really addressed. How do we integrate that into our workflows?

1. Discussion of ethics could include something about the need for working with communities to determine appropriate language/terminology in descriptions and appropriate cultural access protocols.
2. Does this need to mention not only that archivists are biased, but records-creators are also biased and that will be reflected in the records?
3. On number 6, it might be useful to mention an iterative approach to description and that there's not an assumption that all collections will have more than a preliminary description.
4. On #7, I think this ties to a repository's mission as well as their goals. (Related, but not exactly the same thing.)

What do we mean by "machine"? Agents in description, migration. Doesn't need to be rephrased, but good to be general. Maybe provide an example.

#7. I understand what it's trying to express, but is this the vehicle to say what we "must" do? It's prescriptive, but we do what our bosses tell us to do.

#7 stuck out the most, felt restrictive. I agree, but it's being restrictive and ignoring other things.

End user means public, but can we define user?

Can we flip #7 can we still get message about without being forceful? "User needs inform decisions or goals of the repository," avoid being overly prescriptive

#7 and #11 have a lot of similarities. Maybe they could be combined somehow, or make it clear that descriptive is iterative. Make #7 more clear in stating that there are other reasons. Avoid use of "must" or "should"?

I'm okay with "must" and "should"; I gleaned the intent. Was there anything intentionally left out from the previous principles?

Respect des fonds is missing, which was intentional I assume

I liked how you built upon the existing principle #5 in that not everyone documents themselves the same way.

Respect des fonds, I'm struggling with that, would have to ponder it a bit more to buy into whether it should be in the revised version. When I read that in the original DACS, it's a litmus test.

I agree, the archivist in me cried not seeing respect des fonds.

Introduction should include definition of the word "archives"; I'm on a group that is defining this constantly. SAA is not going to take a side on what that term means

We are writing about archival description, not for archives

There should be more attention to arrangement; the focus on the idea that there is more than one arrangement, means that there is no discussion of arrangement at all. The records themselves define the arrangement. The principles make arrangement feel like its an assumption, and arrangement shouldn't be an assumption. Principle 11 is too broad. There is also the feeling that the new principles are too oblique and could be a little clearer. There was also a call to update ethics of the profession.

The terms "agent" and "event" are used in a specific way here that is not self-evident and does not appear to be general usage in the profession – of the two, only "agent" occurs in the SAA's online "Glossary of Archival and Records Terminology" (based on the 2005 publication by Richard Pearce-Moses), but not in the sense employed in the proposed principles. These terms are also not so far on the list of terms to be added (published on the SAA website) in the new edition being prepared. If there is a consensus on their usage in the principles, perhaps the Subcommittee could document them and submit them for inclusion in the updated edition of the "Glossary of Archival and Records Terminology":

<http://www2.archivists.org/dictionary/suggest-a-term>

The introductory statement and principle 1 in the current principles are important, and sorely missing in the proposed revision. The Subcommittee's rationale for leaving them out is hard to understand. Although there may indeed be "plenty of places to find definitions of records and archives" (as stated in the crosswalk), this is a place where it is particularly important to articulate at the outset a shared understanding of the 'records' which are the subject of archival arrangement and description (with additional clarification over and above the old wording, if the Subcommittee finds it desirable).

Principles 3 and 10 are integrally connected and merging them would produce a more useful principle.

"Honest description" is a catch phrase from the current literature, and misleading when used, as it is here, without sufficient context; the current text and bullet points in principle 3 mostly suggest a philosophical background but leave open the question as to why professional work (archivists have long had code of ethics) would ever be anything other than "honest." One needs to call to mind the specific background (elucidated in principle 10), namely, the idea, now current in the profession, that clarification of the interventions on the part of the archivist or the repository (or other custodians) that have had an impact on the shaping of the collection should properly be part of the description - something that was not a professional norm in the past. (This is the context in which the term "honest description" has been used recently in the literature.) Citing sources (mentioned in principle 3) is another good example.

While we don't expect the principles to be the place to explain the nature of archival materials or provide basic definitions, we would like to see more acknowledgement about the records themselves as it relates to the creation of archival description. We feel as though the uniqueness or rareness of the materials, as well as the context of their creation, maintenance, or use are important considerations that contribute to the deeper analysis and thought processes inherent to archival description but are not present in these proposed principles.

The existing principles are prefaced by a short introductory statement - will the revised principles have one as well? If so, will the existing prefatory statement remain or will it also be revised?

Arrangement - at all - and its fundamental relationship to Description. There is a reason they are often mentioned together, e.g. SAA's A&R certificate.

Also, there is an assumption that all description is accessible (even if the records are restricted). There are cases where the description itself (such as if a group of records even exists) is restricted by time to particular user groups. This restriction to description can be by legal statute, judicial or administrative order, private contract, corporate policy, etc.

No.

Miss the traditional practices regarding arrangement and description/levels of description that are in the current principles--I still find this important to communicate to staff and users, and the current DACS principles provide a clear, concise discussion on these topics that I think can be included in addition to these revised principles.

Yes, a better written document, with all due respect for the hard work that has gone into them so far.

As mentioned above, I would like to see a better incorporation of the strong, practical, and innovative aspects of these revisions with bedrock archival principles and arrangement.

We appreciated the principles as a whole but wondered how the principles relate to the rules of the standard. Since some of these principles are aspirationally-oriented, we wondered how these might change the meaning of "DACS compliance."

Some missed the connection between these principles and the core archival principles of respect des fonds, original order, and inheritance. Will these be addressed in the Introduction?

They cover a lot of ground very concisely and clearly. You all did wonderful work.

There is a lot of reference to archivists, users, and collections, but the role and importance of the collector/donor/creator/community is not emphasized enough. We appreciated the reference at the end of principle #9, but felt the "lead was buried." It should be more explicit, for example in principle #1, under "ethical description," the first bullet should say that ethical description "produces trust in and between users, archivists, repositories, *and communities/donors/creators.*"

Was there an intention to map the original principles to these new ones while also expanding them? Or are these new principles intended as a total reboot?

There are concepts in the original 8 principles that are still useful but not clearly articulated in the language of the new principles, such as "original order," and "respect de fonds/provenance." Can these be integrated?

There is no mention/nod towards privacy/confidentiality/right to forget, etc. This should be thought about a little more.

Some principles are wordy and not specific enough. Language could be more precise, clear in some instances.

for those repositories that are in collaborative relationships with communities, where does responsibility for a/d reside? What is the role of creators, collectors, and donors in description?

I worry about having no principles for arrangement. Do we need a separate standard for arrangement? I do think we need something more than the "Archival Fundamentals" text. Maybe the DACS chapter on "levels of description" could be a place for that to live.

