



The American Archivist Reviews

Date posted: June 10, 2015

<http://www.archivists.org/american-archivist-reviews>

ArchivesSpace

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When I was hired as the Minnesota Military Museum's first professional archivist, I needed to provide better access to records as they were processed. The museum became an ArchivesSpace member in November 2013, and I started using it to create finding aids in August 2014. There are several aspects of the program that I do not have personal experience with, such as importing legacy finding aids. To find out more about these processes, and to provide an opportunity for other archivists to give feedback about the program, I created an eight-question survey and invited members of the ArchivesSpace member listserv to participate. The survey was available for approximately two weeks, and I received completed surveys from a total of 35 respondents.¹ This review will explore ArchivesSpace's infrastructure and responses from current users.

ArchivesSpace is open source, meaning it is freely available for download, and the source code is open to alterations and enhancements.² One of the most common ways to make modifications is through the development of plug-ins to make the program fit specific institutional needs. Purchasing a membership with ArchivesSpace is not required for use, but provides access to assistance and documentation. The fee structure for non-academic archives is based on the number of full-time archivists working for the archives, while the academic archives fee structure is based on the size of the institution as defined by the JSTOR and Artstor classification systems.³ Archives that have a dedicated web server and onsite IT support can deploy ArchivesSpace on their own servers, but archives without onsite support may find it more efficient to partner with dedicated hosting sites such as LYRASIS or LibraryHost.

ArchivesSpace allows archivists to create records of accessioned collections. When creating an accession record, there is flexibility in the level of detail that an archivist can enter into the program's fields. In the provenance field an archivist can explain by whom or how a collection was acquired. Using the condition description field, an archivist can note any potential condition concerns, such as born digital media or old movie film that are a part of the collection. Through the "Spawn" functionality, ArchivesSpace creates a resource record, essentially a preliminary finding aid, from the accession record by transferring some of the fields in the accession record into notes and other fields, making it simpler and easier to create a basic description for a collection.

¹ Analysis of the survey was made by tallying responses.

² Opensource.com, "What is Open Source?," <http://opensource.com/resources/what-open-source> (accessed February 8, 2015)

³ ArchivesSpace, "ArchivesSpace Membership," <http://www.archivesspace.org/membership> (accessed February 8, 2015)

At first glance, ArchivesSpace’s resource record may seem a little overwhelming, but after setting up some institutional practices for implementing DACS rules in ArchivesSpace, the input process becomes much clearer. Before a resource record can be saved, the program requires certain DACS single level elements to be created, such as title, identifier, extents, and date. When expanding the level of detail of a collection’s description, these DACS elements will rely on ArchivesSpace’s “Notes” field (Figure 1).

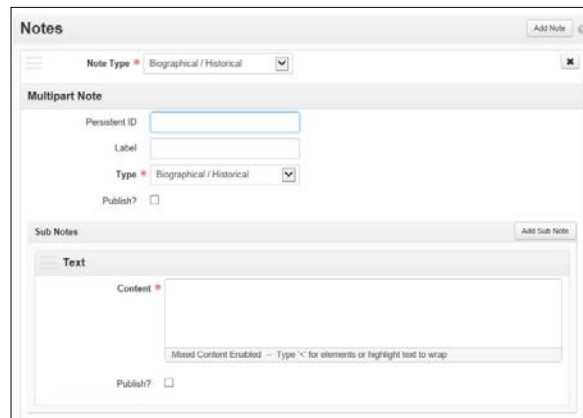


Figure 1: ArchivesSpace Notes Type List

Useful features in ArchivesSpace include agent records, which enable authority control and allow archivists to link related people, families, corporate entities, and software to each other as well as related accession, resource, and digital object records, granting archivists the flexibility to customize finding aids to meet their specific requirements. For repositories where multiple archivists could access a record, ArchivesSpace generates an alert informing users that they are working on the same record as another user to avoid collisions. And in early 2014, the ArchivesSpace developers released a migration tool for Archon and Archivists’ Toolkit, simplifying the process of converting finding aids to the new program. However, regarding the effectiveness of these migration tools, a majority of survey respondents reported occasional problems during the migration process because some of the sections used in ArchivesSpace were not generating properly. This has required institutions to develop local workarounds.

