Caring for Collections:
The Role of Accessioning in Effective Archival Stewardship
SCOPA Grant Proposal - 2019

Applicant
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Purpose and expected outcome
All archival work contains elements of physical, intellectual, and emotional labor. But in my experience as Accessioning Archivist for the Beinecke, it feels like these three types of labor are intertwined with a remarkable complexity. Archival accessioning, by definition, involves taking physical and legal custody of newly acquired collection materials. In practice, though, it is a rich hybrid of workflows from many different areas, with duties including:

■ taking part in pre-custodial visits with acquisitions staff/curators in order to appraise collection material and determine what resources would be required to make it accessible
■ assisting with or establishing shipping arrangements for incoming acquisitions, including on-site packing and in-person pickups of collection materials
■ creating the initial accession record and generating related administrative, financial, and legal paperwork
■ verifying the contents and condition of collections
■ physically stabilizing materials including freezing and rehousing
■ performing baseline arrangement and description (i.e. a finding aid in ArchivesSpace and a collection-level MARC record)
■ building and maintaining relationships with donors, dealers, and researchers

Robust accessioning procedures result not only in having a stronger day-to-day handle on the physical and intellectual status of material a library already has in its possession, but they also facilitate the development of more responsive, informed donor interactions and speed the settlement of financial and legal transactions related to acquisitions. Developing a better understanding of how repositories define and navigate accessioning is crucial to performing special collections stewardship that is rooted in transparency and mutual trust between all parties, and which ultimately results in richer archival description, faster processing of materials, and greater access for researchers.

Using archival accessioning as a lens, I want to investigate how institutions work to build donor relationships, develop effective workflows for making new archival acquisitions accessible, and meet the ever-evolving needs of curators, technical services staff, and researchers. I believe this research can help bring visibility to the different types of archival labor being performed, improve best practices, and kickstart thoughtful conversations within the profession about how
to empathetically and efficiently care for collections through more well-defined accessioning procedures. The initial fact-finding phase of my research will include:

- discussions with staff members involved with the acquisitions process in order to ascertain what kind of impact archival accessioning has on decisions made about incoming collections
- examination of technical services spaces to see how collection material is routed, processed, stored, and accessed throughout its lifecycle
- analysis of local workflow implementations including shipping logs, content and archival information management systems, and interdepartmental communication
- conversations with individuals performing accessioning work to learn more about the mechanics of their work and how they maintain relationships with curators, colleagues, donors, and researchers

In order to collect the information above, I need to perform site visits to archival repositories, investigate their physical and intellectual workflows, interview key staff members making significant contributions to archival practices, and analyze the work these individuals do in context.

A successful outcome of this project will take the form of a written analysis of the experiences and data collected during these site visits, with an aim towards producing a peer-reviewed article. Thus, an important facet of my work on this project will include researching professional journals such as *American Archivist, Journal of Archival Organization*, and *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies* as possible venues for publication. I will also seek out opportunities to share my research outside the Yale community at scholarly events focused on archival practice like conferences organized by the Society of American Archivists and New England Archivists. Most importantly though, I will apply this newly collected knowledge to my own accessioning work at the Beinecke, which is currently undergoing a concerted effort to eliminate our backlog and create greater balance between our acquisitions and processing workflows.

**Methodology**

Recent informational site visits to Harvard’s Houghton Library, the Archival Collections Management department at NYU, and the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas in Austin have shown me the incredible range of ways accessioning work is being performed. In an effort to more strategically investigate differing accessioning practices, I would like to perform site visits to three institutions with more formal, specific goals in mind.

As my research involves examining the physical, intellectual, and emotional components of accessioning and acquisitions, it is necessary to be present in the actual space where this work is being done. These site visits will be comprised of two primary components:

- Analysis of the physical areas where collections are stored and processed with the goal of better understanding how and where people perform accessioning work
Interviews with staff members involved in the acquisitions and accessioning processes including curators, archivists, and any other staff member actively performing labor to shepherd collections into the institution and make it accessible for use by patrons with the goal of gaining insight into how professional and personal relationships are built within the institution and with external parties like donors and sellers.

Every institution has its own specific interpretation of accessioning--each allocates differing levels of support for the individuals doing accessioning work. Given that there is no one universal set of workflows or duties to examine, my selection criteria instead requires that a geographically, financially, and administratively diverse cross-section of archival repositories be represented. Additionally, each site visit must include interviews with archival professionals whose roles include a deep involvement with vital aspects of the accessioning and acquisitions lifecycles.

I have secured permission to visit from the accessioning and acquisitions staff of three institutions, each in a different region of the country and each with their own unique curatorial collecting areas, budgetary resources, environmental concerns, staffing structures, and archival workflows.

- **Rare Books and Manuscripts Library → The Ohio State University → Columbus, OH**
  - My primary contact at OSU will be Jolie Braun, whose current role is Curator of Modern Literature & Manuscripts in Special Collections and Area Studies at Thompson Library.
  - Braun’s prior experience as a technical services archivist working with limited resources will provide insight on developing more holistic, inclusive acquisition policies that bridge the divide between curatorial work and accessioning as it relates to efficient collection intake.

