"Where Do I Begin?": An MPLP Approach to the Collection Survey

Ashlyn Velte

ABSTRACT

Common challenges for many archives are limited staffing, competing priorities, and a backlog of unprocessed or minimally processed collections. Existing literature on collection assessment describes surveys that take years to complete. However, gaining intellectual control of collections is an important first step to managing a backlog. In response to the limited resources in most archival contexts, archives have largely embraced the practice of MPLP for processing collections. Can archivists adapt the meeting-minimal-needs approach from MPLP and apply the same strategy to the collection survey? Without very basic metrics, archivists at the University of Colorado Boulder Libraries (CU Boulder Libraries) had difficulty advocating for resources and prioritizing collection needs. This case study reports on the survey tool developed by CU Boulder Libraries Archives to assess collection needs. Archivists developed their survey based on identified goals and simplified fields from collection surveys reported by other institutions. They surveyed 1,847 collections, totaling 33,554.29 linear feet, in about ten months, exceeding the pace set by previous collection surveys. Based on survey results, they intend to prioritize processing collections at higher levels of description, to advocate for additional resources, and to finish migrating legacy collections to ArchivesSpace. They will expand on the initial survey by developing future collection surveys, including a reparative description survey to identify specific processing needs for collections identified as having materials from underrepresented groups. This case study serves as a model for initial surveys for other archivists needing to assess their collections, but who are afraid a survey may take resources away from other priorities.

KEY WORDS

Assessment, Backlogs, Processing, Project management

Archivists know from existing literature that collections surveys are useful tools to assess the needs of collections. However, existing documentation presents the task as a detailed undertaking. Despite work over the last twenty years to identify the processing backlogs of potentially hidden collections, staffing levels at most archives have not increased to address the problem. In fact, most archives administrators reported lack of staffing as their primary challenge, even over financial constraints, in the A*CENSUS II survey conducted in 2022.[1] Responding to the limited staff availability in most archival contexts, archives have largely embraced the practice of More Product, Less Process (MPLP) for processing,[2] understanding that they can return to minimally processed collections for iterative processing. Despite literature on collection surveys and extensible processing that report the flexibility of the collection surveys,[3, 4] few models exist that do not take significant time to complete.

Archivists needing to gain intellectual control over collections may feel torn between beginning to process backlogs or assessing collection needs to use limited processing resources more efficiently. Archivists at the University of Colorado Boulder Libraries (CU Boulder Libraries) faced this challenge. They wondered if a modified MPLP approach could be applied to collections surveys to make the task less time-consuming and overwhelming.

This case study builds on previous archival literature reporting on collection surveys by providing a simplified model for other archives facing limited staffing. It demonstrates that gathering focused, big-picture data about archival collections, with the intention of performing more detailed survey iterations in the future, can be worthwhile for prioritization, advocacy, and planning.

Literature Review

It has been nearly twenty years since archivists began seriously discussing the problem of hidden collections. It has gone from the profession's "dirty little secret"[5] to a well-known fact shared by archivists and researchers alike. This shift in perspective occurred largely due to the funding support from grants and resources addressing the problem, starting in the early 2000s.[6] Archival literature on collection surveys, MPLP, and extensible processing define the current landscape for backlog management and demonstrate the need for models of simplified surveys.

Collection Assessment and Surveys

In a comprehensive report on collection assessment in archival contexts, Martha O'Hara Conway and Merrilee Proffitt define collection assessment as "the systematic, purposeful gathering of information about archival collections. It includes collection surveys of all kinds, including those undertaken for purposes of

appraisal, setting processing and other priorities, conservation decision-making, and collection management."[7] They explain that the first step when managing unprocessed collections is to begin a collection survey with a clear goal in mind.[8] Their report says that often collection assessment aims to determine the needs of "hidden collections," or processing backlogs. Outcomes that result from assessing processing backlogs include establishing processing priorities, assessing condition, and managing collections.[9]