Yes, most significantly there is no mention of arrangement and description, respect des fonds, original order, corporate bodies, or the fact that creators of archival materials, as well as the materials themselves, must be described because arrangement involves identification of groupings within the material.

In the archival world, which includes the SAA and this TS-DACS committee, there is an obvious bias towards large research colleges and universities and governmental agencies fulfilling their requirements to provide open access. The Principles you propose may be best suited to the needs of public institutions, but why must our professional Principles reflect that bias too?

We also would like also for the Principles to address the reality that our Code of Ethics and Core Values change over time. In 2005, our ethical code informed us that archivists had to uphold all federal, state, and local laws. The 1992 version, stated that it is not sufficient for archivists to hold and preserve materials: they also facilitate the use of their collections and make them known... and encourage users in the institution and outside researchers." Perhaps one day it would be unethical for an institution to acquire collections that will not be made accessible in a timely fashion. Should changes in our Code of Ethics impact our Principles?

"Open your arms to change, but don't let go of your values." --Dalai Lama

I have stated many of the omissions above, but I would like greater awareness of archivists who are not working in College & Universities or governmental agencies. There is an obvious bias in these principles which will leave corporate and religious institution archivists behind.

We found it strange that the principles frame archival description as "the archivist's" responsibility, intellectual endeavor, and so on. The reality of our situation, and probably others', is that students, donors, subject specialists, volunteers, and many more kinds of people besides archivists are involved in creating archival description. Why center "the archivist" at the expense of acknowledging these other participants? There's an irony in acknowledging the responsibilities of description without acknowledging the variety of roles and individuals who do the work.

Is there anything about these principles that doesn't work well or you would like to see handled differently?

27 responses

only one point which I already addressed specifically (7)

If the revised DACS is asking for greater clarity in archival description, then it should also model it.

Principle 1: A clearer definition of what constitutes an ethical description might be useful here, or at least a link to the SAA Code of Ethics (if that is what is being referred to here). This principle as written should also focus specifically on the role of ethics—leaving out references to the iterative nature of descriptive practice.

Principle 2: It might help to define users, including both administrative uses and the public. Much of the use of archives comes from archivists themselves, and descriptive practice should address their needs.

Principle 3: The use of the word "honest" could be better defined in the context of the statement. How is an "honest" description different from an "ethical" description? Portions of this principle also seem closely associated with principle 10—should these be combined somehow, or placed closer together?

Principle 4: For clarity, it might be better to align the order of the concepts listed with the subsections that follow.

In subsection three on agent description, the first paragraph contradicts the current DACS definition of agents in its addition of machine agents (DACS, 2nd ed., p. vii). Currently agent entities are limited to humans, either as individuals or groups. Presumably under this definition software would simply be a tool used by a human agent to complete a task, not an agent in itself.

In subsection four, the use of "events" could be better defined as well. Records, agents, and relationships are all parts of existing conceptual models for archival description, making their inclusion in archival description vital. Events, however, are not part of this mainstream model. If Events are to be included, it needs to be clear what is meant. The examples provided in this section could be applied to the description of the other entities/concepts given (e.g., biographical or historical information to the description of agents, or administrative actions to the description of records).

Principle 5: The first part of this principle seems somewhat unclear. Particularly, the meaning of "in context" seems poorly defined—the examples focus on cultural context for description, while the final bullet point talks about "records' contexts".

Principle 6: This principle ties back closely to principle 1 and 4, and the overlap may not be desirable. This also seems to echo the ICA Code of Ethics point #6, which again suggests the overlap with ethical descriptive practice.

Principle 7: While we agree completely with this idea, this seems more like a best practice than a principle.

Principle 8: For this principle, while we agreed with the main point we had some concerns that the examples below were closer to best practice statements than principles.

Principle 9: This principle seems a bit broad, and its implications difficult to address in a reasonable fashion. We did agree that as a baseline archival descriptions should be accessible to the creators/creating community of the records themselves.

Principle 10: This principle seems closely related to principle 3 (see comments on principle 3).

Principle 11: This principle seems to restate many of the principles above—iterative nature (principles 1, 4, and 6), documenting archival "concepts" (principle 4), user-focused (principle 2 and 7), flexible (principle 5). It may be better to remove than to duplicate.

-They felt additional, future supporting documentation with examples of principles-application might be helpful to new archivists, and help to maintain the simplicity of the new principles, which they really liked. This wasn't a criticism of the principles themselves, but something additional/supportive they would like to see in the future.

-They were looking for the word "authentic," and were surprised to not find it.

One participant had concerns that the language overall is too informal and non-technical and therefore out of step with the tone of other (notable ISAD) standards. Others in the group thought that it was very important to make the language less formal and more available to general audiences and make sure that laymen can take these and better understand what we do, so there was disagreement there

Some saw a tension between #7 and #11. It was also pointed out that #11, while a fact, may not really be a principle. If it is a principle, must iterations of description be only user driven? At least one archivist was troubled by the consistent focus on trust throughout the principles (because she was not sure that should be enshrined so much in our values). A few of us are historians and archivists with a great deal of experience as archival researchers and we think it advisable to never trust an archivist (or anyone else) all that much!

#5 needs revision b/c we aren't clear what it means.

"Events," how do you describe provenance or how they were created; we should be explicit on whether these are known or unknown events

#1 sounds like a policy, should this move above the principles?

Meissner had a great way of describing; at the core there are values, principles are derived from there, and policies are derived from principles

#1 and #11 "standards are rooted in values" but "reflecting changes in values"

Can we link to the statement of ethics in #1?

Description being honest is a little hard to understand, it's postmodern

Will the final document have citations to define our terms? What are we specifically referring to, are they referring to a code of conduct? I assume that that will be included. Shouldn't we constantly revisit them?

In #1, can "drive" be causing tension around this principle? How about "underpin" or "are the foundation" or "embodies the framework of what we do" or "the bedrock"? That would make me more comfortable. It sounds like a manifesto, that may be intentional, but this is the bedrock of what we do.

Can you explain #3? Clear about what archivists know, etc? Concerned that you're giving license for people to be biased. You never talk about whether neutrality is a goal. A lot of us are in public roles, want to show as big a picture as possible. Did anyone else come away feeling like bias is ok?

It says bias is inevitable, you should acknowledge it.

