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Essentials of Collections Management

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### More Product, Less Produce at the Bedford County Archives: A Case Study

The preservation and organization of historical documents and artifacts are crucial for maintaining the cultural heritage of a community. In the case of the Bedford County Archives, the need for a well-defined Collection Management policy is evident to ensure the proper care and access to its materials. In the field of archives and special collections, collection management policies are essential tools for guiding and managing the acquisition, processing, preservation, and accessibility of materials. These policies outline the scope of the collection, the criteria for acquisition and accession, processing procedures, preservation strategies, and access policies. In recent years, the More Product, Less Process (MPLP) approach has gained popularity as a methodology for enhancing processing efficiency and increasing access to collections. This case study will outline the process of writing a collection management policy for the Bedford County Archives using the MPLP approach. This case study will explore the process of developing a Collection Management policy for the Bedford County Archives, utilizing various sources and best practices in the field.

The Bedford County Archives is a medium-sized repository located in the southeastern United States, bordering Rutherford County, in the old courthouse that resides in the center of Shelbyville. The archive houses a diverse collection of materials, including manuscripts, photographs, maps, and oral histories, that document the history of the county. Despite the

richness of its collections, the archives has struggled to keep up with the demands of processing and making materials accessible to researchers. Due to limited resources and staff, processing backlogs have accumulated over the years, leading to delays in access and frustration among stakeholders. In response to these challenges, it was decided to adopt the MPLP approach to streamline processing workflows, reduce backlogs, and improve access to collections. The MPLP approach, developed by archivists Mark Greene and Dennis Meissner, emphasizes a pragmatic and efficient approach to archival processing, prioritizing access and user needs over comprehensive processing. By focusing on providing more access to a larger portion of the collection, MPLP aims to increase the productivity of archival processing and make collections more readily available to researchers.

Before discussing the new collection management policy, it is important to understand what “More Product, Less Produce” means. When Mark A. Greene and Dennis Meissner wrote about MPLP, they challenged the traditional time-consuming and resource-intensive archival processing practices. They argue that the traditional focus on meticulous and time-consuming processing often creates significant backlogs, hindering access to archival materials.<sup>1</sup> Greene and Meissner surmise archivists tolerate this unconstrained backlog because “our profession awards a higher priority to serving the perceived needs of our collections than to serving the demonstrated needs of our constituents.”<sup>2</sup> They proposed a transformative approach that prioritizes providing faster and broader access to collections, while recognizing that some level of arrangement and description is still essential. Greene and Meissner’s transformative, MPLP approach is the

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<sup>1</sup> Mark Greene and Dennis Meissner, “More Product, Less Process: Revamping Traditional Archival Processing,” *The American Archivist* 68, no. 2 (September 2005): 208–63, 209–10.

<sup>2</sup> Greene and Meissner, “More Product, Less Process: Revamping Traditional Archival Processing,” 212.

“Golden Minimum.”<sup>3</sup> Greene’s MPLP movement acknowledges the need for pragmatic solutions to cope with the growing volume of materials and limited resources faced by archivists.

Before embarking on the development of a collection management policy, it was important to identify the key stakeholders in the archives.<sup>4</sup> These stakeholders include the county government, which provides funding and support for the archives, as well as researchers, historians, genealogists, and other members of the public who use the archives for research purposes.<sup>5</sup> In addition, the staff of the archives, including the Director Carole Roberts and archivist Kathryn Hopkins, were also stakeholders in the development of the policy. It was important to engage these stakeholders in the policy development process to ensure that their needs and concerns were taken into account. Morgan and I interviewed stakeholders to gather feedback on their priorities and expectations for the archive’s collection management practices.

The writing process began with a thorough review of existing policies and procedures at the Bedford County Archives. The Director Roberts, alongside Morgan and I, conducted a quick inventory of the collections, assessing the strengths and weaknesses of current practices and identifying areas for improvement. This assessment revealed the extent of the processing backlog and the challenges faced by staff in managing the collections. The strengths include a full storage and archival reading room, fully equipped to preserve and conserve archival material, locked behind a security door only accessed by either the director or archivist. However, the bulk of the repository lay in the unprocessed materials storied in the attic of the courthouse, at risk of environmental exposure, despite the best efforts of the staff to preserve them. The immensity of

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<sup>3</sup> Greene and Meissner, “More Product, Less Process: Revamping Traditional Archival Processing,” 240.

<sup>4</sup> Frank Boles, “Collection Policy,” in *Selecting and Appraising Archives and Manuscripts* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2005), 64–73, 67.