Other reports and research on collection assessment identify the goals of gathering data about collections. In a different report, Conway and Proffitt succinctly explain that "The systematic gathering of quantitative and qualitative data about collections enables institutions to act strategically in meeting user needs, allocating available resources, and securing additional funding."[10] In a research survey on processing metrics collected across institutions, Cyndi Shein, Sarah R. Jones, Tammi Kim, and Karla Irwin found that the three most important ways in which archives use data gathered about their collections are to inform processing priorities, to develop workflows/practices for processing, and to advocate for staff.[11] Wendy Pflug conducted a research survey across institutions about collection assessment and found that most archives conduct surveys not only to uncover hidden collections, as indicated by Conway and Proffitt, but also to gain intellectual control of their collections (78.79% of her respondents), to gain physical control of their collections (69.70%), to identify unprocessed or underprocessed materials or backlogged materials (66.67%), and, less often, to identify collection strengths and opportunities to expand collecting efforts (39.39%).[12]

The first projects funded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and the Council on Libraries and Information Resources (CLIR) beginning in the early 2000s remain the best-documented models for conducting collection surveys. Examining them reveals what was included in the assessment tools and that they tend to be detailed surveys documenting a lot of the information about existing collections. Some of these projects were completed by the Black Metropolis Research Consortium Survey,[13] Columbia University Libraries,[14] the Historical Society of Pennsylvania,[15] and the Philadelphia Area Consortium of Special Collections Libraries (PACSCL).[16] Amy Cooper Cary and Pam Hackbart-Dean conducted a survey across repositories to determine how they assess processing priorities. They compiled a list of past survey projects, many of which were grant-funded, into Appendix C of their study.[17] The tools of these that make documentation available online to the public usually involve assessment worksheets that include various fields covering collection information—such as extent, collection name number, acquisition date, condition of materials, physical access, current level of processing, and desired level of processing.[18] Pam Hackbart-Dean and Elizabeth Slomba in their book *How to Manage Processing in Archives and Special Collections* also provide examples of assessments for the purposes of processing prioritization. Their

examples include qualitative and numerical Lickert scales for "content demand," "physical condition," "staff to process," and "time to process."[19] Pflug's research summarizing collection assessment across multiple institutions explains that the most common fields included in collection surveys are format and location information, extent information, condition of materials, creator and title, subject information, and availability of an unpublished finding aid in that order.[20] Conway and Proffitt in 2011 similarly identified that collection surveys assess condition, arrangement, description, and research value using a combination of quantitative and qualitative fields and data.[21]

These are some of the existing collection assessment tools that archives may turn to for models when developing their own surveys. Many of the fields included here are assessed using Likert-like scales for surveying collection conditions that require detailed information. One example is the PACSCL assessment worksheet that includes a section on the current state of a collection. It asks for a rating between 1 and 5 on one of five different fields.[22] Similarly, the "Guidelines for Efficient Processing in the University of California Libraries" suggests how to assess processing projects, including a collection value score based on a matrix rating using a scale from 1 to 5 evaluating each of four variables.[23] In both cases, these four fields are meant to assess one variable (current state of collection and collection value respectively). Determining the difference in value between each number on the scale requires significant familiarity with a collection. Shein et al., in their research survey about gathering collection metrics, explain that "the vast majority of respondents do not feel that granular data points are worthwhile."[24] Most respondents felt that a simple survey assessing collection title, collection number, processing hours, formats present, level of processing performed, collection creator type, language of materials, and role of processor provides sufficient information about each collection.[25]

All the survey models described here appear time-consuming and labor intensive, though not much has been reported about the length of time it took for those collection assessments to be completed. One estimate given by staff at the University of California Riverside explained that they were able to survey 155.42 linear feet, or eighty total collections, in a year with four part-time student workers assisting.[26] This is a significant amount of time for a relatively small amount of material. Two years after the start of the CLIR funded project, PACSCL reported surveying 1,879 collections totaling over 18,400 linear feet, and that was with the additional grant support provided by CLIR.[27] They also report that many of the collections included in their survey were quite small; 40 percent were less than 1 linear foot.[28] In 2003, Columbia University surveyed 569 collections stretching 15,867 linear feet in 1,588 survey hours.[29] Pflug explains that "Despite the benefits derived from collections surveys, the practice is irregular in archival repositories because often it cannot be completed without additional resources."[30]