It's not about mitigating bias, but making sure we cite, we are honest about what we're doing

Identify yourself as part of XYZ

In practice, where would I put that information? In a processing note? Where do I disclose my potential bias?

lit made me think of Tom and Michelle's article

Can we reframe how we're talking about this, who we are, where we are, etc. and how that has ramifications of how we approach collections, description of them. Bias perhaps has a negative connotation. We want to talk about neutrality not as an achievable goal, because of our positionality. Think about it as productive and generative, not as a negative or bad thing. A social justice framework instead of postmodern (as shorthand for discussions about racial, culture, gender, sexual difference).

The group would also like to see an introduction with some context for the updating of the principles. Principle 6 feels loaded, is a collection title enough base level description? Or does it just mean to get a very basic handle of your collections (minimal processing). The group would also like to see that honest description gets addressed, especially since honest description often needs more resources and means getting control over the records on a basic level. The group also would like to see the idea that description has to be useful and that the onus of processing can't be on the reference staff. They would also like to know how does principle 6 deal with restrictions and privacy. The group would also like to see more

attention to the difference archival collection (records) and manuscript collections (papers); some thought that there is too much onus on openness, what about the needs of government or corporate records? Most of the writers of principles came from academia/special collections and there was not enough perspective from those that work in other types of archives, like government or corporate archivists. There was also some drive for a definition to the word "principles;" principles are not ethics and values, but drive the work.

We have concerns that these principles are most closely aligned with archives and special collections in academic library settings, and worry that some of the strictest principles would not translate outside of these environments.

Overly privileges postmodern theory. Seems to declare bias impenetrable to active mitigation. Casts arrangement adrift. Without a stated relationship there seems to no longer be any principles associated with arrangement that can inform best practice.

I am not sure if there is a particular reason why the group did not include anything relating to arrangement and more specifically provenance, respect des fonds, and original order. These are all core concepts to archival practice, indeed, concepts that have historically distinguished us from other information professions. While each of them has been interrogated, questioned, and refined--and are continuing to undergo that process--they have not been fully dethroned.

I think it is particularly important to address this because the current principles, quite rightly in my opinion, reiterate the important idea of describing aggregates. And each aggregate will almost certainly, have some type of internal organization or arrangement that itself should be described, and about which we should be transparent with our users, even in the case where we can't do additional description of the parts. In fact, this would reflect in one of the core concepts I stress when teaching the A&D of Digital Records course: that you should not describe the digital records until after arrangement has been completed, and that archivists, we should be very upfront and transparent about our arrangement and processing actions. Both of which were major takeaways from me from the AIMS Report, my own experience, multiple conversations over the years, and other literatures.

I think there is another reason to say something about arrangement, and that is simply that external constituencies (i.e. librarians, museum curators) are likely use the standard. As a profession, we want and need to reiterate elements of our core professional identity, as it distinguishes us from other information profession. It is important to stress, of course, provenance and original order are core concepts that, over time, are becoming increasingly complex and refined, as evidenced in the discussion around the Records in Context "protostandard" pages 4-6. But I do think simply leaving them out fully is a big, big mistake since although they are being applied in more complex and fluid ways, we can't just simply toss them aside!

Perhaps there could be a simple statement along the lines of "the description of records should reflect and follow their arrangement or system of organization" and explain how that arrangement is reflection of the origin of the records as well as their original order.

The statement would not need to be as long and involved as that in the current principles, but I feel that if this is left out, it will provide a false impression of how description should and does work in the real world. I think it is particularly problematic because, even in the case of digital files that might not undergo any rearrangement by the archivists--or which may have a set of relationships to other digital objects--they still typically have some organization, grouping, or other arrangement of which the user needs to be aware. It might have been established by the creator, or by the archivist during processing in an attempt to reflect

the original functions, uses, and arrangement of the records.

No.

Have some feedback about specific principles; will provide there. Otherwise, I think there is a tension about the idea of iterative description, and I'm not sure if these principles are the place to discuss that tension or not. I happily add additional information to archival description as it comes to me, but it becomes frustrating having to touch a record multiple times, over and over, for reasons ranging from bad existing data needing to be cleaned up to okay existing data needing to be cleaned up because the system is no longer happy with it to actual revisions to the description due to changes in information or additions to collection. Again, I don't think these principles need to go into that kind of detail, but I do think it's worth pointing out that iterative description can cause tension as much as static description.

I have many many comments on the phrasing of the principles. I will be sending along to the co-chairs a copy of the principles with track changes included.

It won't take much to tweak these principles to fix the problems I describe. Bringing the best of the old and the new together is what I would like to see.

Please note that in the final question on this form (asking to numerically rate support of the Principles), I've indicated "5." Since I didn't have access to the questions on the feedback form prior to our reading group session, I didn't ask the group to agree on a rating, and I don't feel comfortable assigning one for us, collectively. Since there wasn't an option to skip the question, I've just said "5" for the rating, with apologies for possibly throwing off your data.

We believe that these principles need significant revision; and a much more inclusive and varied group of archivists to work on them. What would these principles look like if written by a group of museum, historical society, and corporate archivists? Very different, we think.

Aside from the issues I have with Principles 4 and 7, I am good. I hope that smaller repositories, historical societies, and corporate archivists respond to your call, as I worry that we academic archivists dominate these conversations; I wonder how their day-to-day and longer-term practices differ from larger institutions' and so how radical these concepts would be to their work strategies and goals.

no

Some felt that the principles seem to be biased based on academic archives not so much corporate archives (many corporate collections are not open to the public).

There is no mention/nod towards privacy/confidentiality/right to forget, etc. This should be thought about a little more.

There are too many "musts", which makes the principles overbearing. We suggest determining which are the "must" principles ... and make the others "should". An introduction/pre-amble that sets the context (perhaps referring to the classical/technical principles of respect de fonds, original order,, etc) and indicates that these are aspirational/ideal principles. Also, some of the principles, seem to be at cross-purposes: All collections MUST be described ... and do more interpretation regarding context ... and be more transparent about your processes ... and "show your work" ... all of which will require more work.

In a lot of these revised principles, they seem to be describing very big picture situations that I think would

very much benefit from examples and/or case studies. Will this be a part of the revised principles?

Archivists have a responsibility to ensure the authenticity, reliability, and integrity of the documents in their repository. This can be done through arrangement and description and by verifying evidence of an unbroken chain of custody. Our principles should support our professional activities, and if we aspire to provide trusted digital repositories and create trustworthy archives, then archivists need to be able to assert and assess authenticity.

Our traditional archival principles, have facilitated accurate information discovery, retrieval, and use for more than 100 years. We should not abandon our longstanding, high-quality principles while attempting to appeal to and appease our future user and agent needs.

Yes, I think it would be helpful to identify users and their roles before changing our principles to serve their needs.

