Principled Archivists

How to Make the Proposed New DACS Principles Work for You and Your Users
Instructor Bios

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Maureen Callahan
Sophia Smith Collection Archivist, Smith College Special Collections
@mcallahan
mcallahan@smith.edu

Carrie Hintz
Head of Collection Services, Rose Library, Emory University
@CarrieElise
carrie.hintz@emory.edu
Getting Started – 9:00-9:45
Learning Objectives

Learn about the background and process for revising the principles and understand the concepts underlying the new principles.

Equip yourself with tools to implement the new principles at your repository.

Examine your own practices in the context of descriptive principles and find new ways to better serve your users.
Participant Learning Objectives
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Thinking about relationship between bib desc and archdesc

Being more effective teachers of archival description

How archdesc interacts with systems

How to manage format-specific description

Subject analysis

How to make description inclusive, more accessible
AORTA Guidelines for Discussion

Introducing DACS

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What is an archival content standard?

Why does it need a set of principles to inform it?

What differences do you see between DACS and content standards for related materials (museum objects, books)?

What’s the relationship between a content standard and an encoding/transmission standard (like EAD)?
Principle Revision Process and What’s New
Driven by Users: Principles 1 and 2 (9:42-10:30)
What questions are your users asking that you can’t currently answer?
Principle 1

Archival description expresses professional ethics and values.

Professional values and ethics drive archival work, including descriptive practice. Archival description is an iterative, ethical practice that requires continual engagement with core values. Rooting standards in values helps archivists enact these values consistently and makes them explicit to our user communities.

Archival description that is rooted in ethics will produce a richer researcher experience because it:
- produces trust in and between users, archivists, and repositories
- encourages a diverse archival record
- promotes responsible and responsive descriptive practices
- holds archivists accountable to users and to each other
- privileges equitable access and accessibility
Users are the fundamental reason for archival description.

Archivists make descriptive choices that impact how users find, identify, select, and use archival records. To make wise choices about descriptive practices, archivists must develop an awareness of user needs and behaviors.
User Scenario Exercise

- Find a group of two or three other people you DON’T ALREADY KNOW.
- We will give you a user persona. Spend some time reviewing it and get to know them. Discuss with your group how you may have interacted with patrons like them in the past. (10 minutes)
Your persona wants to request a reproduction of something held in your repository. (One person in the group can volunteer to explain how this works in their repository)

1. **Why** is your persona requesting this thing?
2. **How** did they find that it exists?
3. **How** do they want it delivered to them?
4. **How satisfied** with this process will they be in the end?
Break (10:30-10:45)
All Records in All Contexts: Principles 3 and 4 (10:45-12:15)
Principle 3

Because archival description privileges intellectual content in context, descriptive rules apply equally to all records, regardless of format or carrier type.

Descriptive standards must recognize that not all cultures and communities document in the same ways, and our descriptive standards must be flexible enough to accommodate all the ways that human experience is recorded.

Archivists must adapt and respond to changing recordkeeping practices and technologies. Applying a common set of descriptive rules allows archivists to create consistent descriptions. It encourages confidence in professional judgment and gives archivists the flexibility to apply standards judiciously and thoughtfully.

Consistent description across formats:

- supports universal description and access
- lowers cognitive load for users
- maintains records’ contexts as well as intellectual content
Examples in Action

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What does this tell us about the records described?

How might this description better facilitate use?
Exercise: Integrating Accruals

Look through the sample finding aid for the University of Michigan Board of Regents records (including scope notes).

Take your assignment (an accrual to the collection) and identify where in the existing collection structure you would add these new records if you were processing the collection today.
Principle 4

Records, agents, activities, and the relationships between them are the four fundamental concepts that constitute archival description.

Meaning in archival records is revealed through their contexts as much as through their contents. Archivists expose contextual significance by describing records, agents, activities, and the relationships between them.
Records must be described in aggregate and may be described in parts.

The whole gives meaning and coherence to the parts. Description of the aggregate is therefore an indispensable component of establishing context and must be provided before proceeding with the description of component parts.
The relationships among records, agents, and activities are essential to understanding archives and must be described.

Relationships, which connect agents, records, and activities, convey meaning that may not be apparent from the contents of records alone. Relationships may be simple or may comprise a complex network of interactions among multiple records, agents, and activities.
Agents

Record creators and other agents must be described sufficiently to understand the meaning of records.

Agents act on records or interact with other agents across time. Agents may be human or machine.