Conducting a collection-wide assessment can be a massive undertaking; in fact, nearly all existing literature acknowledges its difficulty. Gregory S. Hunter explains that despite the usefulness of surveys, "any [collection] survey, even a small one, is a complex task. It will require a great deal of time and effort, resulting in the diversion of staff time from other activities."[31] The many competing priorities in understaffed archives means that adding a collection survey on top of existing work might be too burdensome to accomplish. According to Cooper Cary and Hackbart-Dean, only 14 percent of their survey respondents assessed collection priorities "systematically and annually," and immediate researcher and access needs often take priority over processing tasks.[32]

MPLP and Extensible Processing

Many of these assessment strategies were developed to help manage archives' backlogs of unprocessed collections. To make changes in professional processing strategies addressing the same problem, Mark A. Greene and Dennis Meissner wrote a paradigm-shifting article entitled "More Product, Less Process: Revamping Traditional Archival Processing."[33] They argued that applying highly detailed item- or folder-level description across all collections results in backlogs of unprocessed collections unavailable to researchers, as processing to that level is so labor intensive. Instead, they proposed applying the "golden minimum" as a standard of processing, which they defined as the minimum amount of arrangement and description necessary to meet researcher needs. This may mean applying collection- or series-level processing and only using more detailed levels of description when warranted by the materials.[34] Importantly, they explain Frederick Miller's concept of "progressive refinement," indicating that, after minimal description needs are met, processors can return "on a happier day" for additional, more thorough description.[35] Since then, this approach to processing collections, known by the initialism MPLP, has been widely adopted across the profession for efficient processing of archival collections.

Since MPLP's introduction, Mark Greene published a follow-up article in 2010 titled "MPLP: It's Not Just for Processing Anymore." In it, he explains how the minimal processing approach of MPLP can be applied to other archival practices such as appraisal, preservation, reference, electronic records, digitization, and privacy concerns.[36] This implies that the same principles can go beyond the archival act of processing. An outgrowth of MPLP that incorporates the "progressive refinement" approach is the concept of extensible processing. Daniel A. Santamaria defines extensible processing in his book on the topic as "an iterative approach to archival processing that involves creating a baseline level of access to all holdings in an archival repository, then conducting additional processing based on user demand and further assessment of collections."[37]

In the chapter on backlog management (chapter 4: "Attacking Your Backlog"), he discusses the collection survey as a tool to set priorities and to define baseline processing based on an institution's context. He explains, "a collection survey can be as simple as shelf-reading to verify collection locations and assess their basic condition and level of processing, or as complex as systematically working through the entirety of a repository's holdings to capture data about every collection."[38] This flexibility in collection survey approach is supported by Conway and Proffitt, "a single, commonly-understood approach [to collection surveys] neither exists nor is practical."[39] Similarly, Cooper Cary and Hackbart-Dean suggest examining existing survey tools, like the PACSCL tools and the UC guidelines, to adapt them to the needs of a repository.[40] Despite these resources focusing on the application of MPLP beyond archival processing and the described flexibility of collection assessment, no model exists for an initial survey with the intention of iterative follow-up surveys based on the results.

By implementing an initial survey aligned with specific goals, the University of Colorado Boulder Libraries' Archives (referred to here as the CU Boulder Archives, which is a collecting area of the University Libraries' Rare and Distinctive Collections) reports the data collected, shares the usefulness of the data, and plans for next steps including survey iteration. This case study takes an MPLP and extensible processing approach to collection assessment by providing a model for an initial collection survey with a simplified approach to information gathering. This model will be practical in contexts with limited resources, especially personnel and time. Archives feeling overwhelmed by the prospect of embarking on a collection survey may be able to use this iterative approach as a model in addition to the more complex survey models described here.

Background

The CU Boulder Archives is part of the University Libraries at a public institution. As such, its mission is to make records for archival resources accessible to as wide an audience as possible. The CU Boulder Archives includes over 1,800 collections and over 33,000 linear feet of materials with strengths in Colorado politics and labor history, experimental film, the atomic West, environmental history, American music, and university history among others.

