Hierarchical Description and Inheritance

Archival description standards require that information provided at higher levels of hierarchical descriptions not be repeated at lower levels. These descriptive elements are assumed to be inherited by subordinate units in multi-level finding aids.

In most document-centric display systems inheritance is implicit, relying on the user to interpret and contextualize the descriptive elements to make the description of any given subordinate level understandable and complete.

Single-level Displays

Inheritance is especially important for finding aid publication platforms based on single-level views of the collection. In applications such as PLEADE and ICA-AtoM, a single component is viewed at a time, together with contextual pointers to the patron’s relative position in the hierarchical description. But these systems have not taken full advantage of inherited data, leaving users with truncated descriptions.

Repurposing Descriptive Metadata

Creating descriptions that enable inheritance also improves reuse of finding aid metadata. Elements from superior hierarchical components may be incorporated in the descriptions of subordinate components, resulting in richer derivative records.

Collection-level description

- **Identifier:** UA 1119
- **Title:** Dept. of Technology Records, 1955-1988
- **Creator:** Brigham Young University, Dept. of Technology
- **Repository:** L. Tom Perry Special Collections
- **Extent:** 8 boxes (3.75 linear ft.)
- **Access:** Restricted. Closed for 25 years after date of creation.
- **Language:** English
- **Scope/Content Note:** Collection contains a variety of documents related to the Department of Technology, including correspondence and memoranda.

Series-level description

- **Identifier:** UA 1119 Series 1
- **Title:** Department Correspondence and Meeting Minutes, 1963-1988
- **Creator:** Brigham Young University, Dept. of Technology
- **Repository:** L. Tom Perry Special Collections
- **Extent:** [4 boxes from inventory]
- **Access:** Restricted. Closed for 25 years after date of creation.
- **Language:** English
- **Scope/Content Note:** Series note varies from collection based on review of inventory.

Inherited information shown in gray.

By developing data and systems that can fully leverage inheritance, single-level displays become more user-friendly and understandable to the user. The new finding aids database developed at Brigham Young University demonstrates the potential of using inheritance in displays.

Data in archival descriptions must be provided explicitly to enable inheritance, and for the creation of derivative records. Following descriptive practices that enable the creation of such records will result in clearer descriptions and greater opportunities for the creative reuse of our metadata.

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Brigham Young University finding aids database (http://findingaid.lib.byu.edu)