A category of agents, those responsible for the creation, compilation, and maintenance of the records is particularly important and must be described. Describing these agents requires archivists to document agents’ roles, functions, occupations, and activities.

Archivists must be transparent about the sources of their description and recognize that agents have the right to define their identities, which may change over time.
Activities that are essential to understanding records must be described.

Activities, whether biographical, historical, or administrative, provide important contextual information. Describing biographical and historical activities adds information that may be absent from the records themselves. Describing administrative activities helps users understand how the records were affected over time by the actions of various agents following their creation.
Exercise: Self-Documentation and Real Life

Create a field notes worksheet for your curator to ask you to capture what’s important about your life work, your context, and your relationships, and how these are documented in your records. Which records are most valuable and meaningful for documenting your life? What areas of your life won’t have documentation?
Curator’s Collecting Worksheet

Have records ever been lost or destroyed during the lifecycle of the organization (or the person’s life)?

Who are the most important people in your circle?

What records came from significant activities to you over different periods of time?

What communication methods do you use? With which people?

What does sensitive mean to you and where do we find that info?

How do you organize your papers? What are your habits?
Lunch! Be back at 1:30 ready to work
Transparency: Principles 5, 6, and 7 (1:30-3:00)
Principle 5

Archival description must be clear about what archivists know, what they don’t know, and how they know it.

Archivists must always provide honest description that mitigates human bias and limitations through open reference to their sources of knowledge. Citation in archival description builds a culture of accountability and trust.

Honest description:
- acknowledges archivists’ expertise in records, recordkeeping systems and documentary forms
- delineates the limitations of archivists’ knowledge and authority
- acknowledges that archivists are people, and people are biased
Citations

Example 1

Example 2
Curator of Modern Political and Historical Collections, Randy Gue, acquired the collection as part of the Rose Library’s holdings in LGBT politics and activism. Approximately a quarter of a linear foot of duplicate materials were securely shredded. Appraisal decisions were made by Acquisitions Assistant, Elizabeth Miller, in consultation with Randy Gue.
A total of 809 linear feet of materials were separated from the collection in 2009 as follows: 20 linear feet of books (sent to Firestone Library and the Department of Rare Books and Special Collections for further processing); 123 linear feet of redundant constituent correspondence (a 6% sample of which was retained); 59 linear feet of secondary material available from other sources (destroyed); 144 linear feet of routine constituent correspondence (destroyed); 35 linear feet of routine office files (destroyed); 101 linear feet of duplicate correspondence carbons (destroyed); 106 linear feet of clippings available from other sources (destroyed); 50 linear feet of duplicates (destroyed); 53 linear feet of material, including card files and contribution envelopes, that duplicates information available elsewhere in the collection (destroyed); 103 linear feet of case files peripheral to policy research (destroyed); 4 linear feet of book drafts peripheral to policy research (destroyed); 9 linear feet of personal records peripheral to policy research (destroyed); and 2 linear feet of blank forms and folders of no research value (destroyed).
The Rose Library purchased this collection from book dealer Glenn Horowitz in 2010. The original owner bought it in the early 1970s as the unknown contents of a trunk sold at an auction of abandoned items from a storage facility in Wellfleet, Massachusetts. During the 1960s, Brennan spent her summers in the town.

Collection acquired from a dealer; provenance unknown.
The materials in this collection were generated by and passed through a number of hands in the right wing anti-communist network, including private individuals, businesses, and a non-profit before New York University's Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives obtained them in 1992. The immediate source of acquisition for the materials was Liberty University of Lynchburg, Virginia, which at the time was scaling back their archives due to financial difficulties. The accession number for this acquisition is 1992.021. Liberty University had received the collection from the Church League of America, an anti-communist research and advocacy organization, which had essentially dissolved by 1984. The Church League had received the research files from like-minded organizations operating in similar capacities. The files created by American Business Consultants' Counterattack were transferred to the Church League of America as a result of ABC’s own financial difficulties and held by the Church League from 1968-1985. Some files generated by former Joseph McCarthy aide Karl Baarslag were variously gifted or sold to the Wackenhut Corporation, who also collected information on individuals’ alleged subversive activities. Following the passage of the Fair Credit Reporting Act, Wackenhut drastically reduced the number of its files on individuals, and in 1975 they gave many of their research files to the non-profit Church League of America. Materials in Series IV: Research Files on California Student Movements came into the possession of the Church League of America from an unknown entity.
Principle 6

Archivists must document and make discoverable the actions they take on records.

Archivists and archival repositories are agents whose actions affect records and the ways that all users can access and interact with those records.