<sup>5</sup> Vicki L Gregory, *Collection Development and Management for 21st Century Library Collections: An Introduction* (Chicago: Ala Neal-Schuman, 2019), 13–14, 29.

the backlog cannot be overstated or exaggerated. The single semblance of an organized catalog revolved around a sketch made by Director Roberts, detailing a literal maze of boxed collections and metal cabinets sitting up in the attic. The previous archival policies, along with important documents and notes, were kept in a single binder about an inch or two thick.

The first step in implementing MPLP at the Bedford County Archives was to develop a collection management policy that reflected the principles and goals of the approach. The collection management policy, or CMP, in this case, serves as a guiding document for all aspects of collection management.<sup>6</sup> Specifically, in the words of Jutta Reed-Scott, CMP “encompasses the following four components: (1) collection planning; (2) effective selection; (3) evaluation or analysis of the collections; and (4) resource sharing and coordinated collection development.”<sup>7</sup> The collection management policy outlines the scope of the collection, the criteria for selection and acquisition, processing procedures, preservation strategies, and access policies.<sup>8</sup> Based on this assessment, we decided to draft a new collection management policy that incorporated the principles of MPLP. The policy aimed to streamline processing workflows, prioritize access to collections, and improve user services.<sup>9</sup> The policy outlined the scope of the collection, the criteria for selection and acquisition, processing procedures, preservation strategies, and access policies. The first step in developing a collection management policy for the Bedford County

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<sup>6</sup> American Alliance of Museums, “Developing a Collections Management Policy,” (Arlington, Virginia: American Alliance of Museums, 2012), 1.

<sup>7</sup> Jutta Reed-Scott, “Collection Management Strategies for Archivists,” *The American Archivist* 47, no. 1 (January 1984): 23–29, 24.

<sup>8</sup> Sheila S. Intner, “Using a Collection Development Curriculum as a Model for Developing Policy Documents in Practice,” *The Acquisitions Librarian* 15, no. 30 (November 6, 2003): 49–62, 53; Vicki L Gregory, *Collection Development and Management for 21st Century Library Collections : An Introduction* (Chicago: Ala Neal-Schuman, 2019), 31–33.

<sup>9</sup> Ghalib Khan and Rubina Bhatti, “An Argument on Collection Development and Collection Management,” *Library Philosophy and Practice (E-Journal)*, May 2021; Mark Greene and Dennis Meissner, “More Product, Less Process: Revamping Traditional Archival Processing,” *The American Archivist* 68, no. 2 (September 2005): 208–63, <https://doi.org/10.17723/aarc.68.2.c741823776k65863>; Wyoma Vanduinkerken and Wendi Arant Kasper, *Leading Libraries How to Create a Service Culture* (Chicago: Ala Editions, an Imprint of the American Library Association, 2015), 31–32, 60, 66–68.

Archives was to conduct thorough research and planning. This included reviewing existing collection management policies of other archives, reading over literature, and assessing the needs and goals of the Bedford County Archives as provided by Director Roberts. Key considerations during this phase included identifying the scope of the archive's collection, establishing criteria for acquiring materials, and outlining procedures for processing and preserving materials.

The next step in developing the CMP was to assess the archives' collection. This involved conducting a comprehensive inventory of the materials in the collection.<sup>10</sup> The purpose of this inventory was to get a baseline understanding of the size, scope, and condition of the collection, as well as to identify any materials that were in need of conservation or preservation.<sup>11</sup> In addition to the inventory, it was important to conduct a thorough assessment of the collection's strengths and weaknesses.<sup>12</sup> Based on the assessment of the materials, a set priorities were made for the archive's management and preservation, identifying the most significant and valuable materials in the collection, as well as determining the areas of greatest need for preservation and conservation.<sup>13</sup> Another priority identified for the collection was the need for improved access and organization, as the archive's collection was previously organized in a haphazard and inconsistent manner. As a result, one of the key goals of the collection management policy was to establish policies and procedures for organizing and cataloging the collection in a more systematic and efficient manner. The ensuring that the goals and objectives were realistic and

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<sup>10</sup> Margaret Zarnosky Saponaro and G Edward Evans, *Collection Management Basics* (Santa Barbara Libraries Unlimited, 2019), 219.

<sup>11</sup> Randell C. Jimersom, "Archives and Manuscripts: Deciding What to Collect," *OCLC Systems & Services* 19, no. 2 (2003): 54–57, 54.