In 2016, newly hired archivists at CU Boulder Archives faced a monumental task. Only thirty-four collections had finding aids available online through Rocky Mountain Online Archive. As they began the process of implementing ArchivesSpace for collection management, the processing status of the other collections was largely unknown. Attempts by their predecessors to survey collections were outdated (nearly ten years old) and included coded information without keys, making it hard for current archivists to assess collections status and needs.

After returning from the COVID-19 pandemic in 2021, the University of Colorado Boulder had, for the size of its archives, limited staffing consisting of seven full-time archivists, including only two whose primary responsibility is processing all format types. Like many archives, CU Boulder has multiple priorities and large archival holdings. These factors meant that a detailed survey for collection assessment using tools like those of PACSCL or the University of California would have taken years to complete. However, without very basic metrics about collections, archivists found it difficult to advocate for resources, demonstrate progress, and prioritize collection needs.

All collections become accessible when accessioned at CU Boulder Archives. Since 2016, archivists create collection-level finding aids as part of accessioning, even if they remain unprocessed. As a result, many collections at CU Boulder currently have minimal descriptive information that can be easily identified for processing improvements without much examination of the collection itself. Recognizing the large amount of work to be done on the volume of collections, CU Boulder Archives reviewed existing literature on collection surveys and decided to significantly reduce the data collection typically performed by the models of collection assessment described in the literature review. As with processing collections, a More Product, Less Process approach would suggest that if archivists need more information, they could iterate by developing additional future surveys to get more specific data based on the results of the initial survey. Gathering basic information allows CU Boulder Archives to establish baseline intellectual control more quickly without needing to pause entirely all other priorities such as processing and research services.

Methodology

Following the suggestion of Conway and Proffitt,[41] CU Boulder Archives embarked on developing a survey by identifying goals. For this initial survey, the team decided the goals were to:

- gather basic collection information (including extent and number of collections);
- assess processing status and processing needs such as current level of description and collections' arrangement and rehousing needs;
- know how many collections contain materials from underrepresented groups to help identify collections to be assessed for cultural sensitivity and reparative description. Since CU Boulder Libraries and campus have a strong diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) mission and strategic goals, they wanted to identify how many collections may contain these materials to meet users' research needs; and
- identify which collections and how many have materials that could be deaccessioned based on current collection development priorities.

CU Boulder Archives made participation in the collection survey a priority, with each full-time archivist dedicating between five and eight hours per week to its completion. At the start of the survey, the number of staff was reduced from seven to six, further limiting the people available to complete the project. Since many people were working on the same survey, communication about the process and expectations was important. To make sure the whole team was on the same page, they discussed the approach to the survey and documented instructions for how to fill out each field using a Google document. This aligns with Hackbart-Dean and Slomba's suggestion that any assessment include a rating sheet explaining how to choose responses to each field on the survey.[42] Both the training and documentation communicated that between ten and thirty minutes should be spent per collection and explained the use of each field to reduce interrater errors.

To develop the survey, CU Boulder archivists examined the existing literature and collection assessment models reviewed earlier in this case study. They decided to approach the survey fields in a simplified manner to spend less time on each collection. So, for example, they assessed the current level of description by examining the ArchivesSpace finding aid and chose "collection," "series," "box," "file," or "item" from a drop-down menu on the survey. If they felt that the current level of online description provided sufficient access to the collection, they would respond "Yes," "No," or "Maybe" to a question about whether more work was needed on collection description. The process for making these determinations was included in the documented instructions. Simplifying responses and examining existing collection documentation made the assessment of the collection much easier than going through collection materials box by box. Simplifying the responses to a controlled vocabulary ensured that the survey could be completed more quickly and with fewer interrater errors across archivists performing the survey since limited response options required interpretation.

The most challenging fields to develop were those requiring more familiarity with the collection materials. Where possible, the team simplified those fields, knowing that they were making an assessment based on current collection documentation. In the future, they could adjust assessments based on new information gathered. For example, they implemented a field asking, "Arrangement or rehousing needed?" which indicated that the collection was disorganized, in its original housing, or otherwise in need of physical processing. By grouping these activities together, they identified the collections that have physical needs, which create the most time-intensive processing tasks. The documented instructions indicate how to respond to this field by sampling a few boxes to determine preservation needs (such as rehousing), or by using the existing finding aid or inventory to determine if the collection's arrangement could be improved. If archivists completing the survey did not feel comfortable making an assessment, they could spend more time on the

survey as needed. Brief versions of the instructions for how to make assessments to complete each field are included in Table 1 and Table 2.