ArchivesSpace is relatively new, and has several opportunities for growth to help meet the demands of its users. One of the areas that I am most interested in, and received the strongest response from survey participants, was the public interface. When a user chooses to browse the collections from the main navigation menu, they are presented with an alphabetical list of all published collections. This method requires the user to move from one page to the next until the desired collection appears. It is possible to include components of collections when browsing for a collection, but this adds more pages for the user to sort through. When a user selects “Subjects,” a list of the most frequently occurring

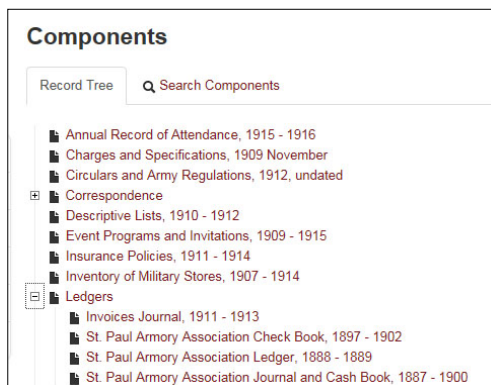


Figure 2: ArchivesSpace Finding Aid

subject headings is listed in descending order. This breakdown may help a researcher estimate the amount of data available in the collection for any given topic, but if a repository has numerous unique subject headings, relevant data may be buried.

Survey respondents also noted concerns about the ArchivesSpace’s user interface, and at least one repository has not implemented the program because of its limited search capabilities, such as the lack of boolean operators. Another aspect of the

public interface that respondents expressed interest in was the collection’s box and folder presentation. Like Archon, ArchivesSpace shows the collections organizational hierarchy, allowing a user to expand and contract the list to show more detailed information on the



Figure 3: Archon Finding Aid

next descriptive level (Figure 2). However, ArchivesSpace displays the resource’s box and folder information only when the hyperlink to the resource is selected, taking the user to a new page. Both Archon and Archivists’ Toolkit display the collection’s box and folder information without opening new pages (Figure 3). Having a more streamlined interface would help users more efficiently locate records.

ArchivesSpace’s open source code will continue to be one of its strengths, as some of the larger archives that were early adopters of the program are starting to create plug-ins to make the program better fit their needs. ArchivesSpace staff recently announced that the Container Management Plug-In created by Yale University will be incorporated into the core programming of ArchivesSpace. This plug-in will bring improvements to how the program treats containers, allowing an archivist to specify the box type, create container profiles, and share boxes across entire collections.⁴ At this time, it appears that ArchivesSpace is focusing on fine-tuning the administrative side of the program. I look forward to seeing future plug-ins and updates that will provide additional features to the program, such as a more refined search capability, or the ability to upload images of digitized records. Many advantages will be gained as more archives adopt ArchivesSpace, such as the collaboration between repositories to take advantage of the flexibility and customizations that will optimize the program for each repository.

⁴ Yale University, “About the ArchivesSpace Container Management Plug-in,” Yale University Library, <http://guides.library.yale.edu/ASpaceContainerManagement> [accessed May 16, 2015].

Appendix Survey Questions

1. What is the name of your Institution?
[open text field]
2. How many full-time archivists are at your institution?*
3. Has your institution adopted ArchivesSpace as the primary solution for creating finding aids and managing your archives?*[YES] [NO]
4. If you answered NO to the question three, what other program is your institution using?
[open text field]
5. How much training did you and your staff receive when implementing ArchiveSpace (in hours per person)?*
[open text field]
6. Did you experience EAD or XML conversion difficulties when implementing ArchivesSpace?*[YES] [NO]
7. How many times in the past year have your reached out to the ArchiveSpace technical support?
[open text field]
8. Any other comments or feedback regarding ArchivesSpace?
[open text field]

* These questions were required to be answered.