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**Every Little Thing She Does... Isn't Actually Magic:
Labor & Relationship Management in Archival Accessioning**
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Slides: https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1XQhvCsywFqMrz7vKcXbt29OAHagL45FyKtHF9LHVz1E/edit?usp=sharing

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I work at the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale, where I've been Accessioning Archivist since 2016. And since 2019, Meaghan O'Riordan and I have been embroiled in a long-term research project focused on the labor of archival accessioning.

At the heart of our project is a trio of goals:

1. surfacing the lived experiences of people performing accessioning duties
2. creating a well-resourced community of practice for those of us doing this work
3. well, we're basically trying to destroy, once and for all, the old notion of accessioning as a finite bit of recordkeeping as opposed to what we see as a more useful, holistic interpretation: accessioning as a constellation of workflows and collaborative relationships that are foundational for ethical collection stewardship.

Our research output falls into three components:

- **Survey**
  - ➢ We had over 150 responses from folks across the nation and collected info about job titles, resources, relationships, and the emotional experience of performing these types of duties.

- **Site visits**
  - ➢ We wanted to make sure that our research included perspectives on the physical aspects of people's workplaces. So we visited to see where they process collections, where they unload boxes, and to really understand how people are doing accessioning in an environmental sense.

- **Standard**
  - ➢ Developing national best practices for accessioning that everyone can use, adapt, and push further.
    - Accessioning workflows are pretty much all homegrown. Everyone is having to invent the wheel over and over. But we want to make

some tools to help. And as of this June 2021, we've officially
selected thirty individuals to serve alongside us in a
SAA-sanctioned working group that will focus on writing
multi-faceted guidelines for accessioning. We have subgroups
focused on:

- pre-custodial work (which includes selection, acquisition,
  and appraisal)
- arrangement and description
- stabilization, storage, and preservation
- labor, ethics, relationships, and the work environment
- born digital accessioning and preservation

■ The goal is to have a draft done by 2023. And we really want these
guidelines to be usable either piecemeal or wholecloth, depending
on your shop's size and staffing composition.

Today we want to focus on relationships.

Accessioning is heavily reliant on constantly nurturing and maintaining a wide spectrum
of relationships. It's important to note that these relationships can be very difficult to
form and sustain, but they also are critically important in terms of facilitating archival
work. Moreover, as with so many elements of technical archival labor, it's easy for
these complex relationships to function as invisible architecture--supporting the goals
of acquisition, stabilization, administration, and user access--while not being
accounted for in concrete ways like staffing, resources, and professional support.

I confess that I'm often vexed with the way in which "soft skills"--which typically
include communication, emotional acuity, empathy, and teamwork for some wild
reason--are marketed and valued in contrast to more legibly defined "hard skills" like
being able to use ArchivesSpace or speaking more than one language. The truth of the
matter is: soft skills are incredibly complex, draining, much more ambiguous and
therefore more time-consuming, and are in fact pervasively intertwined with archival
accessioning. And yet, soft skills are often somehow less than, an add on, a desire
expressed in the job posting--they're just a kind of *magic* that happens. Certainly
there's a huge history of gendered and ableist work expectations and definitions that
we could unpack here but for the moment, I'd like to offer up that the consistent
placement of soft skills on the backburner (either explicitly or implicitly) is tied up very

neatly in the way that archival accessioning work is frequently reduced to more tangible hard skills instead of being viewed as an entire ecosystem.

In this chart, you can see connective threads between accessioning and complex operational goals—these dotted lines represent richly important interactions and workflows, internal and external relationships working in concert. But what does this look like in practice? Well, it could be:

- Establishing short and long-term bonds with donors and creators that make them feel supported and secure with the action of letting their life's work go
- Guiding sellers and creators during pre-custodial work including rehousing, description, and shipping
- Coordinating with development staff, faculty members, library administration, finance offices, and many others to assist with outreach activities, making materials available for instruction and exhibitions, plotting future expenditures, and setting realistic archival processing priorities

Each one of these types of relationships, between someone doing accessioning and say a curator or a Fed-Ex store or a bookseller or a creator or a researcher or a colleague inside or outside of their organization is an amalgam of soft and hard skills. It's labor to develop a patter for interacting with strangers over the phone or in email. It's labor to soothe an anxious person in their living room while you explain what happens next with their papers. It's labor to explain to a curator how their decisions (or lack of decisions) have an impact on your archival work. And when accessioning is viewed as a series of cut and dried functions as opposed to an interlocking set of relationships, it's incredibly easy and sadly common that the totality of labor is overlooked, under-resourced, and misunderstood. Frankly this sucks for people performing accessioning and on a larger scale, it can negatively affect the collection lifecycle in a multiplicity of ways. To get even more specific about this, I'm going to **pass it off to Meaghan**.