It would also be helpful if this process to develop and revise the DACS principles were extended and done on a new transparent and fair basis and providing a public call for participation.

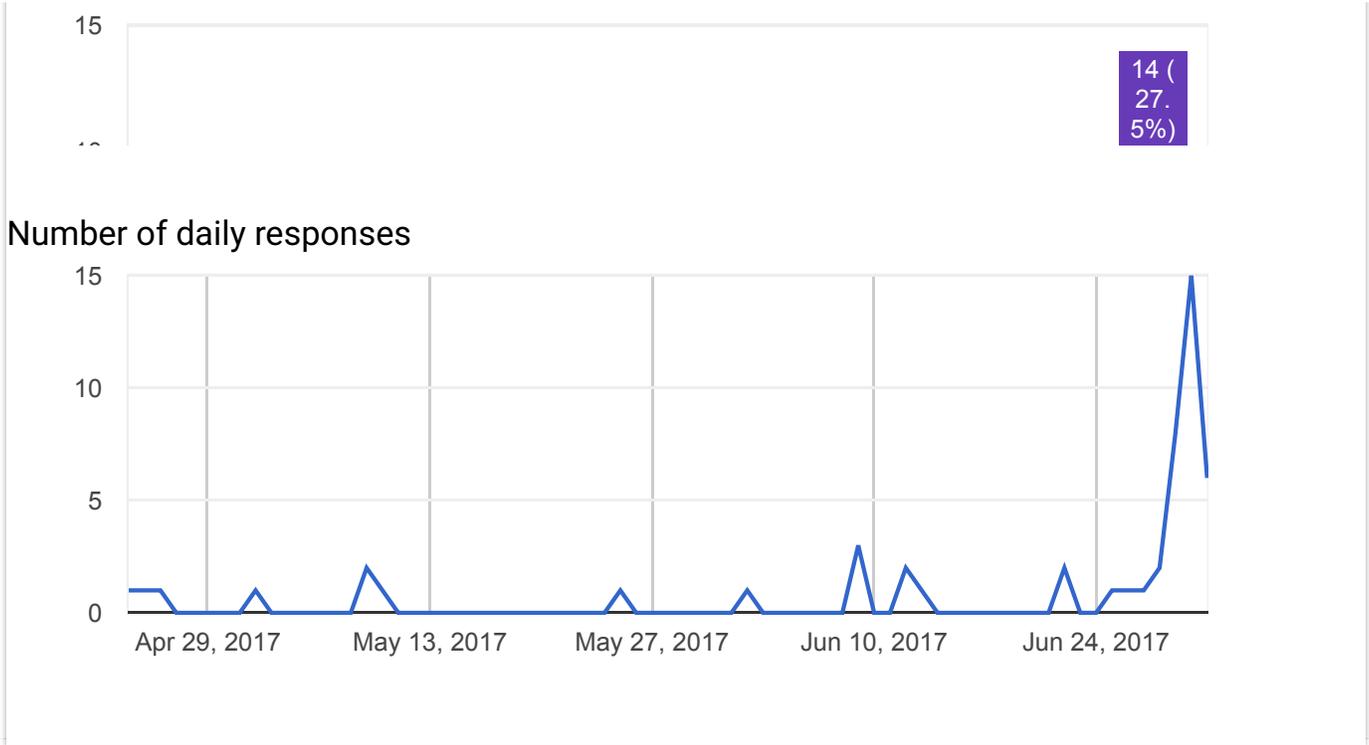
While I appreciate the opportunity to contribute my comments, I wish there were an easier PDF interface for submitting my comments. If there is a possibility of continuing the conversation, I would love to participate and try to help in any way I can.

Not sure this is the right place to put this comment, but: Noting how many adjectives are applied to "description" throughout the principles, the group thought it might be interesting to frame principles around those adjectives, e.g. description is honest, description is ethical, etc.

Overall...

Please let us know how much you agree with the following statement.
"I / we support this new set of DACS principles and would like to see them adopted as part of DACS."

51 responses



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Finding Aids Under Late Capitalism



Nixon in a hard hat, NARA ID 16916291

This is a long divagation from @meau's request for comments on the [proposed new DACS guiding principles](#) or more specifically, only to part one:

Archival description expresses professional ethics and values.

Professional ethics and values drive archival work, including descriptive practice. Archival description is an iterative, ethical practice that requires continual engagement with core values. Rooting standards in values helps archivists enact these values consistently and makes them explicit to our user communities.

Ethical description:

- produces trust in and between users, archivists, and repositories
- encourages a diverse archival record
- promotes responsible and responsive descriptive practices
- holds archivists accountable to users and to each other
- privileges equitable access and accessibility

So I recently moved house and now walk by my kid's preschool every day. The school has four windows in front, and the teachers have put up four posters TEACH / LOVE / TEACH / RESPECT. My first question for the new principles was, Can virtue be taught? Because the principles clearly attempt

About



Keys

But the revolution is thoroughgoing. It is still traveling through purgatory. It does its work methodically. By December 2, 1851, it had completed half of its preparatory work; now it is completing the other half. It first completed the parliamentary power in order to be able to overthrow it. Now that it has achieved this, it completes the executive power, reduces it to its purest expression, isolates it, sets it up against itself as the sole target, in order to concentrate all its forces of destruction against it. And when it has accomplished this second half of its preliminary work, Europe will leap from its seat and exult: Well burrowed, old mole!

The narrator's wish to be a mole in the ground and a lizard [sic] in the spring are quite surrealistic in their symbolism. "The Bend" ("pen" in some other versions) probably refers to the Big Bend penitentiary.

[...] its only meaning comes to it from the Greek *arkheion*: initially a house, a domicile, an address, the residence of the superior magistrates, the *archons*, those who commanded. The citizens who thus held and signified political power were considered to possess the right to make or to represent the law. On account of their publicly recognized authority, it is at their home, in that *place* which is their house (private house, family's house or employee's house), that official documents are filed. The archons are first of all the documents' guardians. They do not only ensure the physical security of what is deposited and of the substrate. They are also accorded the hermeneutic right and competence.

Holdings

what Socrates considered impossible — you will not educate the narcissism out of Donald Trump — kind of by the back door. That is, even if we can't pour virtue in to systems that are innately unvirtuous, we can develop standards of behavior so vanilla and taken-for-granted that subsequent generations behave virtuously without meaning to. Establishing ethical description as a norm — placing it first in the list — is to elevate description to the level of pure ideology.

Do your Žižek voice if you need to. Okay.

