

Guidelines for Standardized Holdings Counts and Measures for Archival Repositories and Special Collections Libraries

Introduction

Archivists and special collections librarians are becoming increasingly mindful of the need to gather, analyze, and share evidence concerning the value of the collections we hold, the effectiveness of the operations we manage, and the impact of the services we provide. The absence of commonly accepted definitions, metrics, guidelines, and best practices, however, has impeded our ability to undertake meaningful assessment activities and to engage in productive, cross-repository conversations about our collections, operations, and services.

In recognition of this two-pronged challenge, SAA and ACRL/RBMS jointly constituted a task force and charged it with developing guidelines that will provide metrics, definitions, and best practices for quantifying the holdings of archival repositories and special collections libraries. The guidelines to be developed should consider and address both the wide range of types and formats of material typically held and the different ways collection material is described and managed. The guidelines should also accommodate both basic and advanced counts or measures, and include recommendations for institutions that wish to engage in collections assessment. With this charge in mind, we took the following approach to our work.

We identified eight categories or types of collection material for which we would develop guidelines for quantifying holdings.

- Archives and Manuscripts (described and managed as collections)
- Manuscripts (described and managed as items)
- Books and Other Printed Material
- Cartographic Material
- Graphic/Visual Material
- Moving Image Material
- Objects/Artifacts
- Sound Recordings

We articulated three types of counts or measures that are appropriate for and relevant to the quantification of holdings information.

- Intellectual Units Held (titles or title-equivalents)
- Physical Units Held (volumes, sheets, audio cassettes, film reels, etc.)
- Space Occupied (linear feet, cubic feet, or gigabytes)

We considered the need to distinguish the following:

- Material described and managed at the collection level from material described and managed at the item level.
- Material that is described online and therefore discoverable from material that is not [yet] described online or discoverable.

We then turned our attention to that aspect of our charge that calls for us to articulate an approach to the quantification of holdings that would accommodate both basic and advanced counts or measures. What follows are our recommendations regarding a basic or “Level 1” count.

The Level 1 Count

The Task Force is proposing a Level 1 count that consists of the following counts and measures:

- Titles/title equivalents representing collection material described and managed at the collection level that is described online/discoverable, by category/type of material.
- Titles/title equivalents representing collection material described and managed at the item level that is described online/discoverable, by category/type of material.
- Physical space occupied by collection material that is described online/discoverable, by category/type of material, in cubic or linear feet as appropriate.
- Digital space occupied by collection material that is described online/discoverable, by category/type of material, in gigabytes.

The above can be summarized as follows.

1. Count intellectual units held. When counting intellectual units held

- count only collection material that is described online (in a catalog record or finding aid, or by way of a website) and therefore discoverable.
- distinguish collection material that is described and managed at the item level from collection material that is described and managed at the collection level.

2. Measure space occupied. When measuring space occupied

- measure only space occupied by collection material that is described online and therefore discoverable.
- distinguish between physical space occupied and digital space occupied.

We would like to draw your attention in particular to the following regarding the proposed Level 1 count.

Collection material that is not described online is not counted. "Described online," however, is intended to be interpreted very broadly as "any description of collection material that can be discovered by way of the web." As such, "described online" extends well beyond catalog records and finding aids to include a wide range of web content (blog posts, online exhibits, databases, lists of collections, etc.) as well as web-accessible content (documents, spreadsheets, etc.).

Physical units held (volumes, sheets, audio cassettes, film reels, etc.) are not counted, nor are the containers (boxes, drawers, etc.) in which collection material is held. A container count may be useful -- and used -- for purposes of calculating cubic or linear feet.

Please also note the following regarding space occupied.

- Collection material occupies physical space or digital space (not both).
- Physical space occupied is
 - reported in cubic feet for all categories of material except Books and Other Printed Material.
 - reported in linear feet for Books and Other Printed Material (only).
- Digital space occupied is reported in gigabytes.
- Convert linear feet to cubic feet and cubic feet to linear feet as necessary for reporting purposes.

More About the Level 1 Count

We are not recommending any methods or even best practices regarding the “hows” of counting or measuring. Our focus has been on developing and promoting a common language for sharing information about holdings rather than on prescribing a methodology for obtaining that information. We have striven to accommodate the wide variety of repositories and libraries that make up the SAA and RBMS memberships, and to account for the many differences among them, especially those having to do with local practices (for accessioning, describing, and managing collection material); available resources (for counting, measuring, generating reports, etc.); and existing systems and sources of information (including integrated library systems, content management systems, databases, and archival collection management systems).

A variety of methods exist for obtaining the counts and measures that are called for in the Level 1 count. These include

- generating a report (from a catalog, database, archival collection management system, etc.)
- doing an actual/physical count/inventory (of containers, volumes, items, etc.)
- getting an actual/physical measurement (of floor, shelf, online, etc. space occupied)
- tracking and tallying (accretions, additions, deaccessions, withdrawals, etc.)

Finally, we are proposing the following regarding surrogates, derivatives, and titles held in multiple copies.

- Surrogates and derivatives (digitized or microfilmed content, photocopies, access copies, etc.) of intellectual units held are not counted.
- Decisions regarding titles held in multiple copies are to be made at the discretion of the reporting institution. If it is preferable (because each copy held is considered unique or important for some reason) and/or practical or convenient (because of how the copies are described), the holding institution can report each copy held as a separate title.

Looking Ahead to a Level 2 Count

Our current thinking is that the Level 2 count will complement and expand upon the Level 1 count by including the following:

- Counts and measures for collection material that is not yet described online.
- Counts of physical units held (volumes, sheets, audio cassettes, film reels, etc.) and of the containers (boxes, drawers, etc.) in which collection material is held.