

Decisions Are Never Easy: Establishing Processing Priorities

Abstract

Objective—After exploring the development of numerous grant funded collection assessment surveys to assist in prioritizing the processing of backlogged collections, this study seeks to identify a comprehensive, integrated strategy to better establish and maintain processing priorities within special collections & archives repositories.

The 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. Survey tools offering criteria to prioritize the processing of backlogged collections have been developed through numerous grant funded projects. We intend to determine whether archivists are using these tools and changing changing processing practices and policies.

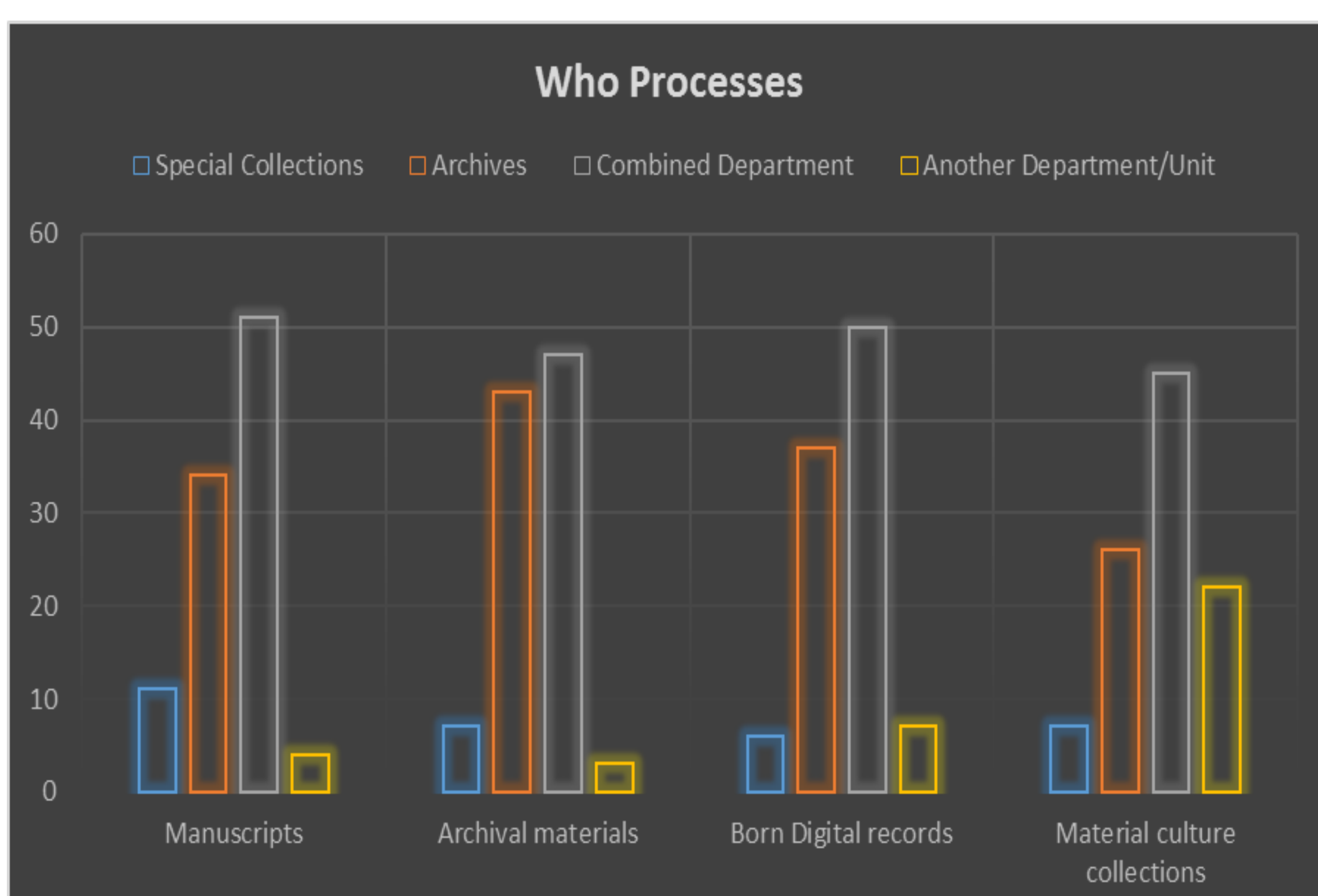
Methods

To gauge the reaction of the archival profession to establishing and maintaining processing priorities, we issued a 29-question survey. The survey focused primarily on who establishes processing priorities, what information is gathered, what impacts decisions, and on barriers on to establishing and maintaining this practice. We created a Web site for the survey and distributed the link to national and regional archival listservs. The survey was open for four weeks, and we received 312 usable responses.