It's worth noting that TS-DACS has to model this for us because no other American archivists' entity can or will. We don't write ethics case studies inside SAA anymore because there's no capacity among us to take risks for the historic record (in contrast to the learned people of [Timbuktu who hid their texts from AQIM](#) or the Hoover institution's preservation of [Ba'ath Party records](#), yeah that's right, don't @ me)

I suspect TS-DACS is aware of its situation of influence. In the current ethics-power vacuum, of course, all any group need do is grasp power outright, but the power of technical language in our discipline is particularly overwhelming. The mass of professional archivists is exhausted by listening to the exhortations of woke LIS professor after woke LIS professor, but let one technical subcommittee issue rules or one expert lecture on codecs or something and we're all just brought to orgasm. TS-DACS is leveraging our worship of rules and more significantly our worship of rulesmaking in order to get us to do good. It's of course mind-bending that we have to resort to this kind of totem-and-taboo to get traction on decolonizing our description, but *selah*.

The principles therefore subject to bounding an ethical [zone of exclusion](#) — the heroic, extralegal, fireable offenses that got us Warren Harding's love letters, for example, are instances of archivists claiming sovereign power. Under the principles, all description, if ethical, is heroism; and since heroism now comes as standard equipment, the notion dissolves of its own, it withers away...

And so the daring move "Ethical description produces trust," read appropriately, is an extension of this act of including-exclusion. It's absurd to think that a technical standard for writing finding aids could inculcate something like love among "users, archivists, and repositories," but that's precisely what the principles aim for: a common front of mutual aid and mutual reliability. People become subject to one another.

Insha'Allah they'll succeed but it perplexes me that in order to get the mass of archivists to really engage with how our work affects the arc of history we have to embed a polemic on archival values inside a technical standard. It's as if "What Is To Be Done?" or "Murderers Who Have Yet To Be Clubbed To Death" could only reach their audiences via railway schedules or actuarial tables.

And the fault of course lies not in TS-DACS but in ourselves. The ethic of servant-leadership, unstated and still plain as day, contained in the new principles is not typically archivists' *modus*. More typically we empanel ourselves as Savvy Knowers Who Deliver The Archival Science — which boxes to buy, mostly — to the unwashed hordes. Our only calls to the barricades occur when NARA's budget is threatened, as occurs ritually. I hope it turns out that standing on principle portends more effective advocacy than Save Our Jobs or May Day For Conserving Stuff ever could. Certainly it couldn't be worse....

Imagine any other lobbying organization: AMA, APA, AARP, the National Rifle Association. Any appeal they make is couched in terms of ultimate values — health, life, self-defense — and aimed at a constituency of users — not doctors, psychs, investment bankers, and gun dealers, but their users. To center the principles on service to the user, is in addition to being plainly Christian in a primitive sense — though I have questions about this too; are we ready to lay down our DACS for a friend? — good politics.

I dream of an SAA which takes everyone who drafted the new DACS principles and empanels them as the board of overseers of our new 527, designed to raise funds and distribute them with the aim of gaining political power. I am totally sanguine about receiving dark money from Hollinger and Iron Mountain. We labor under conditions not of our own devising, and the tactics of our party should be as flexible as the end goal is immutable...

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Maureen Callahan <mcallahan@smith.edu>

request for feedback -- first look at new DACS principles

Michelle Light <michelle.light@gmail.com>
To: Maureen Callahan <mcallahan@smith.edu>
Cc: Adrien Hilton <adrienhilton@gmail.com>

Sat, May 13, 2017 at 1:18 PM

Hi Maureen and Adrien!

I finally got a chance to look these over, and I have some feedback. I was going to use the survey, but I made the mistake of preparing my feedback before looking at how the survey was structured. It would take too much time for me to go back and restructure my feedback according to the questions, so I'm just going to copy and paste it all below. I hope that's ok!

Also, my feedback is not a reflection of Council, but just my thoughts. I haven't had a chance to talk to others about it, but I encouraged my staff to prepare and submit feedback as well.

Overall:

This approach is a huge step forward for archival description. I appreciate its perspective, style, and applicability to analog and digital archives. Thank you for spearheading this initiative.

Overall, I strongly suggest substituting "should" for "must" in most cases. Sometimes, resources or situations don't allow for the "must" all the time.

Here are my comments on each principle.

Principle 1: Archival description expresses professional ethics and values.

Yes! I really like where this is going in the focus foremost on doing right by people. But, I'm concerned that I don't see the community of origin - either donors or subjects - in here. I see users, archivists, and repositories - but no other people. Let me provide a specific example to test the value. How would you apply this value to working with a collection in an academic library of anthropological field notes about and recordings of a Native American tribe? Members of the tribe, past and present, might not be users technically, but they are subjects as the collection is about them and of them. What are your ethical responsibilities to them as part of description? Would this value help you or encourage you to consult with the tribal members to find culturally sensitive ways to describe the content? Would it allow you to be flexible or creative in adapting or incorporating other ways of naming or describing content and entities when it's really important to a community of origin, even if that terminology isn't authorized or standard? I think it's important to recognize that there might be other stakeholders represented in collections we describe, and we have just as many, if not more, ethical obligations to them to treat their memories with respect. What happens when a community of origin wants something described one way according to their values, and archivists want to describe that thing in another way because it's better for users or the systems we use? How would this value guide you in practice?

I recommend checking out the Native American Protocols, particularly the section on "Providing Context" to see how this value aligns with their recommendations. This might be a test for how well the value "encourages a diverse archivist record." I know the protocols aren't endorsed, but its challenges are worthwhile for contemplation.

I wonder if it's possible to use this value to encourage communities of origin to become more active participants in archival processes. Or, to encourage archivists to develop more inclusive processes for creating description and consulting on the accuracy, meaning, or impact of description. Is it possible in here to encourage

appreciation for community expertise and participation in descriptive practices? For engaging them to become users as well?

I realize that you may intend “users” to encompass communities of origin or the subjects of archives, but that isn’t obvious as written. This assumption might also be disingenuous.

Principle 2: Users are the fundamental reason for archival description.

I don’t think this sentence is true: “Archives exist to be used.” Archives can come into existence for other reasons too. For example, historically some archives have come into existence because the very act of creating them was a performance of domination or power; in these cases, subsequent use might have been secondary or accidental. However, I think you can say that institutions devote resources to preserving archives so that people will use them. Maybe revise this sentence: “Archives are maintained for use.” or “Archives are maintained because of their continuing value to users.”

I agree that we create description for users; however, we have obligations to other stakeholders as well relating to the impact of our description. (E.g., we create description to help users find and use material, but we should create description that doesn’t harm communities of origin when they are not users but subjects. Using a derogatory descriptive term, for example, has an impact on nonusers.) Later on, the principles state that description “builds trust between archives and those being documented.” It’s hard to build trust if your fundamental loyalty is to users outside of the community being documented.

