

a (not so sudden perception) of accessioning: value, labor, and impact

Rosemary K. J. Davis, Accessioning Archivist
Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University
OCLC “Articulating Accessioning” webinar--November 8, 2018

I'd like to thank the OCLC folks for inviting me to be a part of this webinar. My talk today is an adaptation of my presentation at SAA back in August. My awesome co-presenter Rachel has *wisely* focused on the specifics of accessioning workflows including so many helpful concrete details. I'm going to shift gears a tiny bit and I talk about how my library historically and currently supports accessioning, but also about how complicated and important accessioning work can be, in terms of emotional, temporal, and institutional investment.

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 fairly traditional, non-MPLP 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.

The Beinecke is voluminously well-staffed—around 120 souls in the library proper, 24 of whom work in the manuscript unit, with 5 of us working solely on accessioning--and yet! A hallway full of pallets, stacked high with collections material, is much more the rule than the exception. To give you an idea of numbers: we typically acquire over a thousand linear feet of manuscript material each fiscal year. And since I joined the staff in 2016, our team has accessioned over 1200 acquisitions measuring at more than 2100 linear feet and also performed baseline processing for over **2000** linear feet worth of collection material. On average, our five person team processes about 2-3 times the linear footage of the rest of the manuscript unit, which is doing longer-form, often item-level, processing and original cataloging.

But let me backtrack a bit and give you an idea of how accessioning work has evolved at the Beinecke over the years.

In the beginning, there were curators. During the early days of the library, curators and their assistants were responsible for much of the paperwork and handling that went into new acquisitions. Given that there was few unified procedural workflows for tracking items and collections as they came into the library's possession, there was less accountability and little consistency in regards to description of materials or even, sometimes simply knowing where things were at all times.

In order to bring more control to the handling and tracking of materials, the Beinecke implemented a paper slip system. These slips followed collection material around, essentially documenting their journey. Two big things to keep in mind here--the information being collected and recorded was predominantly bibliographic in nature and hence, many of the older acquisition records looked very similar to catalog records. And that made sense because at that point, archival accessioning work was being performed in the same realm as more traditional rare book cataloging, with fewer clear divisions between the types of description being generated.

The original incarnation of the paper slip system lasted until the mid-1980's, around the same time that the Beinecke's Manuscript Unit came into being as a separate entity from Printed Acquisitions, with both units grouped together into a Technical Services division.

At that point, the Beinecke started using DBText to generate electronic slips and track the cataloging status of materials. By the mid-1990's there was a growing focus on more comprehensive description of collections--including adapting existing inventories and dealers' lists to bolster the records being created.

Beinecke adapted DBText to provide the functionality they needed until the early 2000's, when other options were explored. By that point, Beinecke had also developed a database of uncataloged collection material and preliminary lists started being entered directly into the system, making the descriptive elements attached to incoming accessions way more robust than just a simple accession number and its cataloging status.

During the last fifteen years, the number of staff members solely focusing on archival accessioning has grown from two staff members to five (and side note: in January, it'll become six as we add a three-year project archivist to our team). During these years, MPLP-style processing procedures were introduced and baseline processing guidelines were developed. An institution-wide barcoding project in 2008-2009, along with a subsequent baseline processing project, were essentially large-scale retrospective accessioning projects that brought much higher-levels of intellectual and physical control over all collection material in the library's holdings. This work essentially demonstrated the ongoing need for an enriched form of accessioning protocols.

Archivists' Toolkit was used to create records, track locations, and generate finding aids from 2012-2015, until we transitioned into ArchivesSpace, which now serves as

both the staff and public interface for creating and browsing finding aids and accession records. This long-term, yet concentrated shift from bibliographic description to DACS-compliant archival description, along with the implementation of minimum levels of description required for incoming materials, has made accessioning much more than a simple “in the door, what’s the status” tracking mechanism. The work our team does is now a foundational element of our institution’s acquisitions workflow, helping to ensure that a comprehensive amount of structured data is captured for all manuscript collection material, including:

<i>Required Elements</i>	<i>Optional Elements</i>
Call Number/Unit ID	Languages
Unit Title	Associated Materials
Inclusive Unit Dates	Acquisition Information
Physical Description	Custodial History
Arrangement	Container
Description of the Papers/Records/Collection	Note
Processing Notes	Information About Access
	Physical Location

Our accessioning team works to capture and record this information from all incoming manuscript items and collections. And I’d like to be specific about the long list of stuff we do. We are responsible for:

- assisting with or establishing shipping arrangements for incoming acquisitions, including in-person pickups
- for creating the initial accession record
- for generating acknowledgment and payment paperwork
- for verifying the contents of collections
- for physically stabilizing materials including freezing and rehousing
- and for performing baseline arrangement and description (i.e. a finding aid in ArchivesSpace and a collection-level catalog record).

