

Obligations and Expectations: Pushing Collections to the Front of the Queue

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Good morning! I'd like to offer my gratitude to NEA for letting me speak here today and give thanks to all my fellow speakers for sharing their ideas and experiences.

I am the Accessioning Archivist for the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale. Prior to my role with the Beinecke, I worked a series of project processing gigs at various institutions, doing long-form, item-level arrangement and description of collections. Accessioning in general, and at the Beinecke specifically, is a different beast entirely than the type of archival work I'd done before. It requires a unique and ever-shifting blend of emotional, physical, and intellectual labors that hopefully produce an increased number of accessible collections at a quicker rate than more granular processing strategies. Those of us doing accessioning work do so responsively, iteratively, and relentlessly, lest we find ourselves borne back ceaselessly into the backlog.

The Beinecke typically acquires over a thousand linear feet of manuscript material each fiscal year. In addition to the brilliant, longer-form processing work done by our Manuscript Unit colleagues, the five-member Accessioning team routinely churns through between 750 to 2000 linear feet worth of collection materials every twelve months. And to be clear here, accessioning for us involves completing all of the following:

- assisting with or establishing shipping arrangements for incoming acquisitions, including in-person pickups and onsite packing
- creating the initial accession record in ArchivesSpace
- generating legal and payment paperwork including deeds of gift and acknowledgments
- verifying the contents of collections against existing inventories (or in the absence of any kind of inventory at all)
- physically stabilizing materials including freezing and rehousing
- and, of course, performing baseline arrangement and description including a finding aid in ArchivesSpace and a collection-level catalog record for all incoming acquisitions over ten boxes (I believe that's technically the guideline)

Every one of these processes involves multiple steps, different interlocking combinations of stakeholders, and an immense need for collaborative efforts of all kinds. And with the Beinecke's rapid pace of acquisitions AND the incredibly high number of research requests we regularly receive for collection material, the

expectations for access and availability are always in a sort of...tension with our ongoing workflows that make up the accessioning process.

All of this is to say: people want to use the stuff we have, even if we haven't gotten it ready for them.

And of course: this *complicates* things.

I mentioned different types of labor before and it's really something I think about a lot, especially since I started in my current position.

I made this slide for a recent talk at SAA and I like it a bunch so I'm going to use it again today. Seeing this wall of different duties that make up my day-to-day work is really clarifying. Reminding myself of the different types of energy that I (and my colleagues) expend in service of performing these duties feels important.

Acknowledging the complexity that undergirds even the most seemingly mundane decisions is crucial to understanding how we can more consciously evolve towards practices that not only better serve patrons and donors and local communities, but that also ultimately better serve ourselves as archivists who want to grow and gain joy from the work that we do every day. Looking at this also reminds me of how much energy we direct outwardly, beyond the walls of our archives, as we interact over email and in person with people who are handing over their life's work, their partner's memories, the products they created, and the records they kept.

I mean, collections make their way to us in so many different fashions. Gift, bequest, auction, purchase. There are mediators and executors and relatives. Grief and greed. The desire to not be forgotten. All of these different motivations affect the relationships we build over the course of an acquisition. And in turn, those relationships have an immense power over the way an acquisition works its way through the system.

For example, say your institution acquires a collection from an individual with grave health issues. There is an urgency to getting this collection, not just for an eager curator who wishes to preserve the materials in question, but also for a donor who wants to make sure that their legacy is fixed, available, and useful to others.

Perhaps the donor has worked to pull their archive together, inventoried it, made thoughtful decisions about what to include and what to keep for themselves (or, you know, maybe they didn't make those decisions, but still!). Perhaps shaping their

archive and insuring its safety is part of a larger process of saying goodbye or...of simply instilling some kind of order into a time that has largely felt out of their control.

Suppose that the individual's health gets worse. The collection is now in your hands but until this most recent round of news, just the getting of it was the priority. But that's shifted. Making the collection visible to others, and most of all, to the creator, is now the priority. Quarterly processing expectations don't often really take this type of thing into account. Death and illness. Publicity and prestige. These things push priorities around in ways that can't necessarily be foreseen. The relationships that develop between those of us who work in libraries and archives and those individuals and organizations that choose to trust us with their collections are shaped by so many variables that are impossible to plan around neatly.

Which brings me to this: the title of this talk is about "Pushing Collections to the Front of the Queue" but what if there isn't really a queue? What if there are no straight lines and instead, this is all a series of knots we are constantly untying in order to pull strands free as needed? The Beinecke sits in an immensely privileged position economically and in terms of staff support and so my perspective today obviously shines through that lens—we have more knots than many, but we also have more people untying those knots. Still: the complexity of this balancing act is something that so many of us navigate, at institutions of every size. In my role, I talk people through making Fed-Ex arrangements or I show up at their apartment with a van or I correct inaccuracies in my scope and content after a quick note of thanks wrapped around a clarification shows up in my inbox. A lot of this abstract and business-y and fits neatly into my monthly reports. But so so much of it is...the opposite. It's direct and it's urgent and it's really personal. And I'm lucky that I work in an environment with enough support that we can shift course with a fair amount of agility, that we can rise to the occasion and make sure that someone gets to see their neatly boxed collection in the reading room even if it means reconfiguring so many other variables in order to do so.

Side note: I always kind of envision the Beinecke as some kind of huge and beautiful container ship while Accessioning is the scrappy little tugboat getting everything in and out of a very crowded harbor, over and over again. I also love that the action a tugboat performs when it's pulling an immense vessel somewhere is called "a drag." Yep!

In any case, let's be crystal: **use** is why we are in this game to begin with, or at least, it should be. Collection development policies, processing metrics, acquisition strategies, staffing decisions...all these things should be geared towards facilitating the imminent and active use of our materials. Otherwise what are we even doing? Equitable access

to collections for the purpose of use must be one of the defining principles of any kind of archival ethics that exist.

Robust accessioning procedures result not *only* in having a stronger day-to-day handle on the physical and intellectual status of everything you have already have, but they also facilitate the development of richer pre-custodial work on collections headed in your direction, speed the settlement of financial and legal transactions related to acquisitions, and generally foster an increased likelihood that you and your colleagues can react to emotional and logistical curve balls with grace and power instead of disarray.

One final quick thing--the composer Jürg Frey writes about the idea of the path and the expanse. I will now briefly and very liberally paraphrase his words. On the *path*, things unfold continuously, organically, over time. In an *expanse*, there are not necessarily fixed points or boundaries that we can readily attach meaning and specificity to—things are unbound. Frey is talking here about the nature of experience and time as it relates to sound, but I find truth in his words about the work that many of us do. We are constantly navigating these liminal spaces of personal and professional experience, trying to effectively code switch between the language of caretakers and the jargon of our jobs. We have to be cautious, empathetic, and efficient stewards for the material we acquire and that must necessarily include figuring out how to effectively function in challenging situations which call both for concrete answers AND an open-ended, ongoing responsiveness.

We have to travel on the path, through the expanse, and back again. And we have to bring all the collections along for the journey.

I thank you all very kindly for your time today.