Principle 3: Archival description must be clear about what archivists know, what they don’t know, and how they know it.

Yes, I agree with this.

Here are a few suggestions: : “Archivists should strive to provide accurate, honest description and to recognize and reduce their bias. Archivists should create evidence-based description and cite their sources of knowledge.”

Principle 4: Records, agents, events, and the relationships between them are the four fundamental concepts that constitute archival description.

A. This is the most problematic of the sections. It dances around traditional archival principles without mentioning them. I’m glad you got rid of arrangement and original order, because they’re problematic concept in a digital environment, but you should put provenance back somehow. Description, especially in a digital environment, also helps establish and ensure the integrity, authenticity, and trustworthiness of archives. Tracking the provenance of archives is about more than providing access, it’s about maintaining the very nature of archives.

I also think that if DACS will be of use to broader communities outside of practicing archivists for describing aggregates of digital material that are archival in nature, that you need to somehow mention the essential characteristics of archives.

Archival description should document records agents, events, and relationships, but WHY? This section doesn’t explain why in a way that gets at the very essence of archival accumulation and control.

This needs a lot more thought and editing, but maybe adding an introduction along these lines:

Archival description tracks [I’m sure there is a better word..] agents, records, events, and the relationships among them.

Archives are materials created or received by a person, family, or organization, public or private, in the conduct of their affairs and preserved because of the enduring value. To maintain trustworthy, authentic archives, the contextual relationships between the record creator, the records, and the actions of any subsequent agents on the records should be described when possible or known.

B. Records must be described in aggregate and may be described in parts.

Maybe this: Records from a creator or related by provenance should be described in aggregate before describing component parts.

C. I disagree with "Events that are essential to understanding records must be described." because it's impossible. How can an archivist know every essential event that influenced a creation of a record, especially in a personal collection? How granular, or where would you stop? Perhaps there is a way to distinguish essential events that are necessary to track because they are the legal or functional reason for the existence of a record, and those events that just help you understand things a bit better. For events that just help users out in interpreting records, it's nice to include them as time allows, but we have to recognize that these are really subject to bias and serendipity, and also resource intensive to do.

Principles 5, 6, and 7: Yes!

Principle 8: I disagree with this sentence: "Archival description is an archivist's primary intellectual output." I have several archivists in my department who don't do archival description, but rather develop courses and workshops, give public presentations, create exhibits, write press releases and articles, etc. This statement is too myopic. I agree with the rest of the principle though.

Principle 9: I like the sentiment behind this: "Accessible archival description engages creators and communities being documented to reflect their complexity, nuance, and fluidity. It builds trust between archives and those being documented." However, I don't think accessible description is what builds trust. It's a small component, but I would think that being culturally sensitive, flexible, and respectful (of diverse practices, diverse ways of knowing, etc.) builds more trust than removing physical, technological, linguistic or geographic barriers to accessing and understanding archival description. And, description of archives is also a just component in how you build relationships and trust. I suggest tempering this sentence to read: "It can help build trust between archives and those being documented."

Overall, this is an amazing rethinking of archival description, and I'm super disappointed that I couldn't make it out there in March. Someone with a lot of grounding in archival theory about provenance, respects du fond, concepts of authenticity and trustworthiness, should really spend more time with principle 4. I don't have this background, but there's something fundamental missing in the principles about the essence of archives and how description plays a role in maintaining and revealing this. Perhaps someone with experience in electronic records, like Chris Prom or Cal Lee, might have more insight into how to talk about this in a way that transcends the physical environment?

Please let me know if I can be of any further assistance.

Best, Michelle

[Quoted text hidden]



Maureen Callahan <mcallahan@smith.edu>

request for feedback -- first look at revised DACS principles

j.dryden@utoronto.ca <j.dryden@utoronto.ca>

Sat, Jun 3, 2017 at 3:00 PM

To: Maureen Callahan <mcallahan@smith.edu>, Adrien Hilton <adrienhilton@gmail.com>

Cc: jeandryden@gmail.com

Hello Maureen,

I've reviewed the revised principles, and there is much that I applaud. However, I think that some things are missing:

The principles address what elements should be described, who is to be served, and the importance of transparency, but if I were a new archivist, these principles would leave me wondering where to start. Principle 4 talks of "the whole" and Principle 6 talks of "each collection," but the principles nowhere give any guidance on what constitutes "the whole" or a "collection." The fundamental principle of respect des fonds is missing entirely. I understand that the application of the principle is being critically examined, but it is what distinguishes archives from libraries. I would also suggest that the other principle of original order be addressed in some way. I know that OO is also being re-examined, but to the extent that it exists, it is evidence of the context of the records, and shouldn't be disrupted. As these principles stand, there is nothing the counsels an archivist not to rearrange the whole thing by subject (or even merge all the repository holdings into one big subject file).

Principle 5 is somewhat confused. First of all, the commentary does not clearly match the main statement. Secondly, the commentary tries to accommodate two conflicting ideas. It talks first about the need for flexibility, but then goes on to note the benefit of standardization. It doesn't give any guidance on where the boundary of the standard is. If the standard permits infinite flexibility, it isn't a standard.

Thank you for getting in touch, and don't hesitate to contact me if you have questions.

Regards,

Jean

[Quoted text hidden]

[NYDAWG] NY Digital Archivists Working Group
c/o 131 Huron Street, #2R
Brooklyn, NY 11222

July 1, 2017

To Whom It May Concern:

Thank you for your hard work in proposing the revised Principles for DACS. We truly appreciate the time and effort you expended creating a forward-looking framework. We understand, of course, there were significant challenges associated with this project, but we are compelled to offer our perspective. The 32-page googledocs feedback form with 140 questions is overly burdensome, so we are simply sending you this letter instead.

On behalf of NY Digital Archivists Working Group [NYDAWG] and our 135 professional archivist members, we have identified a number of issues with the proposed revisions. Some of our concerns may be due to the fact that there is no introduction or glossary defining terms, but we wanted also to address some of these larger issues directly.

- Our Principles are not a product, so we should not accept a “Minimally Viable Product.” They cannot focus solely on description and ignore arrangement and the principles of respect des fonds, provenance, original order and chain of custody. While some argue these terms are outdated, archivists must be able to prove authenticity based on assessments of origins, completeness and integrity of the collections.
- Records are created originally to serve the needs of their primary users. Later in their life cycle, they provide information for secondary and tertiary users. Archivists may never know who future users will be, or how records may be used or misused, or where information will be interpreted, re-interpreted or recontextualized. How can we focus on serving user needs without knowing what users (will) need?
- The revised Principles use terms like “agents” and “events” without reference to definitions. We tried to find those terms within the voluminous committee-generated documentation, but were overwhelmed and defeated by the task of locating the working documents.