<sup>12</sup> Susan Raikes, "Is Collection Management an 'Art' or a 'Science'?", *Journal of Conservation and Museum Studies* 1 (May 1, 1996): 16.

<sup>13</sup> Mark Greene and Dennis Meissner, "More Product, Less Process: Revamping Traditional Archival Processing," *The American Archivist* 68, no. 2 (September 2005): 208–63, 250–52.

achievable, and that they were aligned with the mission and vision of the Bedford County Archives.

With the priorities for the collection established, the next step was to determine policies and procedures for acquisition, processing, access, and preservation of the materials in the collection.<sup>14</sup> This determination process involved developing guidelines for acquiring new materials, including criteria for assessing the value and significance of potential donations, as well as procedures for processing and cataloging new materials once they were acquired.<sup>15</sup> In addition, it was important to establish policies and procedures for providing access to the collection. This involved developing guidelines for researchers and other users of the archives, as well as procedures for handling requests for information and materials. It was also important to establish policies and procedures for preserving and conserving the materials in the collection, including guidelines for handling and storing materials to ensure their long-term preservation.

With goals and objectives in place, we worked on a draft of the Collection Management policy. This involved outlining the purpose of the policy, defining the scope of the collection, establishing criteria for acquiring materials, outlining procedures for processing and preserving materials, and defining access and use policies. Key considerations during this phase included ensuring that the policy was clear, comprehensive, and easy to understand, and that it addressed the unique needs and challenges of the Bedford County Archives.<sup>16</sup> We defined the scope of the collections that the archive will collect and preserve. The Bedford County Archives collects materials that document the history and culture of Bedford County, including, but not limited to:

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<sup>14</sup> Margaret Zarnosky Saponaro and G Edward Evans, *Collection Management Basics* (Santa Barbara Libraries Unlimited, 2019), 38–39.

<sup>15</sup> Saponaro and Evans, *Collection Management Basics*, 115–18.

<sup>16</sup> Margaret Zarnosky Saponaro and G Edward Evans, *Collection Management Basics* (Santa Barbara Libraries Unlimited, 2019), 39, 46; Vicki L Gregory, *Collection Development and Management for 21st Century Library Collections : An Introduction* (Chicago: Ala Neal-Schuman, 2019), 17–18, 31, 38.

- I. County records, such as minutes, reports, and correspondence;
- II. Personal papers of prominent individuals or organizations in the county;
- III. Photographs, maps, and other visual materials;
- IV. Published materials, such as books, newspapers, and periodicals; and
- V. Digital records and born-digital materials.<sup>17</sup>

The Archives does not collect materials that fall outside of the scope of its mission.

After drafting the policy, it was reviewed by Director Roberts and Dr. Kolar to gather feedback and suggestions for improvement. This feedback was then used to revise and refine the policy. Key considerations during this phase included incorporating feedback from both Director Roberts and Dr. Kolar, ensuring that the policy was aligned with best practices in the field of archival management, the county archives, and addressing any gaps or inconsistencies in the policy.<sup>18</sup>

Developing a Collection Management policy for the Bedford County Archives was a complex and time-consuming process, but it was also a valuable learning experience. Some of the key lessons learned include the importance of conducting thorough research and planning, setting clear goals and objectives, and seeking feedback from stakeholders throughout the process. Additionally, Morgan and I ensured the new policy was flexible and adaptable to changing needs and circumstances, and that it reflected best practices in the field of archival management, as provided by the American Alliance of Museums, Saponaro's *Collection Management Basics*, Gregory's *Collection Development and Management for 21st Century Library Collections: An Introduction* and other literature reviews. By following the guidelines

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<sup>17</sup> Angharad Roberts, "Exploring Concepts of 'Collection' in the Digital World," *Purdue University Press EBooks*, October 15, 2013, 453–59, 456–57.

<sup>18</sup> Wyoma Vanduinkerken and Wendi Arant Kasper, *Leading Libraries How to Create a Service Culture* (Chicago: Ala Editions, an Imprint of the American Library Association, 2015), 7, 50, 53, 60–68.

outlined in the collection management policy, the Bedford County Archives can effectively manage its collections and ensure their long-term preservation and accessibility for future generations. In the end, writing a collection management policy for the Bedford County Archives, while implementing the MPLP approach proved to be a challenging, revamping the old policies and guidelines used, but rewarding process. Moving forward, the archives will continue to implement MPLP principles and strategies to enhance processing efficiency and increase access to collections for researchers and users.



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