Results

Who processes your collections, whether manuscripts, archival materials, born digital materials or material culture collections?

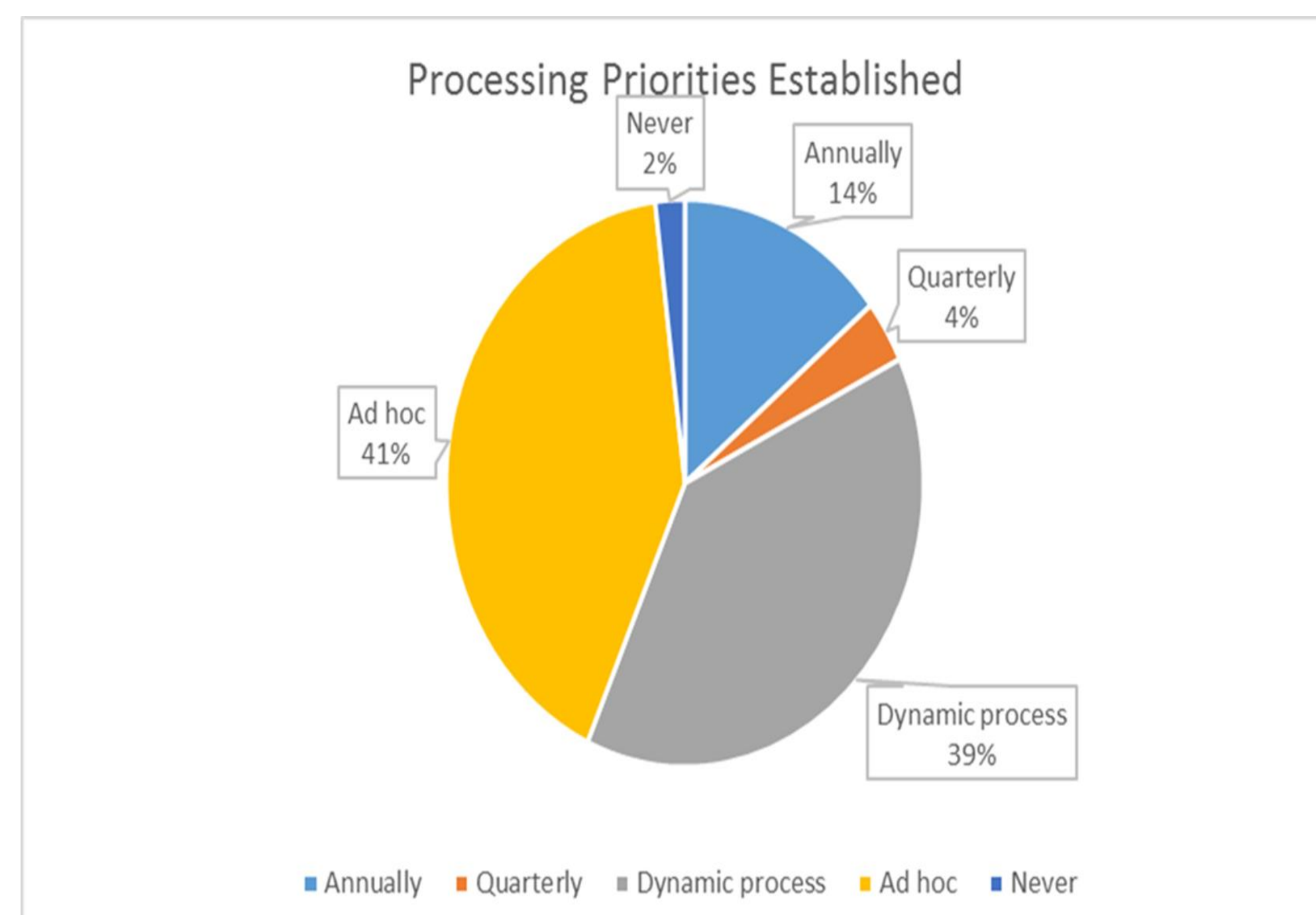
92% of the respondents stated that processing was a combined effort between archives and special collections. The survey yielded a number of references to museums, especially as relating to the processing of material culture collections.



Results

When are your processing priorities determined?

80.3% of the respondents determine their processing priorities as part of the accessioning workflow and/or when “demanded” by researchers or donors.