Why should our principles use an unfamiliar, uncontrolled vocabulary while ignoring terms like functions and activities that continue to define the purpose of records? Shall we just assume, without context, that these terms merit a re-evaluation of our methodologies?

Arrangement is key to description because description reflects arrangement. In the digital era, archivists cannot responsibly (or ethically) expect that arrangement is useless. We cannot ignore or “disrespect” des fonds and have faith that smart algorithms will find the appropriate records in their proper context. Though original order may not be the only answer, archivists should be aware of the records’ provenance, origins and functions, how they were organized (topical, chron, or alpha), and of the users or creators that generated the records.

In the digital age, obviously, multiple provenances exist. Records may be used by different stakeholders to serve different functions at the same time. In our opinion though, short-sighted decisions mixed with insufficient minimal description and inconsistent workflows, will lead to inadequate care and mismanagement. As a consequence, records of enduring value may be lost, information may be misinterpreted, and lessons will not be learned.

There is an obvious bias in our profession towards archivists who work in colleges, universities and governmental agencies. Because these institutions are required to provide open access, the Principles proposed are best suited for repositories in public institutions and higher education.

But we need high-quality, long-standing Principles for our profession that are not tied to solving today’s most pressing concerns. As presently expressed, the proposed Principles are confusing and chaotic and disrespect our traditional archival principles. This helps devalue our work.

We ask you to revise the proposed Principles. Please consider opening the process up to encourage others with different professional experiences to participate. Let’s not settle for minimal viability! NYDAWG has drafted a more detailed response to your proposed principles, which can be provided upon request, but not prior to the July 1 deadline.

Best wishes,

[NYDAWG]
NY Digital Archivists Working Group

Response to Revised DACS Principles

Provided by the *DACS Working Group*
at the National Archives and Records Administration

2. Users are the fundamental reason for archival description.

What idea in this principle do you think work well?

Archives exist to be used.

What ideas in this principle are unclear, or do you possibly disagree with?

This principle seems to assume that users are only external.

Is there anything you'd like to add?

An understanding that Users should include both external and internal users.

3. Archival description must be clear about what archivists know, what they don't know, and how they know it.

What ideas in this principle are unclear, or do you possibly disagree with?

We would like clarification on how much we need to demonstrate what we know or don't know about the records, and how we should do that. Should we include a disclaimer with each description indicating the limitations of our knowledge?

4. Records, agents, events, and the relationships between them are the four fundamental concepts that constitute archival description.

What ideas in this principle are unclear, or do you possibly disagree with?

Describing the relationship between records, agents, and events may be among the information that is unknown to the archivists. Considering this, how can principle 4 be reconciled with principle 3 above?

Also, it is unclear as to who "agents" might be? Creators? Individuals in the records?

7. Archivists must have a user-driven reason to enhance existing archival description.

What idea in this principle do you think work well?

Makes sense to prioritize the needs of the User.

What ideas in this principle are unclear, or do you possibly disagree with?

We feel that it should be more clearly stated that choosing to add more information to descriptions should continue be user-driven. We'd like to propose that the final sentence for this principle read, "This choice must be based on demonstrated or anticipated user needs, and then the goals of the repository."

10. Archivists must document and make discoverable the actions they take on records.

What ideas in this principle are unclear, or do you possibly disagree with?

We'd like clarifications on actions that need to be recorded in the course of archival work. How minor or major of actions are we supposed to capture and document, and where? e.g. if we refolder a single folder - do we describe that action?

11. Archival description is a continuous intellectual endeavor.

What ideas in this principle are unclear, or do you possibly disagree with?

While we do agree with "Archival description is a continuous intellectual endeavor," we disagree with, "Description must be iterative." Ensuring that descriptions meet user needs is important, but by the same token, ensuring each description has the most up-to-date information is impractical.

1. Archival description expresses professional ethics and values.

Professional ethics and values drive archival work, including descriptive practice. Archival description is an iterative, ethical practice that requires continual engagement with core values. Rooting standards in values helps archivists enact these values consistently and makes them explicit to our user communities.

Ethical description:

- produces trust in and between users, archivists, and repositories
- encourages a diverse archival record
- promotes responsible and responsive descriptive practices
- holds archivists accountable to users and to each other
- privileges equitable access and accessibility

2. Users are the fundamental reason for archival description.

Archives exist to be used. Archivists make descriptive choices that impact users. Archivists must have an awareness of how users find, identify, select, and use the records in order to produce effective description.

3. Archival description must be clear about what archivists know, what they don't know, and how they know it.

Archivists must always provide honest description. Honest description mitigates human bias and limitations by requiring that archivists cite their sources of knowledge. This builds a culture of accountability and trust.

Honest description:

- delineates the limitations of archivists' knowledge and authority
- acknowledges that archivists are people, and people are biased
- acknowledges archivists' expertise in records, recordkeeping systems and documentary forms

4. Records, agents, events, and the relationships between them are the four fundamental concepts that constitute archival description.

Meaning in archival records is revealed through their contexts as much as through their contents. Archivists expose contextual significance by describing records, agents, events, and the relationships between them.

- **Records must be described in aggregate and may be described in parts.**

The whole gives meaning and coherence to the parts. Description of the aggregate is therefore an indispensable component of establishing context and must be provided before proceeding with the description of component parts.

- **The relationships among records, agents, and events are essential to understanding archives and must be described.**

Relationships, which connect agents, records, and events, convey meaning that may not be apparent from the contents of records alone. Relationships may be simple or may comprise a complex network of interactions among multiple records, agents, and events.

- **Record creators and other agents must be described sufficiently to fully understand the meaning of records.**

Agents act on records or interact with other agents across time. Agents may be human or machine.

A category of agents, those responsible for the creation, compilation, and maintenance of records, is particularly important and must be described. Describing these agents requires archivists to document agents' roles, functions, occupations, and activities.

Archivists must be transparent about the sources of their description and recognize that agents have the right to define their identities, which may change over time.

- **Events that are essential to understanding records must be described.**

Events, whether biographical, historical, or administrative, provide important contextual information. Describing biographical and historical events adds information that may be absent from the records themselves. Describing

administrative events helps users understand how the records were affected over time by the actions of various agents following their creation.

5. Archival description privileges intellectual content in context. Descriptive rules apply equally to all records, regardless of format or carrier type.