This is a big tangle of responsibilities but we manage them as best we can. And while all archival work contains elements of physical, intellectual, and emotional labor, in my experience of working as an accessioning archivist, these three types of labor feel like they are intertwined **more** intimately, **more** stressfully, and with a complexity that feels remarkable in some way. I think it’s important to acknowledge this fact alongside the

more nuts and bolts aspects of our work since it often feels like there can be a very real disjunct between these sometimes *less* acknowledged facets of the work that we do and the much more visible and **urgent** expectations from our institutions about linear footage, metrics, and the concept of “access” writ-large.

An example: physically obtaining materials is one of the very first steps in our workflow Let’s break down what that actually looks like.

There are a lot of dynamics that go into arranging pickups with donors and sellers. Some situations are very straightforward. This many boxes, this address, this day, this time. But many pickups require more logistical gymnastics and a higher level of emotional sensitivity. Dealing directly with donors and dealers requires kindness, efficiency, and flexibility. Now, all of us here know that collection materials are rarely just boxes full of old things--those boxes are full of lives lived, good and bad memories, accomplishments, personal connections. And it can be difficult to pin down a single spot on the calendar when asking someone to surrender the physical evidence of their own history, or the history of someone they loved or hated.

Internally at Yale, we also have to work out details for pick-ups with our transportation department, who provides us with drivers and moving vans. We have to be very precise about where the truck is going, what kind of street they’ll be parking on, if there are stairs, how many boxes, and so on. And yeah, sometimes we do pick up dozens of boxes. Or...a pick-up is a **single** item. That happens too.

More often than not, though, we go to people’s homes. We go into their apartments. We see where they live. We navigate their living rooms. We usually get into conversations about what they’re giving to the library and why. We explain how we’ll take care of their collections. We explain what “processing” means. We tell them there will be a catalog record and that they will be able to find it online. We talk about the library and how people use its collections.

I always try to answer questions. I always ask if they **have** questions. I always try to say, “is there anything you need from me?” Part of this work is being a resource for the donor, to demonstrate that careful stewardship of their collection starts in that moment when I’m standing in their home or their garage or their storage unit. Part of this work is convincing them that even though I’m very sweaty and wearing jeans and loading a truck, that I’ll also be helping to make sure that the documentation of their lives and work will be cared for, will be visible to others, will be understood. I ask for trust every time I show up at someone’s door.

And of course the other big part of this work on pickup day is obviously **actually** getting things packed up. Collections come to us in all forms. Beautifully labeled, inventoried, secure boxes. More often though, these collections accrue over time and as such, they are boxed up to save space or packed in a hurry just before we show up.

When I arrive at a location, in addition to being present and helpful to the person onsite, I also have to assess the physical status of everything that needs to be loaded up and make constant judgments about how to efficiently and safely move things out of that space. We essentially have to be ready for anything **and** everything.

Keep in mind that collection material pickups are just one of the first stops on the accessioning train. After getting materials to the library, members of our team then proceed to:

- pay the bills
- record the collection's physical presence at the library
- ascertain what exactly is in all those boxes and make sure we **have** what we *expected* to have
- decipher any existing inventories or documentation that came along with the collection
- ensure that the material is physically stable and figure out if we have insects or mold to deal with
- shift other collections in our physical space to make room for temporary storage **and** active work with the new materials
- correspond with the donor to answer questions about **when** the materials will be available or **why** does the finding aid look so different than the spreadsheet that was provided
- respond to researchers who need to use the collection before we've even taken it off the pallet
- and work (independently or as a team) to perform the first iteration of physical and intellectual processing.

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.

Seeing this list of different duties that make up my day-to-day work is truly 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 feel like this list also helps give a really clear view of the impact that thoughtful and comprehensive accessioning work can have for an institution when it's done well--stats seem really dry, but this is the work behind the numbers.

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.

Acknowledging the humanity of our collections, our donors, our archivists, and our mission is all wrapped up in the way that we build relationships between every aspect and every individual involved in the acquisitions process. Effective accessioning work really **is** a *true* hybrid of archival workflows from so many different areas: administrative, legal, transportation and moving, arrangement and description, donor relations, preservation, cataloging--it takes time, institutional buy-in, lots of documentation, an immense amount of empathy, and endless strategizing, but it's worth it. And when this work is supported by an organization, **everyone** benefits.

Thank you!