

Society of American Archivists Reference, Access, and Outreach Section MPLP Task Force Report

The MPLP Task Force of the Reference, Access, and Outreach Section (RAO) of SAA was interested in what members of the section felt about basic processing, or MPLP, and its implications for reference. So, task force members developed a survey to query them. While 265 archivists viewed the survey, only 73 completed it. Following is a summary of the results.

Total Size of Collections:

- Answers ranged from 36 linear feet to 130,000 cubic feet.
- Respondents reported material using a variety of measurements including: linear feet, cubic feet, collections, items, boxes, miles, and units.
- Respondents represent a variety of repository types.
- Collections described included archival materials, audio materials, microforms, photographs, negatives, rare books, sheet music, and maps.

Staff Size:

- Answers ranged from 1 to 3,900.
- The majority of respondents reported from 4 to 20 staff members.
- Many respondents reported that they also employed students to assist with archival work.

Annual Reading Room In-Person Patronage:

- Responses ranged from 0 to 1.4 million.
- Out of 70 respondents, 9 respondents didn't know how many patrons they served or did not keep statistics distinguishing on-site patrons and off-site reference requests.
- The breakdown of answers is as follows:
 - 0 patrons: 4 respondents
 - 10 and under patrons: 3 respondents
 - 30-70 patrons: 8 respondents
 - 100-500 patrons: 20 respondents
 - 600-900 patrons: 6 respondents
 - 1000-2000 patrons: 6 respondents
 - 2100-3000 patrons :4 respondents
 - 3100-5000 patrons: 5 respondents
 - 7800 patrons:1 respondent
 - 8500 patrons: 1 respondent
 - 10500 patrons:1 respondent

- 14500 patrons: 1 respondent
- 1.4 million patrons: 1 respondent

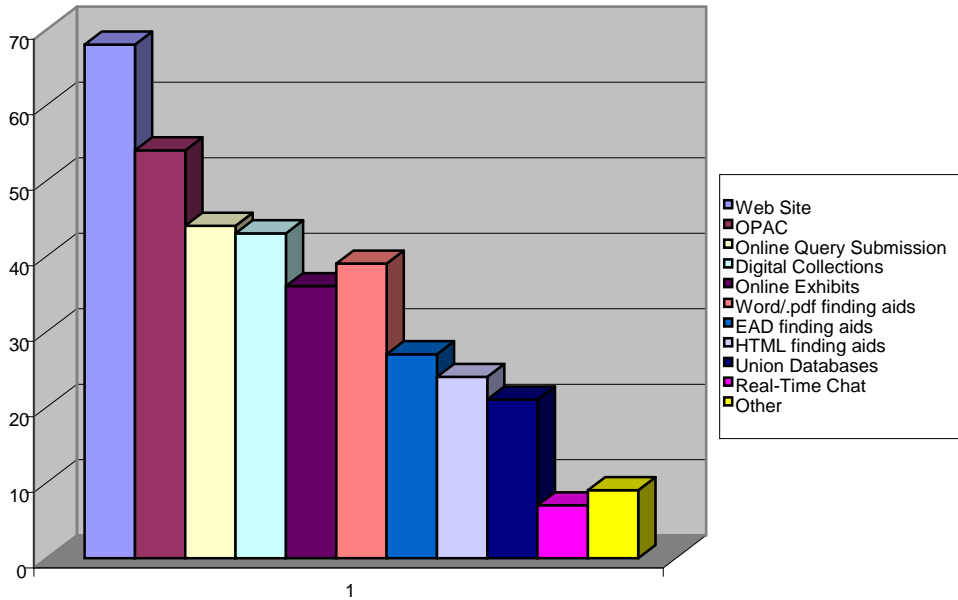
Off-site Reference Requests:

- Responses ranged from 1 to 9300.
- Out of 69 respondents, 9 respondents didn't know how many patrons they served or did not keep statistics distinguishing on-site patrons and off-site reference requests.
- The breakdown of answers is as follows:
 - 1-2 requests: 3 respondents
 - 50-100 requests :5 respondents
 - 120-250 requests: 7 respondents
 - 300-350 requests:5 respondents
 - 400-449 requests:4 respondents
 - 500-1000 requests:13 respondents
 - 1100-2360 requests: 8 respondents
 - 3000-3971 requests: 6 respondents
 - 4000-5500 requests: 7 respondents
 - 9300 requests: 1 respondents

Distribution of staff that works the reference desk:

- The most common response was that a cross section of staff worked reference shifts (45). Many respondents reported that while a public services group staffed the reference desk for the majority of service hours, other departments helped to cover weekends, evenings, holidays, and employee absences.
- The second most common response was that one person provided reference service (15). In many of these cases, respondents reported being one-person shops.
- Five respondents reported that only reference or public services staff worked on the reference desk.
- In four cases, archivists reported that they did not have a traditional reference desk and that researchers were provided service by appointment only.
- Many respondents distinguished between professional staff and paraprofessionals when describing who served on the reference desk.