Descriptive standards must recognize that not all cultures and communities document in the same ways, and our descriptive standards must be flexible enough to accommodate all the ways that human experience is recorded.

Archivists must adapt and respond to changing recordkeeping practices and technologies. Applying a common set of descriptive rules allows archivists to create consistent descriptions. It encourages confidence in professional judgment and gives archivists the flexibility to apply standards judiciously and thoughtfully.

Consistent description across formats:

- supports universal description and access
- lowers cognitive load for users
- maintains records' contexts as well as intellectual content

6. Each collection within a repository must have an archival description.

The absence of archival description is a barrier to users and good stewardship. In order to access archival collections, users must know which collections a repository holds. No matter how basic a description may be, it is more advantageous to users than no description at all.

Creating these archival descriptions helps archivists meet stewardship needs. This results in:

- access to a better, broader sense of the scope of our holdings
- the ability for archivists to gather information about how collections are used
- guidance for future appraisal and acquisition choices

It is incumbent upon repositories to deploy their resources in a way that permits them to describe all of their collections as part of their normal business operations.

7. Archivists must have a user-driven reason to enhance existing archival description.

When deciding how comprehensively to describe a collection, the goal should be to maximize the availability of all collection materials to users.

Once all collections in a repository have been described at a minimum level, archivists may choose to add more description. This choice must be based on demonstrated user needs or the goals of the repository.

8. Archival description should be easy to use, re-use, and share.

Archival description is an archivist's primary intellectual output. It is valuable, often resource-intensive, and is a form of data. Archival description consists of discrete data elements that can be expressed in a variety of useful outputs.

Users are best able to use, re-use and share archival description when:

- it is discoverable
- it is structured
- it is machine-readable
- it is machine-actionable
- it is available under an open license

Archivists must understand the ways that their data can be consumed by a broad range of users, including people and machines.

9. Archival description is accessible and intelligible.

Users of archives encounter barriers to accessing archival description that may be physical, technological, linguistic or geographic. Archivists limit or remove these barriers to finding and interacting with description.

Accessible archival description engages creators and communities being documented to reflect their complexity, nuance, and fluidity. It builds trust between archives and those being documented.

10. Archivists must document and make discoverable the actions they take on records.

Archivists and archival repositories are agents whose actions affect records and the ways that all users can access and interact with those records.

Archivists have an obligation based in professional values of accountability and responsible custody to thoroughly and transparently describe their own interventions in the course of their work. These interventions may potentially affect users' understandings of records and are an essential part of archival description.

11. Archival description is a continuous intellectual endeavor.

12. Description must be iterative. It continually reflects deeper understandings of agents, records, events, and the relationships between them. It is responsive to users. It is flexible, reflecting changes in knowledge, practice, and values.

TS DACS Revised Principles Discussion, 6/20/2017

Principle 1

- Can you think of scenarios where having this principle would help users?
 - In cases of controversial items, ethics and values mandate that we apply the same level and type of description
 - Could link from Principle 1 to SAA's code of ethics to clarify what we mean by "values and ethics"
 - Users are often unaware that we even have "values and ethics" as archivists
 - Iteration encourages us to consistently review our descriptive notes to make changes that may reflect contemporary sensibilities
- Would this change how we currently do archival description?
 - It would help with transparency
 - The biggest change would be clarifying and communicating what decisions we made during processing
 - How to fit this all in with restrictions on our time?
 - DACS should be viewed more as the ideal to aspire to
 - This would help us communicate the custodial history/provenance of some of our collections, especially those for which such history/provenance is murky

Principle 2

- How would this change how we work?
 - Can help remind us that users should take precedence over exactness and perfection of description; although remember that archivists are also users, so following standards remains critically important
 - This marks a shift in current users' expectations that they should be able to access records online at a deeper level – a less mediated/more democratized way of accessing or understanding records
 - The interconnectedness of series/records might not be as relevant as it once was in light of how users can now search digitally – users may not care as much about hierarchies
 - We describe for ourselves sometimes in ways that create inadvertent barriers for users
 - Who exactly is the user? How to define that? Short-term vs long-term? How to balance simplicity with sophistication of description?
 - Agency/biographical notes can be shortened to allow more time for actual descriptions of the records

Principle 3

- Honest description is great, but also an impossible ideal in other respects
- Levels of description, particularly bio notes, can be based on how unique a particular collection/subject is (are we the only ones who have this information?)

Principle 4

- Is taking shortcuts in description jeopardizing context? (as with bio notes?)
- It's our job to understand if there is more context available elsewhere; if there is, we can point to it, if not it's up to us to communicate and clarify that context
- Decisions as to what should be omitted or described can be difficult; how to determine what will be truly important or valuable long-term?
 - Impossible to know; the best approach is to make sure that the decisions are documented

- o Adding disclaimers, notes, especially when materials are discarded for ethical reasons, communicating that those materials had previously existed
- What could change w/ our own records
 - o Be better at linking among records to highlight relationships amongst collections
 - o ArchivesSpace will really improve our capacity to highlight relationships and link to/from collections
- Not entirely clear what is meant by transparency about sources of description
 - o This might mean that we should be clear about pointing out that descriptive notes, terminology, folder headings, etc. are created in a particular context in a particular time
- “Administrative events” – what exactly does this mean? Does this include administrative events carried out by archivists on the records? Or just before they come to a repository?
 - o Shouldn't Principle 10 immediately follow Principle 4, if you're going to create that separation?

Principle 5

- “Accommodate all the ways that human experience is recorded”
 - o This sounds incredibly daunting. As it's stated here, it sets an unreasonable expectation
 - Indicates that we should all possess a universal level of cultural competency?
 - o But we should acknowledge that there is more than one way to describe knowledge
- Maybe the order of the principles should reflect how practical/feasible each principle is? Like the NDSA levels of preservation?
- “Lowers cognitive load” nicely captures what we're trying to do

Principle 6

- Putting out rough inventories is important to facilitate access, but if we can't actually find things in the boxes when requested, it makes us look like bad stewards
 - o Intellectual control is important in order to mitigate that risk
- A basic description/minimal description should include a set of elements (DACS minimum descriptive elements, for instance), rather than just a title and inventory
- This principle is really getting at MPLP as a routine standard, and that further description should really be driven by user needs
 - o Minimum standard elements would help archivists as users, in addition to the average user
- There is an ethical obligation to provide basic description for collections received from donors, as donors have that expectation when they convey collections
 - o At the same time, the better the description, the more use will result
- If we happen to authoritatively know that a collection is important, we can move forward with more in-depth description