

Letter to the Editor



We have both admired and benefited from *Archivaria* over the years. We have despaired of US archivists' parochialism because so few subscribed to the authoritative voice of the archival profession in Canada. One of us published an article in *Archivaria* and contributed a letter to the editor some time later. Yet here we find ourselves confronted with a special issue on processing (arrangement and description) and discover that your journal is as parochial as our own. Since 2002, US arrangement and description has undergone something of a revolution, as more and more archivists accept a method that puts researcher access first and pristine processing second.

The method goes by several names: "MPLP," "Greene-Meissner," "minimal processing," "maximal processing." MPLP derives from the title of the original article: Mark A. Greene and Dennis E. Meissner, "More Product, Less Process: Revamping Traditional Archival Processing," *American Archivist* 68, no. 2 (Fall/Winter 2005): 208–63. The article, for which the research was supported by a 2003 NHPRC Archival Research Fellowship, is freely available online at <http://archivists.metapress.com/content/c741823776k65863/fulltext.pdf>. Since its publication, it has spawned a dozen related articles (all but one of them favorable; most were examples of applying the method), at least a dozen sessions at the Society of American Archivists annual conferences, a long-running SAA workshop on how to implement MPLP, innumerable blog posts and tweets, readings in the curriculum of most if not all US graduate archival concentrations, and – perhaps most importantly – a change in the granting programs of the National Historic Publications and Records Commission to favor MPLP-based projects. Yet the several articles in the *Archivaria* special issue completely ignore MPLP (though it is mentioned in a book review).

The best external overview of MPLP to date is Matt Gorzalski, "Minimal Processing: Its Context and Influence in the Archival Community," *Journal of Archival Organization* 6, no. 3 (2008): 186–200. In two paragraphs, MPLP (More Product, Less Process) can be summarized thusly: In approaching the expanding queue of unprocessed archival collections in their custody, many

archivists apply processing (arrangement, conservation, description) techniques that are remarkably insufficient to eliminate their backlogs, procedures that may have been appropriate decades ago but are unsuited to current needs. These traditional approaches (for example, searching for and destroying every paper clip, photocopying every news clipping, and refolding and relabeling every file) are labor intensive; they tend to be applied in ways that are inflexible and dogmatic; and they ignore the real needs of most users, who would generally prefer to see archival materials arranged and described to a less granular level and appear less pristine if, in return, they receive speedier access to many more collections. MPLP argues that all collections in a repository ought to be processed to the collection (fonds) level, then to a series level, before any of them are treated to arrangement and description at some notably more granular level. Significant productivity increases, improved user outcomes, and better relations with donors and other stakeholders will result.

While some archivists erroneously see MPLP as a set of rigid prescriptions repudiating detailed processing (one person going so far as to refer to it as “much ado about paperclips”; see below), it is in fact an approach that stresses flexibility in applying processing procedures, and sensibility and sound management in deploying institutional resources. ***Above all, MPLP focuses on the needs of researchers as the key driver in processing decision-making.*** MPLP articulates an approach to archival processing that is both more efficient and more effective than traditional approaches, one that seeks to preserve scarce program resources by expending them more intentionally and thoughtfully. Surveys of both researchers and reference archivists confirm our hypothesis that MPLP improves user access even though it may require some realignment of resources between processing and reference staffs.

Examples of successful implementation include Donna M. McCrea, “Getting More for Less: Testing a New Processing Model at the University of Montana,” *American Archivist* 69, no. 2 (Fall/Winter 2006): 284–290; Michael Strom, “Texas-Sized Progress: Applying Minimum-Standards Processing Guidelines to the Jim Wright Papers,” *Archival Issues* 29, no. 2 (2005): 105–112; Seattle Municipal Archives, “NHPRC Grant,” *Archives Gazette* 29 (Summer 2009): 2; Anne L. Foster, “Minimum Standards Processing and Photograph Collections,” *Archival Issues* 30, no. 2 (2006): 107–118; Stephanie H. and Karen Spilman, “MPLP @ 5: More Access, Less Backlog?,” *Journal of Archival Organization* 8, no. 2 (2010): 110–133; Northwest Archives Processing Initiative Phase II, NHPRC Grant No. 2002-064 – Whitworth University, *A Consortium Project for Archival Institutions in Alaska, Oregon, and Washington*, a final narrative report submitted to the National Historical Publications and Records Commission for the grant period July 1, 2005–June 30, 2007.