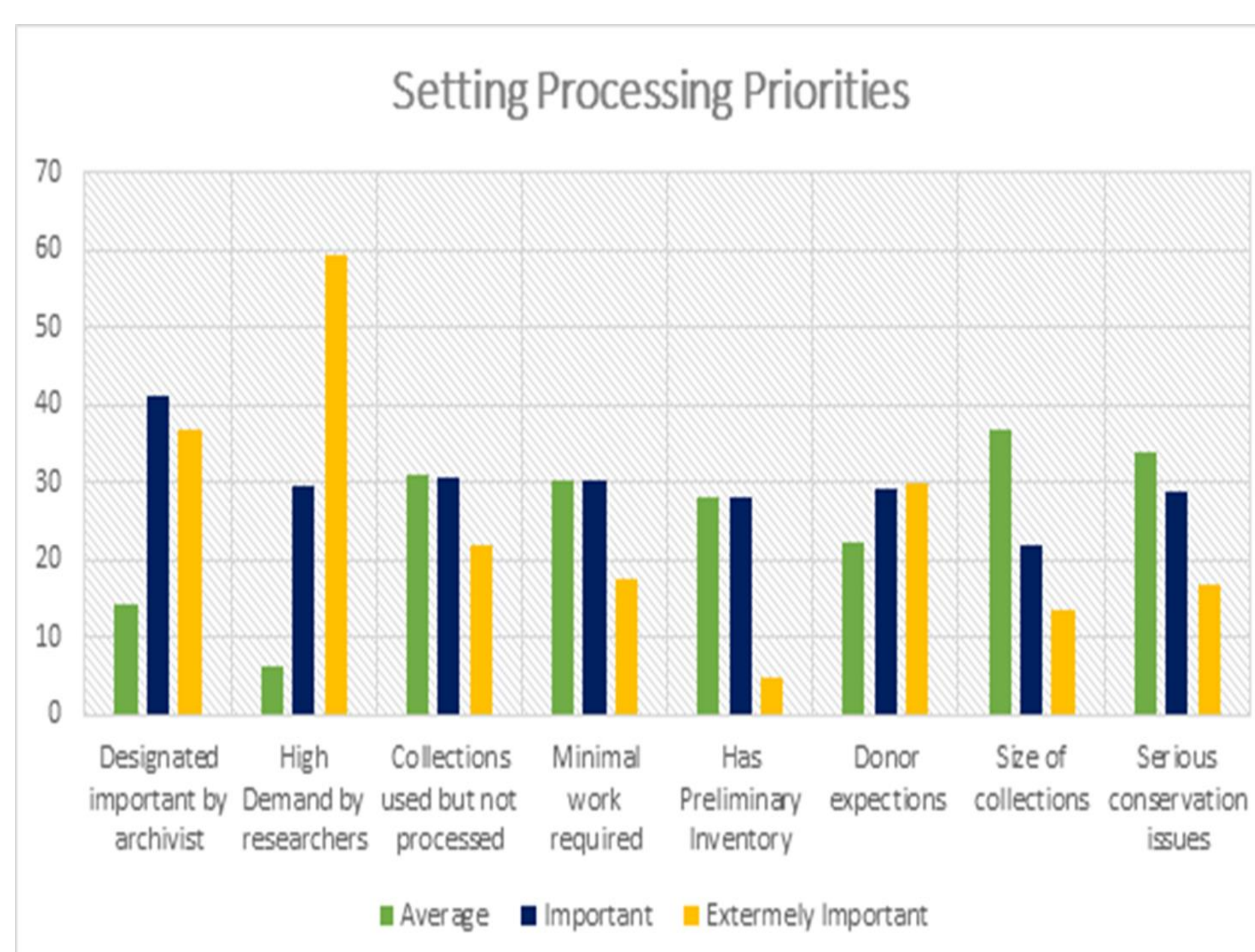


What types of information do you gather and review prior to assigning processing priorities?

Research value, donor influence and preservation issues rank the highest in this area. Size of collection, use statistics, reproduction requests, length of time in repository backlog, intrinsic value, pre-existing arrangement and description, privacy issues/significant restrictions, and patron input were also highlighted as types of information gathered and reviewed when assigning priorities for unprocessed or under-processed collections.

When setting priorities, what are the most important factors to consider?

The survey suggests that the factor considered most important in setting priorities for processing was high demand by researchers. The second highest ranked factor was whether the collection was designated important by archivists or other staff.