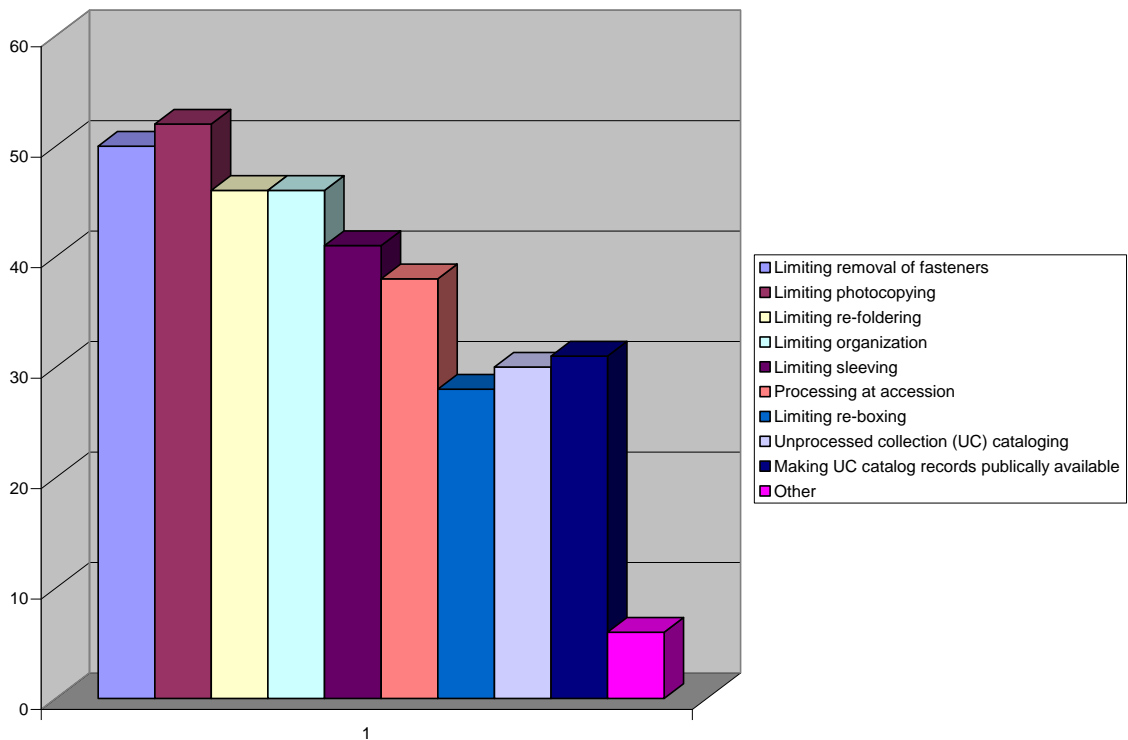
Online Access Resources Employed:



- One respondent who cited “other” reported the use of podcasts and blogs.

Basic Processing:

- 79% of respondents reported providing access to unprocessed collections.
- 88% of respondents reported that their institutions employ basic processing techniques.
- Respondents were asked which basic processing techniques their institutions employed. Following are their responses, represented in graphic format.



- 58% of respondents reported that if their institutions did not currently use basic processing techniques, they were planning to do so in the next five years.

Time Spent on Individual Reference Requests:

- The most common response was 15-30 minutes, with 36%. 29% of respondents reported spending 30-60 minutes on a reference request.
- Out of the 14 respondents who chose 'other' to describe how much time they spend on reference requests, 8 answered that it depended on the question and the needs of the patron.
- One respondent indicated that he/she spent 15-30 minutes on requests for off-site researchers and 30-60 minutes on requests for on-site researchers.

Other Responses Regarding How Much Time is Spent on Individual Reference Requests:

- Out of 25 responses, 14 replied that they did not have a set amount of time per reference request. They spend as much time as needed to answer the request.
- 11 respondents indicated that they do have a set amount of time per question.

- The breakdown of respondents who answered that they do have a time limit is as follows:
 - 2 hours: 1 respondent
 - 1 hour: 4 respondents
 - 30 minutes: 4 respondents
 - 15 minutes: 1 respondent
- 7 respondents indicated that the amount of time spent on a reference request depends on the status of the researcher. For internal customers, employees of the institution, administrators, and on-site reference requests, these respondents indicated that there was no limit on the amount of time they would spend, but they would limit time spent on external or off-site reference requests.