CU Boulder archivists completed the survey using a Google spreadsheet containing a list of all collections exported from ArchivesSpace. As more collections not included in ArchivesSpace were discovered, they were manually added to the list. Using a Google spreadsheet ensured that all staff could complete the survey simultaneously. It also allowed all the results of the survey to be seen in one place and analyzed together. The collection management feature of ArchivesSpace was not useful in this case since it is hard to view data across more than one collection at a time in the staff-user interface, and it has fewer fields than CU Boulder Archives needed. The Google spreadsheet uses fields (columns), and the instructions for completing the survey advised staff members to choose the best answer for each using existing collection documentation from ArchivesSpace, collection information files, and files on the libraries' network. Archives staff were instructed to examine the materials only when the information could not be gathered from those sources. The survey included required fields and optional added-value fields. The added-value fields gathered other information (primarily about format) when it was obvious without having to seek out that information specifically. The required fields fulfilled the goals of the survey, while the added-value fields primarily addressed information that would be nice to know about each collection. CU Boulder archivists jointly decided not to complete an in-depth assessment of the format of collections, as that would require more detailed examination of materials and because format identification and condition assessment were not goals of this survey. Additionally, CU Boulder Archives is fortunate to have format-specific archivists on staff, including a sound recording archivist, a moving image archivist, and a photograph archivist, who assess materials under their purview independently.

Figure 1 shows all the fields included on the spreadsheet as they appeared. An appendix to this article includes a row of sample data from the collection survey. The required survey fields and how they were used are listed in Table 1.

Table 1. Required Fields on Initial Survey

Field Name	How Field Was Used	Data Format Type
Collection Identifier	Exported from ArchivesSpace	Free text
Collection Title	Exported from ArchivesSpace	Free text
Arrangement or rehousing needed?	Is any processing work required on the collection that will require physically touching material?	Yes/No/Maybe
Current level of online description	Based on lowest level of description attached to ArchivesSpace resource record (finding aid)	Controlled value list that included resource record only; collection level; box level; file level; file/item level; item level

Field Name	How Field Was Used	Data Format Type
Is online description sufficient?	Sufficiency was determined by the archivists' judgment based on the presence of component inventory (at any description level) for collections more than a few boxes, missing DACS required description fields at collection level,[43] or unprocessed additions.	Yes/No/Maybe
Processing completed?	Does the finding aid meet minimal DACS requirements as well as including a component inventory at any level? And is the collection condition okay as it is?	Yes/No/Maybe
Processor?	Name of processor for those collections with processing completed only	Free text
Notes field	Used to document information not covered by other fields	Free text
Materials about or by underrepresented groups	Does the collection contain materials created by or written about religious minorities, or groups outside of the dominant white male perspective prevalent in our collection?	Yes/No/Maybe

The fields that were included as added-value fields but were not required to be completed are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Added-Value (Optional) Fields on Initial Survey

Field Name	How Field Was Used	Data Format Type
Extent containers	Number of boxes; exported ArchivesSpace	Number
Extent linear feet	Linear feet count; exported from ArchivesSpace (CU Boulder did not include extent of born-digital materials due to current staffing limitations preventing migration of born-digital materials from storage media, though digital extent could also be included in other contexts.)	Number
ArchivesSpace needs inventory added?	Is there a PDF, Microsoft Word, or paper inventory of the collection that is not currently on ArchivesSpace?	Yes/No
MARC record	Does the collection have a record in the libraries' catalog?	Yes/No
Presence of nitrate?	Included to track location of more volatile format of film	Yes/No
Presence of moving image film?	Included to aid moving image archivist in identifying collections	Yes/No
Presence of born-digital materials?	Included in lieu of born-digital extent	Yes/No
Presence of photographs	Includes prints, negatives, and slides	Yes/No
Presence of magnetic audio/video	Included to aid sound archivist in identifying collections	Yes/No

Record ID	Record title	Extent container summary	Extent extent	Extent type	Arranged/ rehoused?	Current level of online description	Is online description sufficient? (Yes/No)	Processing completed?	Processor	Considered for Deaccession? (Yes/No)	Notes	Presence of material about or by under-represented groups?	ASpace needs inventory added?	MARC record?	Presence of moving image film?	Presence of Born-Digital material?	Presence of photographs?	Presence of magnetic audio/video?	Staff surveyor?

