

Centering Users: Developing a Community of Practice for User Experience & Archival Description

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Archivists have long sought to center users in our work, including our descriptive practices and choices, but there has never been a professional community of practice that supports or advocates for the user experience work necessary to truly understand our users' needs. This has become all the more critical as the archival field has turned its collective attention to reparative and inclusive descriptive projects. This work is often done without fully understanding the impact legacy and new description might have on users, particularly those from underrepresented communities.

In addressing equity, diversity, inclusion and social justice (EDISJ) as a core value for archives and archivists we would like the opportunity to speak about these issues and have an open dialogue with fellow archivists across the profession about user experience initiatives that archivists have conducted at their institutions or are interested in doing. The goal of this presentation is to bring attention to the importance of user experience work around archival description and to begin bringing together a community of practice focused on usability.

We as prospective panelists recognize our positionality as white staff at predominantly white and well-resourced institutions. We will approach any discussion generated by this panel and its participants with cultural humility and an eye towards scalability. User experience testing is truly effective when it can be done by a diverse set of archivists with varying backgrounds and from various institutions.

About the authors:

Faith Charlton is the Lead Processing Archivist for Manuscripts Division Collections at Princeton University Library. She is interested in the intersection between history, memory, and archives, and what is purposefully or inadvertently forgotten, ignored, or repressed in the historical record. She seeks to provide user-centered discovery of and access to archival records, especially those documenting underrepresented voices. Faith is a certified archivist and a graduate of Drexel University (MLIS), Villanova University (MA), and The College of New Jersey (BA). She is a white cis-woman.

Zoë Hill is a Public Services Assistant at Houghton Library, Harvard University. She strongly believes that special collections should be a place where everyone feels welcome and can fully engage with collections. She is interested in how user-testing and research will not only impact archival description practices but public facing roles as well. She is a graduate of Simmons College (MLIS, MA) and the University of Minnesota- Twin Cities (BA). She is a queer, white cis-woman.

Betts Coup is the Interim Manuscript Section Head at Houghton Library, Harvard University. She feels strongly that users should be at the center of our descriptive work, but to do this, archivists have the responsibility to research and assess not just our discovery systems but also

multi-level description, and published a paper in 2021 focusing on this topic entitled “The Value of a Note: a Finding Aid Usability Study.” She feels it is critical to better understand how users interact with and are impacted by the content of archival description specifically in order to ensure we are doing our duty to equitably and conscientiously describe our materials. Betts is a graduate of Simmons University (MLIS), New York University (MA), and Carleton College (BA). She is a white cis-woman.

Alison Clemens is Yale University Library (YUL)’s special collections Access Strategist. In this inaugural role, she will identify and implement strategies to provide seamless, meaningful, and just access to YUL’s special collections. She was previously the Head of Processing in YUL’s Manuscripts & Archives (MSSA), where she managed MSSA’s accessioning and processing program; taught instruction sessions on accessing and interpreting primary source material; and provided reference support. Alison is a graduate of the University of Texas at Austin’s School of Information (MSIS) and Scripps College (BA). She is a white person.