Archivists have an obligation based in professional values of accountability and responsible custody to thoroughly and transparently describe their own interventions in the course of their work. These interventions may potentially affect users’ understandings of records and are an essential part of archival description.
Exercise: Processing Notes

Find a partner

Talk about a recent processing project (about 5 minutes per person)

Write a processing note for your partner

Examples in DACS 7.1.8
Principle 7

Archival description is accessible.

Users of archives encounter barriers to accessing archival description. Typical barriers may be physical, technological, linguistic or geographic. Archivists must limit or remove these barriers to finding and interacting with description.

Accessible archival description engages creators and communities being documented to reflect their complexity, nuance, and fluidity. Archivists must be respectful of the knowledge they hold in trust and the norms of the communities from which they collect, particularly when collecting from communities that have been historically marginalized.

Accessible and respectful description builds trust between archives, users of archives, and those being documented.
Break (3:00-3:15)
Implementing Extensible Description: Principles 8, 9, 10 and 11 (3:15-4:30)
Principle 8

Archival description should be easy to use, re-use, and share.

Archival description is a form of data, consisting of discrete data elements that can be expressed in a variety of useful outputs.

Users are best able to use, re-use and share archival description when:

- It is discoverable
- It is structured
- It is machine-readable
- It is machine-actionable
- It is available under an open license

Archivists must understand the ways that their data can be consumed by a broad range of users, including people and machines.
Principle 9

Each collection within a repository must have an archival description.

The absence of archival description is a barrier to users and good stewardship. In order to access archival collections, users must know which collections a repository holds. No matter how basic a description may be, it is more advantageous to users than no description at all.

Creating these archival descriptions helps archivists meet stewardship needs. This results in:

- Access to a better, broader sense of the scope of our holdings
- The ability for archivists to gather information about how collections are used
- Guidance for future appraisal and acquisition choices

Archival repositories must deploy their resources in a way that permits them to describe all of their collections as part of their normal business operations.
What constitutes a minimum archival description?
DACS Required Elements

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Single-Level Required
- Reference Code Element (2.1)
- Name and Location of Repository Element (2.2)
- Title Element (2.3)
- Date Element (2.4)
- Extent Element (2.5)
- Name of Creator(s) Element (2.6)
- Scope and Content Element (3.1)
- Conditions Governing Access Element (4.1)
- Languages and Scripts of the Material Element (4.5)
DACS Required Elements

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Multilevel Required
- Everything in the single-level required element set, plus
- Identification of the whole-part relationship of the top level to at least the next subsequent level in the multilevel description. This may be done through internal tracking within a particular descriptive system; if so, the output must be able to explicitly identify this relationship.
- Each subsequent level of a multilevel description should include all of the elements used at higher levels, unless the information is the same as that of a higher level or if it is desirable to provide more specific information.
Archival data in the wild
Archivists must have a user-driven reason to enhance existing archival description.

When deciding how comprehensively to describe a collection, the goal should be to maximize the availability of all collection materials to users.

Once all collections in a repository have been described at a minimum level, archivists may choose to add more description. This choice must be based on demonstrated user needs or the mission of the repository.
You are determining work priorities for the month of May.

One of your curators runs into the staff meeting talking about how a benchmark donor is 93 and just broke her hip. He’s desperate to create an exhibition based on her collection while she can still attend the opening. He is advocating for giving all processing resources toward that 30 foot collection in May.

In that meeting, the collection manager argues that with a backlog the size of this organization’s and the number of different collecting areas, she would prefer to see resources go toward single-level accessible records for 30 of the most-requested but inaccessible collections.
Debate rules

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We will assign you to a side!

Write down your strongest and weakest arguments.

Pick your debater (one per side).

Maureen will moderate the debate.

Carrie will determine who made the strongest argument.
Wrapping up – implementing descriptive principles in your repositories (4:30-5:00)
Principle 11

Archival description is a continuous intellectual endeavor.

Description must be iterative. It continually reflects deeper understandings of agents, records, activities, and the relationships between them. It is responsive to users. It is flexible, reflecting changes in knowledge, practice, and values.
What is something that we discussed today that you might take back to your home repository?

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Not separating records by format automatically -- unless it’s the right choice for the records!

Making sure that the accession includes the DACS single-level minimum element set to give us a head start!

Making fuller and better use of descriptive notes.

Let’s be explicit and transparent about the work that we do!!

Use structured data!

Thinking about the relationships between records, agents, activities and relationships -- make these clear!

Context is so important!!