Workflow for Processing Manuscripts in Automated Systems

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In January of 1983, Stanford began formal involvement in the Title II-C RLIN Manuscripts format project which included Yale University, Cornell University, and the Hoover Institution, in addition to the Stanford University Archives and Department of Special Collections. The first year of the project at Stanford involved laying a solid foundation consisting of implementation of short-term project procedures and long range planning. The 1983 project report for the Stanford University Archives and Department of Special Collections stated,

Integration of the RLIN format into existing departmental procedures was the goal towards which all newly instituted procedures, guidelines, and standards were pointed. The successful integration of the RLIN system will assure the system will be used productively and effectively after the project period ends.

Two years of post-project experience at Stanford reveals a basic naiveté inherent in those words. Integration does not occur overnight. It is a process of evolution involving trial and error in some cases and in others just a concerted effort to change a way of thinking. In Stanford's Department of Special Collections, staff continue to change, adjust, and work towards integration of the system and its capabilities, while closely considering the requirements of researchers, donors, collections, and staff. Other institutions can learn from Stanford's experience, although each experience with an automated system will, of course, be unique.

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Integration of automation into archival and manuscript repositories is much like the successful journey of a tightrope walker from one multi-story building to another, even taller building. To lean too far to one side or another is to lose sight of the ultimate objective: for the tightrope walker, to reach the taller building without loss of life; for archivists, to benefit from automation and to meet adequately the needs of researchers, donors and collections while satisfying the requirements of an automated system. If, as has been intimated, the journey seems fraught with perils, why do archivists embark on it?

The benefits of automation are numerous. Automation provides for increased subject access to manuscript and archival materials at a level which, in most repositories with only a manual system, could not even be contemplated because of the staff time involved. For researchers, an automated system means easier identification of the location of primary source materials; for archivists and manuscript curators, an automated system serves as a vehicle for announcing and advertising the availability of their collections. With the Archives and Manuscript Control (AMC) format of RLIN, information about the scope and content of manuscript collections held by repositories across the country is available to researchers in minutes.

Revision of cataloguing is another benefit of an online system like RLIN/AMC. As additions are made to existing collections, the online record may be updated to reflect the accessions. Current research interests may be addressed in updated subject guides. New accession lists may be created for distribution to faculty or other constituencies served by the repository. Archivists are invariably short staffed, oversubscribed, and yet desirous of going the extra distance for the researcher. Although automated systems are not inexpensive and do in fact require staff time, the capability to do more with less becomes more and more possible.

Standardization of terms used in describing archival and manuscript collections is also a benefit of automation which serves both the researcher and the archivist. Standardization may well have occurred under a manual system, but with an automated system it is a requirement, because retrievability is assured only if a controlled vocabulary is used. For example, the use of a Library of Congress subject heading or an in-house term under authority control insure that a researcher will be able to search many repositories under the same heading to pinpoint material on specific topics. Collections are more easily compared for content when descriptions and size, as well as subject headings, are standardized.

For archivists, an automated system is a powerful management tool. Collections may be “tracked” from accessioning through processing, cataloguing, and conservation work. Collection reviews may be done online and reports requested for in-house evaluation. Because the ability to retrieve material quickly
and comprehensively is greater in a system in which a controlled vocabulary is employed, reports generated from the system can be tailored to their use.

The requirements of the RLIN/AMC system are relatively few. Certain information must be included in the record in a particular format in order for the record to be processed and become available online, while standards agreed to by participating repositories determine format of information in fields such as main entry, title or date. How each repository chooses to expand those requirements will determine the difficulty of the tightrope walker’s journey.

The essential elements involved in the tightrope walker’s journey from the tall building to the even taller building are now in place. The benefits of automation are the taller building towards which the walker/archivist is headed. On one side of the rope are the needs of the archivist, researchers, donors and collections, and on the other side are the system requirements. The process of learning to balance, and continuing to balance, the two sides successfully involves changing and adapting workflow in the repository.

The easiest and most logical starting place to evaluate existing workflow and consider future workflow is with forms. Forms for accessioning, forms for processing, forms for donor information reveal the intentions behind the collecting of particular information. What information should be recorded, for example, on an accession form? Date, source, restrictions, value, description? What information is routinely recorded on this form? Is there a difference between intention and reality? If so, what is the difference? What information escapes routine recording and is this information actually necessary? Does the function of the form need to be reevaluated? In other words, was certain information deemed important at one time but never utilized? Is the information actually unnecessary? Planning or lack of proper planning in repositories is often reflected in the forms used. Forms generally undergo a process of evolution. Changes are made to accommodate new reports required by the administration, changes which can reveal intentions and needs in a repository.