Moreover, MPLP’s principles can and are being applied to other aspects of archives administration. See Mark A. Greene, “MPLP: It’s Not Just for

Processing Anymore,” *American Archivist* 73, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 2010): 175–203; Christine Weideman, “Accessioning as Processing,” *American Archivist* 69, no. 2 (Fall/Winter 2006): 274–283; Jennifer Schaffner, *The Metadata is the Interface: Better Description for Better Discovery of Archives and Special Collections, Synthesized from User Studies*, a report produced by OCLC Research (Dublin, OH, 2009), 9–10, <http://www.oclc.org/programs/publications/reports/2009-06.pdf>; Colleen McFarland, “Rethinking the Business of Small Archives,” *Archival Issues* 31, no. 2 (2007): 137–138; Joshua Ranger, “More Bytes, Less Bite: Cutting Corners in Digitization,” <http://www.archivists.org/conference/sanfrancisco2008/docs/session701-ranger.pdf>; and Gregory P. Johnson, “Quality or Quantity: Can Archivists Apply Minimal Processing to Electronic Records?,” <http://ils.unc.edu/MSpapers/3267.pdf>.

Certainly there has been some objection to MPLP, but it has been scattered and, we believe, overwrought. Examples are: Jeffery S. Suchanek, “More Product, Less Process: One Size Does Not Fit All,” [SAA annual meeting, Austin TX, 2009, www.archivists.org/conference/austin2009/docs/Session501-Suchanek.doc]. More reasoned critiques include Chris Prom, “Optimum Access? Processing in College and University Archives,” *American Archivist* 73, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 2010): 146–74; and Carl Van Ness, “Much Ado about Paper Clips: ‘More Product, Less Process’ and the Modern Manuscript Repository,” *American Archivist* 73, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 2010): 129–45. Our response to such criticism can be found in Dennis Meissner and Mark Greene, “More Application while Less Appreciation: The Adopters and Antagonists of MPLP,” *Journal of Archival Organization* 8, no. 3–4 (2010): 174–226.

Our point in this letter is not that MPLP ought to be unthinkingly embraced by our Canadian colleagues, only that our friends from the north should take some serious and substantial cognizance of a method spreading quickly and generally with success across the US. Love it or hate it, it seems odd to completely ignore it.

Respectfully,

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Dennis E. Meissner, Minnesota Historical Society

The General Editor and the Guest Editor Respond

Thank you for your letter regarding the absence of an article about MPLP from the Fall 2012 issue of *Archivaria*, which focused on arrangement and description. We question your charge of parochialism. An issue that features authors from the UK, the US, and Canada can hardly be called parochial.

It is true that many aspects of archival arrangement and description are not covered (e.g., the ongoing maintenance of standards, arrangement of born-

digital records, as well as the impact of MPLP). However, we were not publishing a comprehensive volume of commissioned essays on archival description; we were publishing a single issue of a journal that can at most include six to eight articles. The content of the issue was drawn from proposals received in response to a call for papers. Of the thirty-seven proposals received, only one dealt with MPLP. As you indicate, MPLP has been widely discussed in the published literature and in other venues, and the proposed paper did not appear to add new insights to an already well-documented discussion. Given the absence of proposals on MPLP, it may be that the community feels the topic has been thoroughly canvassed.

Archivaria always welcomes submissions of thoughtful, scholarly, evidence-based articles that advance our knowledge, and we invite you to fill the perceived gap in addressing this issue.

Jean Dryden, General Editor
Terry Eastwood, Guest Editor