Charges for reference service:

- 76% of the responding archivists reported that they do not charge patrons for research conducted on their behalf.
- The average of reported fees for research was \$27.73 per hour.
- One respondent reported a sliding scale based upon how much the patron felt he/she could pay.
- Two respondents described a differential between research fees for state residents and out-of-state patrons.
- Most of the respondents who reported charging for research provided a certain amount of research service gratis (15 minutes-1 day).
- One survey participant noted that at his/her institution, there is a three-hour time limit on research for patrons, even though the institution charges \$50 per hour for the service.
- Two respondents reported that donations were suggested for research service.

Finding Aids and Access Tools:

- When asked to rank the access tools that they found most useful, survey participants, not surprisingly, gave collection inventories the highest ranking. Online catalog records ranked second, and other archivists ranked third.
- 76% of respondents reported that they had had difficulty interpreting a collection inventory.

- Survey participants were asked to rank a number of archival priorities in order of importance. The top three priorities chosen were:
 1. Putting more resources into creating basic descriptions for all collections, even though some of those collections may never have more detailed inventories written for them
 2. Putting more resources into creating basic collection inventories that lack introductory information and organization of the collection's contents if it means that collections will be made available more rapidly
 3. Putting more resources into the creation of detailed collection inventories on the web, even if it means slowing the pace at which collections are made available for research.

Providing Access to Basically Processed Collections:

- Survey participants were asked to rank the importance of a number of issues associated with providing access to basically processed collections. While 'other' received the highest ranking, 'patron usability' and 'intellectual control' were ranked second and third.
- Respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement with a number of statements related to providing access to collections. Following are some notable results.

-Participants indicated a relatively high level of agreement with the statement, "I depend on collection inventories to identify material relevant to my patrons' research." The analogous statement for catalog records received a slightly lower agreement rating.

-For the statement "limiting the removal of fasteners, photocopying of high acid papers, sleeving of photographs, and re-folding of material for a limited number of collections would be acceptable to me if it meant that more collections would be available to researchers, the average rating was 3.48 out of 5 (5 indicating strong agreement).

-When asked to indicate their level of agreement with the statement "I am confident in my ability to find material relevant to my patrons' research in archival collections, even when the collections I am using are not well organized," archivists' average rating was 2.84 out of 5.

-"Basic processing should be applied on a case-by-case, technique-by-technique basis." This statement received an average agreement rating of 3.55.

-“Basic processing techniques should be applied to all archival collections, in order to eliminate backlog and free archivists’ time for other important work.” This statement was ranked lower than the previous statement, with an average rating of 2.75.

RAO Guidance for MPLP:

- 83% of respondents indicated that they would like some guidance from RAO regarding MPLP.
- Types of assistance from RAO that respondents selected most often were:
 - Best Practices Guide (36%)
 - Endorsement and support of SAA sessions (27%)
 - Column in section newsletter (18%)
 - Processing blog (12%)

Additional Comments:

- Overall, there seemed to be an agreement that it is very difficult to draw a line between processing and reference. In many cases, the same person performs both duties. Cooperation and dialogue between reference archivists and processing archivists (and their respective sections) is needed.
- Many of the comments reflected issues related to processing rather than reference, which again points to the need for greater collaboration.
- Many respondents felt that guidelines and criteria for basic processing would be helpful. This could take the form of examples of processing manuals, best practices and criteria for when to apply traditional processing techniques vs. minimal processing. Several people pointed out the need for flexibility in any type of guidance that is developed, as well as the need to take into account the specific needs of individual repositories.
- Some respondents thought that basic processing was a non-issue and that their institutions had been applying these practices for years.
- Some participants did have some concerns regarding the impacts of basic processing on reference. Among the issues raised were:
 - Minimal processing is too cursory. Unable to discover materials for researchers
 - Security issues/physical control at time of use
 - Barriers to novice archival researchers
 - Takes more time for reference staff to help researchers

Conclusions and Recommendations:

- Respondents seemed supportive of MPLP concepts but reported a desire for more guidance about how to apply the principles of basic processing and how to “triage” collections for processing.
- The responses of survey participants reveal a relative comfort with the issues associated with provision of access to basically processed collections. Most comments and responses suggest more interest in the processing aspects of MPLP. Collaboration with the Description Section is recommended.
- The results of the survey indicate that many archivists do not have any policies in place to limit the amount of time that they spend on reference requests. A best practices guide should address this.
- While the survey does not address this issue, the Task Force feels that a best practices guide should propose the tracking of reference statistics using a relational database. The information tracked should include data regarding the nature of individual requests and specific collections used, in addition to the time required for answering, patron type, and other administrative information. This tool would help reference archivists to guide processing decisions in a more articulate and educated way.
- Institutions that provide a certain amount of research for free before charging patrons should consider the impact that MPLP may be having on the time that it takes to fill the presented information need.
- The section needs to create a mechanism for supporting SAA sessions on these topics that reaches beyond the traditional session endorsement process.