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Mid-term Essay
LS558 Archival Representation, Access, and Use
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In what ways could standardization have a *negative* impact on accessibility to archives?

Our readings on classification and standardization were eye opening for me. It is unnerving when you realize how deeply ingrained systems have become in societal functions that you are unconscious of their impact on how life is experienced and privileged. People have chosen to classify and standardize almost everything; it can be seen as the basis of human knowledge. The results of these choices become social facts that create an agreed upon social reality of assigned functions, leading to classifications by a common shared intention to treat things in a particular way.[1] When classification and standardization is viewed through the archival lens, you must understand, as Bowker and Star state, "Each standard and each category valorizes some point of view and silences another."[2] This is the crux of the colonial archive, a historically privileged arena of power, where the role of the archivist is undeniable. The authors acknowledge that this doesn't mean this valorization or silencing always will have nefarious results, but it is inescapable. In the end, it is a choice based on personal and professional ethics, and in there lies the danger.[3]

Jimerson, in his article "Archives and Manuscripts: Archives and Memory," rightfully observed that this choice provides archivists the ability to either co-create power structures or to promote their dismantling.[4] Due to the fragile fluidity of collective and personal memory, archival memory has become a means to link memory to stable and preservable forms. Jimerson states the artifacts and documents within archival holdings are "surrogates for memory," in which memory can be fixed within time and place.[5] Historical memory is then structured upon the evidentiary holdings of the archive. Here in lies the rub, archives are not neutral institutions. Archival memory is historically privileged, thus privileging historical memory. Given that

[1] Currall, James; Michael Moss; and Susan Stuart. "What is a Collection," *Archivaria* 58 (Fall 204): 131-146.
[2] Bowker, Geoffrey C., and Susan Leighr Star. *Sorting Things Out and Classification and Its Consequences*. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), p. 5.
[3] Ibid., 5.
[4] Jimerson, Randall C. "Archives and Manuscripts: Archives and Memory," OCLC *Systems & Services*: Vol. 19, no.3 (2003): 85-95.
[5] Ibid., 89.

archives confer significance and authority upon documents, it directly influences historical memory, and over time impacts collective memory. Jimerson makes his stand here, archivists must recognize their role in identity and memory construction politics. He posits that this applies to not just what is deemed worthy of preserving, but the means in which it is made accessible. Jimerson, referencing Nesmith, states that as archivists create the finding aids that provide controlled access to archival materials, "How they perform these archival functions will shape the accessibility of these materials for all future research."[6]

Given the weight of implication in Jimerson's statement, the decisions made in the preservation of and the access to archival materials has necessitated theoretical frameworks and systems to provide guidance and structure in navigating appraisal practices, as well as descriptive practices to facilitate access. As our archival frameworks for description have become more standardized to reportedly facilitate greater access, we must be cognizant of the limitations imposed by these frameworks. Standardization inherently imposes a classification system that dictates a predetermined preference in how things should be organized. When one attempts to fit an object within a predetermined framework, which consists of categories manipulated and determined intentionally, decisions, according to Currall et al., "express preferences that are based on a range of choices, personal, professional, cultural, historical, political, and so on."[7] Therefore, choices made by individuals or groups of individuals defined by their cultural specific language, means these "categorization choices privilege, possibly inadvertently, some kinds of information or knowledge over others."[8] A document never simply relates to one subject or activity and must be understood in context of other documents, which in turn are related to other activities. The complexity of context can be lost when introduced to standardized systems. This is amplified, as Star and Bowker state, because no real-world classification system survives people disagreeing "about their nature, they ignore or misunderstand them; or they mix together different and contradictory principles."[9] In the end, standardization is a necessary concession in archives to facilitate greater access through interoperability and semantic web tools. Standards make things work over distance with heterogeneous metrics; however, the algorithms of

[6] Jimerson, Randall C., "Archives and Manuscripts: Archives and Memory," 93.
[7] Currall, James; Michael Moss; and Susan Stuart. "What is a Collection,"135.
[8] Ibid., 136.
[9] Bowker, Geoffrey C., and Susan Leighr Star. *Sorting Things Out and Classification and Its Consequences*, 11.

codification will obscure, rather than resolve the moral issues inherent in the process.[10] Opening up collections to participatory tagging to create additional cultural-specific metadata has the potential to redress the silences that will undoubtedly happen with the usage of classificatory and standardization systems.

Look online at the websites of five different archival institutions, paying specific attention to their finding aids and their archival description. Do they seem to have standardization across the board? Do they have standardization within one institution? Across all of them? Reflect on the practical application of standards such as DACS.