Results (Continued)

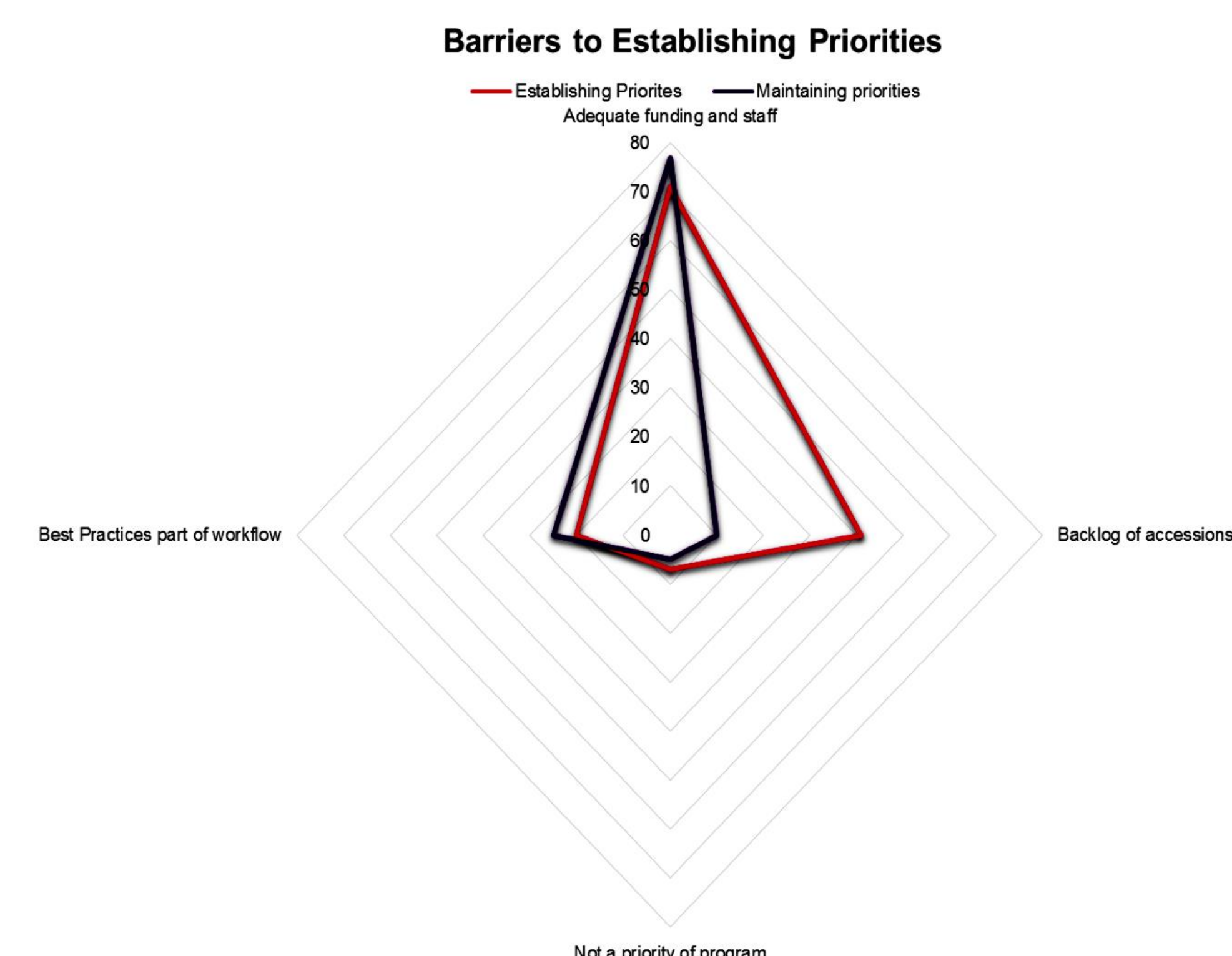
A collections assessment serves as a useful tool for planning, informing, and guiding priorities for collections processing. Which, if any, of the following assessment tools have you used?

Of the 20% that do assessment, some of the tools that have been used include PACSCL or adaption of tools, as well as content management systems such as Archival Toolkit or Trello.

80% of the respondents indicated that their institution has **NOT** used an assessment tool, such as PACSCL, Columbia University Preservation Survey tool, etc.

What are the significant barriers to establishing and maintaining processing priorities?

The main barriers for archives, regardless of size or institution type, continued to be the same for all parts of the processing workflow – planning priorities, maintaining prioritization, reference and outreach programming, instruction and collection development: **Budget and staffing**.



Conclusions

- Developing and maintaining processing priorities is a fundamental piece of archival practice should be done as a regular part of an institution’s workflow.
- Both establishing and maintaining processing priorities seem to be done on an ad hoc basis
- In general, research value of a collection drives its ranking in what we process first; however, it does not appear that we are actively seeking advice from scholars and researchers in the discussion.
- Lack of adequate staffing and budget, a significant backlog, lack of infrastructure and lack of research data seem to be the main challenges in developing and maintaining processing priorities in archives, special collections and other historic cultural institutions.

Next Steps

We will engage focus group discussions related to: the barriers, access to unprocessed collections, and how do we develop a more proactive administration of processing our collections. If you are interested in being a part of a focus group, please contact either one of the presenters:

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