FIGURE 1. Screenshot of all the fields included in initial survey

Survey Results

CU Boulder Archives began conducting the survey in July 2022 and completed assessing the collections in May 2023. Archivists surveyed 1,847 collections, totaling an estimated 33,554 linear feet, in a ten-month period. Of those, 163 collections, or 3,136 linear feet, were processed and marked as completed (8.83% of total collection), and 39 collections were deaccessioned before survey completion (2.11% of total collections; 462 linear feet).

Across all collections, 1,513 collections (81.92% of total collections) need description work, and 727 collections (39.36%) need either rehousing and/or arrangement. Those 1,513 collections that need description work total 26,794.96 linear feet. The 727 collections that need rehousing and/or arrangement total 20,207.96 linear feet. Figure 2 and Figure 3 demonstrate that both description and physical needs are priorities for the collections, but that more work needs to be done to improve descriptions.

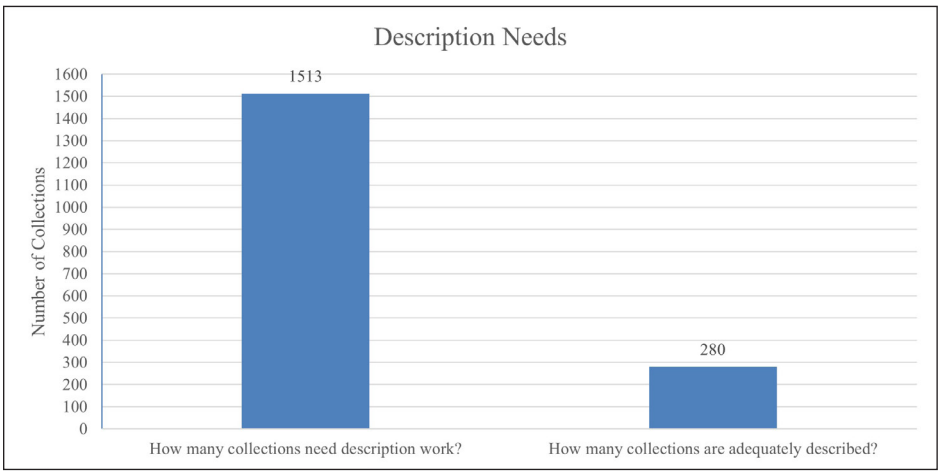

FIGURE 2. Description needs of all collections

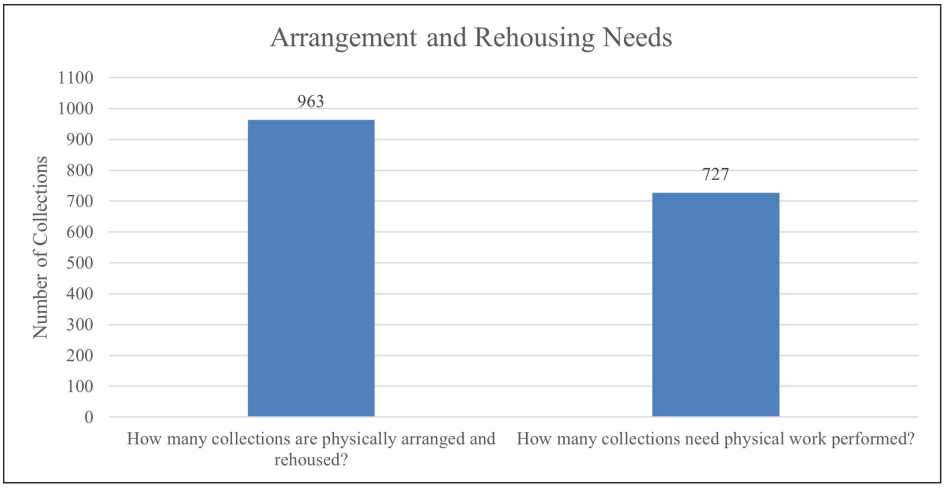

FIGURE 3. Physical needs, including arrangement and rehousing, of all collections