Archival description is necessary to distill the masses of information found in records, enabling archivists to succinctly describe, "what they are, what they mean and the historical process by which they were maintained."[11] To facilitate this process, the Society of American Archivists adopted Describing Archives: A Content Standard (DACS) as the official content standard for U.S. archives in the creation of archival descriptions, such as finding aids and catalog records.[12] But has the implementation of DACS led to standardization across archival repositories? In order the judge the standardization and consistency of archival finding aids and description practices across institutions and within a given institution, I chose to investigate five schools in the University System of Georgia (USG): The University of Georgia, Georgia College, Kennesaw State University, Georgia State University, and Georgia Southern University. As an USG employee of Georgia College Library, I was curious to determine: if institutions are within the same state university system, does this translate into a system-wide standardization of these archival processes.

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[10] Bowker, Geoffrey C., and Susan Leighr Star. *Sorting Things Out and Classification and Its Consequences*, 24.
[11] *Describing Archives: A Content Standard*. Chicago: The Society of American Archivists, 2020.
[12] Ibid., vi.

I began my investigation with the USG flagship university, The University of Georgia. Founded in 1785, the University of Georgia's Special Collections Libraries houses the Hargrett Rare Book & Manuscript Library, the Richard B. Russell Library for Political Research and Studies, and the Walter J. Brown Media Archives & Peabody Award Collection. I initially reviewed the finding aid for the Ed Friend Visual Materials Collection.[13] It is presented as a dedicated web page, beginning with a descriptive summary (Title, Creator, Inclusive Dates, Language, Extent, Collection Number, Repository, and Abstract), followed by a collection description (Biographical Note, Scope and Content, and Organization and Arrangement), proceeded by administrative information (Conditions Governing Access, Preferred Citation, Processing Notes, User Restrictions, Copyright Information, and Finding Aid Publication date), followed by related materials and subjects, related collections in other repositories, and lastly, series descriptions and folder listings. Across the institution's collections, the finding aids are consistent in appearance and form.

Next, I visited Kennesaw State University Archives and Special Collections, which also houses the Kennesaw State University Bentley Rare Book Museum. I conducted a search of the collections and randomly viewed the finding aid for the Blair Family Collection.[14] Immediately, it is obvious that Kennesaw State presents their finding aids differently than the University of Georgia. Kennesaw's is a dedicated page hosted in ArchivesSpace. The presentation of the finding aid is much more visually pleasing and modern than the University of Georgia. On the landing page, right below the collection name, identifier, and repository, you have three tabs that can be toggled between. The default is the collection overview, along with the other options, collection organization and container inventory. The collection overview provides content description, collection dates, creator, conditions governing access and use, extent, and language of materials. Below this initial information is additional description, containing custodial history, source of acquisition, other descriptive information, subjects, related groups, related names, digital materials, finding aid & administrative information, and repository details. The collection organization tab presents reiterated information about the collection and then provides collection series information. The container inventory provides item levels description per collection box. All the Kennesaw State University finding aids are consistent is appearance and form.

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[14] https://archivesspace.kennesaw.edu/repositories/4/resources/47

Georgia State University Special Collections also uses finding aids hosted on

ArchivesSpace. I searched their collections and randomly reviewed the finding aid for the

Speakers Club Collection.[15] Since Kennesaw State and Georgia State both utilize ArchivesSpace,

there is an immediate visual consistency between the two repositories. However, the information

is organized differently between the two. Georgia State University displays scope and content of

the collection, dates, access restrictions, terms governing use and reproduction, and language of

materials. This is followed by the additional description information, which includes acquisition

information, processing information, subjects, finding aid & administrative information, physical

storage information, and repository information. The finding aids across the collections are

[15] https://archivesspace.library.gsu.edu/repositories/4/resources/1682

consistent.

ArchivesSpace at GSU Library

Collections   Subjects   Names   🔍 Search

Speakers Club collection
Collection — Box: 1   Identifier: G1973-01A
Georgia State University Archives | Speakers Club collection

Collection Overview   Collection Organization   Container Inventory

Scope and Contents of the Collection
Financial records, correspondence, and membership lists comprise the records of the Speakers Club at the precessors of Georgia State University, 1938-1942, 1962-1963.

Dates
1938-1942, 1962-1963

Access Restrictions
Records may be subject to restrictions. Consult archivist before requesting this material.