Automation may require further such evolution of forms, but the first order of business must be a thorough evaluation of those forms and their functions. Information about manuscript and archival materials is collected for a purpose. This may range from the building of files to assist in donor relations to recording information which is legally required. Collection needs, such as conservation, and a researcher’s needs—improved and expanded access to collections—are similarly met. In a traditional setting the time expended in recording this information is substantial. In an automated environment the time is shortened appreciably, which benefits staff by making time available for other activities. At Stanford, decisions were made as to what fields in the Archives and Manuscripts Control format to use in order to satisfy perceived needs, but not overburden staff or collect information unnecessarily. Several levels of catalogued records
above the basic record required by the system were established. Each successive level includes more information, primarily descriptive, than the previous level. Some collections receive comprehensive cataloguing, while others receive minimal level cataloguing.

What are the procedures that are performed after the accession, cataloguing, and donor information forms are completed? Examining existing procedures follows naturally as the next step after evaluation of forms. Are there too many steps in a procedure? If so, is it never completed as originally intended? Could these steps be absorbed elsewhere or dropped completely? As forms and procedures are examined, knowledge of the automated system should be influencing the evaluation procedure and possible “new look” of forms and procedures. How much of a leap can be made from old to new depends on the archivist’s balance. Is there more weight on the side of staff needs? Are staff members receptive to change or will they dig in their heels at every chance? Balance can be learned—the process is not always a rapid one, however. Staff members should not be the only consideration. Information regarding collections or donors should not be dismissed lightly. And what is the best way to introduce an automated system to researchers? Change may or may not be indicated. Some forms and procedures require little modification to translate effectively to an automated system. Other forms and procedures require major surgery, if not modification.

At Stanford, several of the forms in use when the automated system was first implemented have changed entirely, others adapted well and are still used. The forms which were changed now reflect an automated approach to work (Figures 1-2). Input forms are used to record accessions, although brief accession descriptions are still manually entered into a log. Accession level descriptions and required information are recorded on a worksheet (Figure 2) which serves as the basis for the catalogued record after processing has been completed. In a manual system other information about an item or collection was collected and placed in files as appropriate: donor information beyond the basic name and address; conservation notes; processing suggestions; processing notes; deaccessioning notes; or retention schedules. All this information can now be collected online in the accession level record and retained in the fully catalogued record to serve as an online management file.

The adaptation of the form to an online format also forced consistency and order in how and where staff record information. Automation requires a place for everything and everything in its place. Information must be put consistently in the same slot. Form of name, punctuation, terms used in description and management segments must be standardized within those slots. This regularization initially required that more time was spent on the basics. For example, in describing operations conducted on the material, is the term to be used accessioned
or received? Has the collection been weeded or screened? Is the donor name "Smith, John, Mr. and Mrs." or "Smith family"? And so on. These examples seem simplistic, but consistent terminology has helped regularize routines and has significantly reduced the time necessary to record actions taken on material. Staff have become accustomed to verifying names in the authority file and now know the procedures for establishing an AACR2 form of name. Many individuals represented in our manuscript collections have never published and therefore are not represented in standard sources for name authority. This has not proved a problem to staff, who accordingly establish the name as it is represented in the collection. Stanford's own records then serve as an additional authority source. Standardization has streamlined the process of accessioning, cataloguing and record keeping. There are no more stray notes to the files or "meaningful" notes in shorthand. Information is organized.

The next step for the tightrope walker is implementation. The RLIN/AMC system may be used to record information about future donors or future receipts, or may be used to purchase materials. Special Collections at Stanford is investigating these possibilities, but at this time accessioning remains the first online activity. Accessioning is carried out by a manuscripts staff member. Staff have been trained in AACR2 rules for cataloguing manuscript material as rewritten by Steve Hensen. Cataloguing according to rules is new for many staff and undoubtedly most would consider AACR2 more of a stumbling block than the online system. From worksheets completed by staff members, bright, capable students create accession level records quickly and learn to spot errors in punctuation and use of terms.

Stanford has, as do many institutions, a manuscripts processing backlog; consequently materials may for some time remain represented online with only an accession level record. However, an accession level record at Stanford contains sufficient information to serve the public and staff until processing and cataloguing can be completed. An accession level record includes fields additional to those required by the system, such as one subject access point in addition to the main entry. No longer are temporary catalogue cards typed, since by accessioning material access is provided. The flow of work has changed, not in terms of time perhaps, but more activities take place simultaneously. In recording or taking physical control of the material, the process of description is begun. Donor records are created and information is provided to potential researchers about additions to collections. Adequate notification to researchers of additions was not achieved under the manual system. Because many tasks are now accomplished at once, more is done and done faster.