The survey gathered statistics about the level of description for each collection. Table 3 indicates the number of collections, the percentage of total collections at each description level, and how many collections are described adequately at each level. It shows that most collections are minimally processed or unprocessed. If they have been processed, or partially processed, it is most likely at the file level, which is intensive processing according to the University of California processing guidelines.[44]

Table 3. Collections Processed at Each Level of Description

	Collection Level	Series Level	Box Level	Folder Level	Item Level	Box/ File Level	File/ Item Level	Other
How many collections are described at each processing level?	841	12	59	581	68	6	36	244
Percentage of total collections	45.53%	0.65%	3.19%	31.46%	3.68%	0.32%	1.95%	13.21%
Of the above, how many are described adequately on ASpace?	21	2	5	201	27	1	15	*
Percentage of level processed	2.50%	16.67%	8.47%	34.60%	39.71%	16.67%	41.67%	*

*Unable to calculate exact numbers for collections described at other levels because data analysis was not possible.

Of collections with legacy finding aids (finding aids on paper, Microsoft Word documents, or PDFs), CU Boulder Archives has nearly completed its migration to ArchivesSpace. Only 289 collections have legacy finding aids that need to be migrated (15.65% of total collections). The survey identified 59 collections that need to be added to ArchivesSpace as they are not reflected in the available finding aids (3.19% of total collections).

Finally, as archivists explored existing finding aids, inventories, and documentation, it became apparent that some collections likely contain materials from historically underrepresented groups. Survey results found that 282 of the total collections (15.27%) contained materials about or by underrepresented groups. They also indicated that 203 might have materials from underrepresented groups (10.99%).

Discussion

Taking this minimal, MPLP-style approach to the collection survey was successful; CU Boulder Archives completed surveying all collections in less than a year and met the goals identified during survey development. The PACSCL survey, the largest documented survey that the author could find, had surveyed a similar number of collections (1,879) with fewer linear feet (18,400 linear feet) in slightly more than twice the amount of time that the CU Boulder project took. The data collected from this survey will inform the priorities for collection management and processing going forward. Archivists gathered useful big-picture information about collections using existing documentation and only examining boxes when necessary. This will allow CU Boulder Archives to establish a baseline and to compare improvements in the future.

As a result of the data collected by the survey, CU Boulder Archives can report on the extent and current level of description of its collections to University Libraries and campus administration. The survey results will also allow CU Boulder Archives to justify time spent processing collections and to advocate for additional processing resources in the form of student employees, project positions, and full-time hires. The results of the survey indicate that most of the collections require additional description and arrangement; this data will support the case to University Libraries and campus administration for more staffing resources to improve accessibility to collections. For example, archives staff have already reported on survey results in the form of department- and libraries-wide presentations on the processing needs of the archives. These presentations educate others on the importance of archival processing activities at CU.

The data led CU Boulder Archives to adopt two basic strategies for tackling the backlog. First, since most of the processed collections are described at the folder level (intensive processing), CU Boulder Archives will prioritize collections for

processing at intermediate levels, such as the series or box levels, to allow faster processing and efficient use of staffing resources. The data indicate that even some collections described at item level have not been adequately processed, implying that description has not met minimum DACS standards at higher levels such as the collection or series level. Second, CU Boulder Archives also plans to prioritize migrating legacy collection inventories, which is a good use of time for student employees. Completing the migration of legacy collection inventories will make information about collections publicly accessible without having to process collections from scratch.