- **Special Collections and Archives → University of California, Irvine → Irvine, CA**
  - My primary contact at UCI will be Audra Eagle Yun, whose current role as Head of Special Collections & Archives and University Archivist for UCI Libraries draws on her extensive experience working as an Accessioning Archivist.
  - Her scholarly contributions include a chapter on archival accessioning for Dan Santamaria’s hugely important book “Extensible Processing for Archives and Special Collections: Reducing Processing Backlogs” (2015).
  - Audra’s perspective on incorporating accessioning as an integral programmatic component of technical services workflows will be particularly useful in terms of analyzing current practice and managerial approaches.

- **Charles E. Young Research Library → University of California, Los Angeles → Los Angeles, CA**
  - My primary contact at UCLA will be Jasmine Jones, whose current role is Head of Processing for Library Special Collections.
  - Jones’s current work involves the establishment of an accessioning program within technical services, including hiring a dedicated Accessioning Archivist as part of the permanent staff. She has also presented on “Applying Radical
Empathy Framework in Archival Practice” both at professional conferences and in a recent webinar for Society of California Archivists.

- Her perspective on building accessioning workflows into an existing technical services framework will help provide concrete examples of accessioning’s measurable impact on efficient and sensitive collection stewardship.

**Spelman College Archives → Spelman College → Atlanta, GA**

- My primary contact at Spelman College will be Holly Smith, whose current role as College Archivist is informed by her extensive contributions to archival scholarship including her article “Radical Love: Documenting Underrepresented Communities Using Principles of Radical Empathy” (*Journal for the Society of North Carolina Archivists*, 2019) and her editorial role for a forthcoming issue of *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies* which will focus on radical empathy in archival practice.

- Smith will bring a critically-needed humanistic perspective to my analysis of the ways in which acquisitions, archival processing, and collections access are intimately intertwined with the emotional experience of direct interaction with individuals and communities.

- This visit to Atlanta, GA will also allow me to meet with my writing/research partner, Meaghan O’Riordan, who is the Accessioning Archivist for the Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library at Emory University.

In addition, I will also do research locally, performing staff interviews and site analysis within the Yale community, including at the Beinecke and at Manuscripts and Archives. During each of these site visits, my primary goal will be to gather information and reflections on:

- How collections are shepherded through each phase of acquisitions and accessioning work
- How acquisition and processing priorities are determined and then, how those priorities are balanced against local factors including availability of labor, physical space, funding, and other institutional resources
- What role appraisal plays in determining processing priorities and acquisition decisions
- How acquisitions and accessioning workflows are determined and documented
- How donor relationships are managed during the acquisitions and accessioning process and determine who is responsible for maintaining open lines of communication/explanation
- How individuals performing acquisitions and accessioning work cope with the stresses (emotional, physical, and intellectual) that arise

Hopefully my work will reflect the richly varied interpretations and applications of accessioning work being done at institutions across the country, while also forging new professional relationships with individuals beyond the immediate range of Yale and our neighboring institutions here in New England.
Note: As my research progresses, other repositories or organizations might emerge as better (or additional) candidates for examination. In the eventuality of shifting focus to institutions beyond the above list, I will work within the financial constraints of my grant funding and submit an updated list of institutions.

**Proposed Timeline**

- **July-August 2019:**
  - Develop and finalize project methodology and interview questions for site visits
  - Perform in-depth research into existing professional scholarship focused on archival appraisal, accessioning, and acquisitions

- **September-October 2019**
  - Perform interviews with Beinecke and MSSA staff members
  - Research repository I will be visiting in the winter
  - Ongoing writing and analysis

- **November-December 2019**
  - Prepare for and perform site visit to Ohio State
  - Research repositories I will be visiting in the spring
  - Continue performing interviews with Beinecke and MSSA staff members
  - Ongoing writing and analysis

- **January-February 2020**
  - Prepare for and perform site visit to Spelman College + in-person meeting with writing/research partner Meaghan O’Riordan at Emory University
  - Continue performing follow-up research and interviews remotely
  - Research future publication and presentation options
  - Ongoing writing and analysis
  - Prepare mid-term SCOPA progress report

- **March-April 2020**
  - Prepare for and perform site visits to UC Irvine and UCLA
  - Continue performing follow-up research and interviews remotely
  - Determine steps for next phase of research
  - Ongoing writing and analysis
  - Find opportunities to share findings more widely with Beinecke, YUL, and wider archival communities through publication and presentation

- **May-June 2020**
  - Ongoing writing and analysis
  - Prepare final SCOPA report and forum presentation

In addition, I will actively share my data and experiences with Beinecke and YUL colleagues throughout the course of the project.
Benefits

This project will enable a richer understanding of the emotional and intellectual labor required to perform archival acquisitions and accessioning, while also making the practical organizational workflows supporting this work more accessible to others. It is my hope that this increased transparency will foster opportunities for reconsideration of current practice and encourage innovative approaches going forward.

I will apply the experience and expertise I hope to gain during these site visits to future iterations of my own accessioning work in service of Beinecke’s stated goal to “implement an integrated approach to building, describing, and managing the collections in order to provide appropriate levels of access for all collection materials within two years of receipt.” More generally, I will also be able to more actively contribute to the development and improvement of technical services workflows within YUL.

This research opportunity will enable me to bring fresh perspectives from outside the Yale and New England archival communities, contribute more substantively to ongoing conversations regarding the evolution of local practices, and perform engaged, scholarly outreach to academic institutions in the American Midwest, South, and West.

Expenses (based on GSA.gov’s average lodging and per diem rates for 2019)

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<th>Purpose</th>
<th>Cost Explanation</th>
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<td>Per diem (3 days @ $61 per day and 75% 1st/last day rate)</td>
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