

## **Decisions Are Never Easy: Establishing Processing Priorities**

**AMY COOPER CARY and PAM HACKBART-DEAN**

### **Abstract:**

In 1998 the Association of Research Libraries conducted a survey of special collections. The resulting 2003 publication, "Hidden Collections, Scholarly Barriers: Creating Access to Unprocessed Special Collections Materials In North America's Research Libraries," provided the impetus for a renewed discussion about the fundamental problems of backlogs and encouraged archivists to find innovative solutions to providing access in a timely manner. Since then, there have been numerous conference presentations and articles related to strategies for increasing productivity of unprocessed collections. Survey tools offering criteria to prioritize the processing of backlogged collections has been developed through numerous grant funded projects, such as the Council on Library and Information Resources. Additionally, there are specific backlog processing projects reporting on the efficiency of this advice.

Additional review of archival literature indicates the establishment of processing priorities includes -- but goes well beyond -- the gathering of basic information about the size, scope and contents of the collection. It typically requires the surveyors to assess the state of its arrangement (by determining the ease with which material in the collection can be located), evaluate its discoverability (by identifying existing descriptive information) and estimating its research value for present and future users (by using some type of rating scale).

We sought to learn if archivists are currently developing processing priorities and, if so, what metrics are currently being engaged to determine the establishment of overall processing priorities. This was done with a literature review, survey and analysis of the survey results. The survey took place May 10, 2017 through June 19, 2017, and was publicized to the archival community via several listservs as well as on group Facebook boards. In all, there were 312 respondents. After analyzing the survey results, the authors will conduct discussion forums to gather further information.

### **About the Authors:**

*Amy Cooper Cary* received her MSI with a specialization in Archives and Records Management from the University of Michigan. She has served as archivist and special collections librarian at the University of South Dakota, assistant head of special collections at the University of Iowa, and as director of the archival studies program at the University of Wisconsin Milwaukee's School of Information Studies, where she spent seven years directing the program and teaching. In 2012 she became head of special collections and university archives at Marquette University. She has served in multiple capacities in both the Society of American Archivists and the Midwest Archives Conference. She currently serves as a member on the Society of American Archivists Council. Her most recent publication is a chapter on archival collecting policies,

co-authored with colleagues and published in ACRL's *Collaborating for Impact: Special Collections and Liaison Librarian Partnerships*.

***Pam Hackbart-Dean*** has been Director of the Special Collections Research Center at Southern Illinois University Carbondale since 2006. Previously she was head of Special Collections & Archives at Georgia State University. From 1990 to 2000, she was the processing archivist for the Richard B. Russell Library for Political Research and Study at the University of Georgia. Hackbart-Dean has been active in many professional archival organizations, including the Academy of Certified Archivists, the Midwest Archives Conference, the Society of Georgia Archivists and the Society of American Archivists. She currently serves as a member on the Society of American Archivists Council. Hackbart-Dean received her MA in history from the University of Connecticut with a certificate in archival management. She has conducted a number of workshops on arrangement and description, as well as published a book and several articles on the subject.