Terms Governing Use and Reproduction
To quote in print, or otherwise reproduce in whole or in part in any publication, including on the Worldwide Web, any material from this collection, the researcher must obtain permission from (1) the owner of the physical property and (2) the holder of the copyright. Persons wishing to quote from this collection should consult the reference archivist to determine copyright holders for information in this collection. Reproduction of any...See more ›

Extent
0.2 Linear Feet (in 3 folders)

Language of Materials
English

Expand All

Additional Description

Subjects

Finding Aid & Administrative Information

Physical Storage Information

Repository Details

Search Collection
From year   To year
Search

Collection organization
Speakers Club collection
Receipts, 1962-1963
Membership lists, 1938-1942
Letters received, 1942

My experience with the above three institution made clear that my institution, Georgia College Library Special Collections, presents their finding aids in a very different manner. I randomly selected the James C. Bonner Papers Collection to review.[16] Once a patron selects a collection, they land on the biographical note. A right justified menu allows you to move from here to individual pages dedicated to scope and content, provenance and arrangement, and lastly the finding aid. The finding aid page contains a link the finding aid as pdf file created in Archivists' Toolkit. Once in the finding aid, you are presented with the summary information outlining the repository, creator, title, date (bulk), date (inclusive), extent, language, abstract, and preferred citation note. Next is the biographical and historical note, scope and content note, arrangement note, administrative information, controlled access headings, and then the collection inventory. The finding aids are fairly consistent across the institution, the older aids were produced in Archivists' Toolkit and the newer aids were produced in ArchivesSpace. The look

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[16] https://libguides.gcsu.edu/bonner-papers

and feel are very similar, there are subtle differences in order and information field terminologies.

Lastly, I visited Special Collections at Georgia Southern University. I randomly selected the American Legion Auxiliary, Dexter Allen Unit No. 90 Records Collection.[17] Georgia Southern was similar to Georgia College in look and feel. Georgia Southern did not have dedicated pages for biographical note, scope and content, provenance and arrangement, and finding aid. Instead, when a collection is selected, you land on a single page that has at the top, a downloadable finding aid in pdf format. Below this, you are provided with scope and content, start date, end date, keywords, disciplines, extent, copyright, and recommended citation. The finding aid starts with a collection overview outlining title, date, extent, creator, language, repository, and processing note. Next is information on the use of the collection, outlining conditions governing access, physical access, conditions governing reproduction and use, and preferred citation. Next is information about the collection outlining administrative history, scope and content, system of arrangement, access points, and lastly container listings. The finding aids are consistent across the collections.

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[17] https://digitalcommons.georgiasouthern.edu/finding-aids/143/
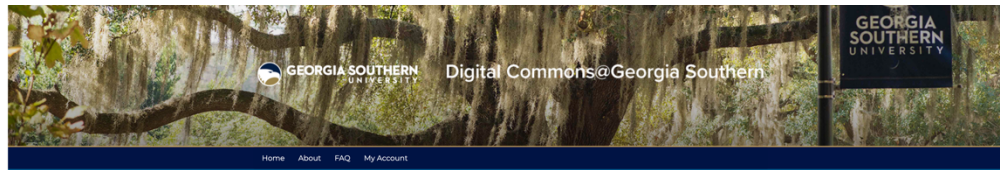
I found this investigation to be an interesting exercise. The finding aids across the institutions within the University System of Georgia are not consistent in presentation and differ somewhat in structure. So why is this? I have learned that many of the differences boils down to institutional capacities. The University of Georgia, as the state's largest institution with a very large institutional capacity, was able to build its own infrastructure to house their finding aids. This was done years ago, before ArchivesSpace, to allow their finding aids to be more discoverable by enabling HTML formatting of the information. Kennesaw State University and Georgia State University utilize ArchivesSpace to construct their finding aids, which are then hosted on dedicated university server space. In comparison, Georgia College and Georgia Southern University construct their finding aids in ArchivesSpace, but lack institutional support or capacity to host the finding aids on university server space. This necessitates both archives to export their finding aids out of ArchivesSpace as pdf files. These are then hosted externally; Georgia College utilizes libguides as the hosting framework and Georgia Southern utilizes bepress Digital Commons as their hosting framework. I noted subtle differences in the layout of each institution's find aids, such as the order of the information within the aid, or slightly

different headings. For example, Kennesaw State University uses *Content Description*, whereas, Georgia College uses *Biographical/Historical*, and Georgia Southern University uses *About the Collection* as headings for the sections describing what the collections are. However, there is standardization in the information presented, and in spite of slightly different ordering and labeling, each finding aid is fairly similar.

As discussed, individual institutional capacities directly affect the methods that archival repositories may present finding aids to end users, which in turn creates a different experiential interaction with each archive. This perceived lack of standardization across archival repositories can lead to user frustration. One may feel they have to figure out a new accessibility and description system with each archival inquiry. Once you deduce how to access an institution's finding aids and become comfortable with the framework they reside in, DACS provides a fairly uniformed and structured presentation of information. I would like to see the University System of Georgia adopt a system-wide standardization in the presentation of finding aids. This could be achieved by providing each repository what is needed to host finding aids built in ArchivesSpace, thus ensuring a consistent user experience across the state's academic archives.