The intention of this initial survey was to gather enough information to be able to perform more focused iterative surveys based on the results. To support the University Libraries' DEI strategic mission, CU Boulder Archives is already developing a second survey to assess reparative descriptive needs. By using the list of collections identified in the initial survey, CU Boulder Archives can limit the scope of the reparative description survey to only those collections that indicate content relating to marginalized individuals, which is a more efficient use of staff time than surveying all collections. Early reports and research on reparative description surveys model the inclusion of fields for communities represented in collections, collection creators, and the presence of outdated or harmful language in archival description to assess the representational belonging of the repository holdings.[45, 46, 47] In addition to supporting the University Libraries' strategic mission, the reparative description survey supports the CU Boulder Archives' collection management and reference needs because it aims to prioritize improved description of materials from underrepresented communities. Additional future survey iterations might focus on gathering more information about the processing needs for collections with collection-level description only. In short, the data gathered from this survey will allow CU Boulder Archives to focus future surveys on portions of the total collections instead of needing to survey every collection again. This will save time by focusing future survey iterations on the most relevant collections for the information being gathered.

Another goal of the initial survey was to identify materials for deaccessioning based on the collection development policies of the institution. Prioritizing deaccessioning means that, ultimately, there will be less material to process from the backlog. CU Boulder Archives intends, when appropriate, to deaccession materials to other cultural heritage institutions. The archives has begun deaccessioning projects to review the materials identified in this survey.

Limitations and Future Research

The success of the initial collection survey can be attributed to several factors. One is that CU Boulder Archives was able to redirect staff priorities toward survey completion. If only one or two staff members were available, the survey would have

taken more than a year regardless of the efforts to simplify it. Implementing the survey documentation and training for the whole team described earlier successfully ensured that the team completed the survey consistently. One lesson learned would be the importance of this kind of communication to the success of the project.

One limitation of this approach is that by not examining collection materials more closely, CU Boulder Archives risked missing important information not already documented about collections. This possibility was considered when planning the project, and it was determined that even this initial survey would allow the archives to analyze existing documentation across multiple collections, which was not possible before. Additional survey iterations may take more time as a whole than a single, more comprehensive survey might have. However, this survey allowed CU Boulder archivists to continue other tasks and demonstrate progress to administrators. Finally, they did not check data for consistency across raters since archivists at CU felt that the instructions provided enough guidance on consistency. However, that could be a weakness to this approach in some contexts, especially if relying on part-time, student, or volunteer labor. Future research could be conducted on the amount of time this approach takes when including survey iterations.

Conclusion

Applying MPLP and extensible processing techniques to a collection survey allowed CU Boulder Archives to get information about its holdings quickly. As in most archival contexts, limited staffing resources and a large backlog of minimally processed collections threatened to overwhelm the archivists at CU. By prioritizing gathering simplified information based on identified survey goals, CU Boulder Archives established a baseline and can demonstrate progress in the future.

Though the existing literature on collection surveys and extensible processing explains their flexibility, CU Boulder archivists did not have a model available for a minimal initial survey that would meet their goals, and they allowed the potential to develop future survey iterations based on the results. For other archives with limited staffing resources, this approach is a useful model alongside other collection surveys reported in the literature. For archivists wondering "Where do I begin?" when approaching a large backlog in resource-strapped contexts, the survey tool and methodology presented in this case study can serve as model.

Appendix A: Completed Initial Survey Example for One Collection

Same row of example data split to fit page. Field titles are in the first row and the collection data is in the second.

Record ID	Record title	Extent container summary	Extent extent	Extent type	Arranged/ rehoused?
COU:2216	Boulder Faculty Assembly records	32 boxes	16	Linear feet	Yes

Current level of online description	Is online description sufficient? (Yes/No)	Processing completed?	Processor	Considered for deaccession? (Yes/No)	Notes
File level	No	No		No	Needs addition of some collection level notes

Presence of material about or by under-represented groups?	ASpace needs inventory added?	MARC record?	Presence of moving image film?	Presence of born-digital material?	Presence of photographs?	Presence of magnetic audio/video?	Staff surveyor?
No	No	No		Yes	Yes		Ashlyn

FIGURE 1. Screenshot of all the fields included in initial survey

Notes

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ashlyn Velte is the senior processing archivist and assistant professor at the University of Colorado Boulder Libraries. She is responsible for collection management, project prioritization, processing and processing standards, and student supervision. Her research has focused on digital preservation workflows and balancing privacy and access in archives. In 2018, she was named an ALA Emerging Leader. She received an MSLS from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and a certificate in digital curation. You can reach her at ashlyn.velte@colorado.edu.