Under Stanford's manual system, accessioning and providing limited access through temporary cards in the card catalogue was batched work. Cards were not typed until there were several collections or items for which main entry or
title cards were needed. The same holds true with the online system; accessioning is done in batches and the forms given to a student for inputting. However, when the forms are input, there are several ways to access that material: main entry, an additional subject or name access point, and donor name. Batching work for inputting was found to be most effective in terms of time and the creation of consistent records. Special Collections went through a period of trial and error to determine the most effective way to use the system. It is tempting, when staff first begin to use the system, to put information online the minute it is received, to update records if by chance a typo is found, or if the collection is appraised and that information needs to be recorded. Gradually staff learn to batch work effectively and make the system work for them.

When forms are revised and procedures are outlined, the next step is to turn to those who use those forms and work through those procedures—the staff. An online system does not solve all the problems of limited staff, though many wish it would. Neither does it make the basic work which must be completed in a manuscript repository or archives disappear. The work remains to be done, but in a slightly different way. In the Department of Special Collections at Stanford two basic changes in workflow with regards to staffing have been made. First, responsibility for functions has been “compartmentalized.” One person is responsible for all accessioning and the basic online record, another is responsible for overseeing the processing and cataloguing of materials and for cataloguing additions to collections. Second, students have been integrated into another area of the workflow.

An online system such as RLIN/AMC can “compartmentalize” activities in a repository and make the next step more independent from the previous one. With the introduction of the online system, it was found that one person can easily perform the duties connected with accessioning, without necessarily being involved with the processing. This break-up of function is often done in repositories that have a larger staff, but in a two- or possibly three-person department, many functions are done by all staff members. In other words, one person follows a collection from the accessioning stage through to completion of cataloguing. Now those functions are more easily separated, no longer vertically, but horizontally. One person records basic information about the collection or item and performs minimal cataloguing. The next staff member builds on the first’s work, including more information about what operations have been performed on the material, as well as creating a fully catalogued record (Figure 3). Information is not lost between one person and the next, but is transmitted in a logical fashion. Functions do not need to be broken up with an online system, but the opportunity to do so is present.

The integration of students into the workflow has been accomplished by creating a new hierarchy akin to that found in processing procedures. Students
continue to be used for processing work and now input records and update the online records as necessary. Students belong to a third layer in the hierarchy located somewhere below and between the two staff members. If taught to search as well as to input, students can be helpful in suggesting subject headings, can verify form of name, and may be of help with other authority issues. Staff need not spend their time sitting at the terminal typing, although staff should certainly know how to use the system.

Although this has not occurred at Stanford, there is a third possible change or adjustment, or perhaps wrinkle in workflow. Many repositories are in or connected to institutions or departments that also contain book material. If the book material is catalogued online in the RLIN or other online system, the possibility of merging workflow might be worth investigation. It is true that there are a great many differences between the cataloguing of books and the processing and cataloguing of manuscript materials, but the introduction of an online system minimizes those after a point. Book cataloguers should not necessarily start cataloguing manuscript material, though it has been Stanford's experience that educating them about the cataloguing of manuscript material can be very beneficial. It is true that after a worksheet has been created by a manuscript person, it really does not matter who inputs it or who updates it. The coding required by an automated system is a universal language; a tag is a tag. A books person can better read a manuscript record now because the information has been subjected to a coding similar to books. The act of creating an online record, therefore, is little different whether it is book material or manuscript material; it is a mechanical exercise. The idea of integrating the processing workflow, including authority work as well as the inputting and updating of records, may not work in many repositories, but for repositories that are short staffed or short on funds and that are connected with a book operation, a closer look might prove worthwhile.

At Stanford during the project, the Catalogue Department was consulted and included in discussions as was appropriate. As a result, the Catalogue Department approached manuscript and archives staff to “train” the cataloguers in the use of AMC. In Special Collections, notes are now included in both book and manuscript records indicating the location of a letter or manuscript that is bound into or tipped into a published volume or the provenance of manuscript material that has been removed from a volume and is housed with the manuscripts. Material is accessible both through the books file and the manuscripts file. The other benefit in Special Collections is a shared approach to cataloguing. Manuscript staff is more knowledgeable about book cataloguing and book staff is more knowledgeable about manuscript cataloguing and it is this knowledge that opens the door to future cooperation on such issues as uniformity of genre terms and the use of Library of Congress Subject Headings.
A final step in evaluation of workflow is a consideration of products. Products can be in one of several formats. There are reports produced as reference tools and management tools, and there is the online record, available to institutions across the country. But the end of the process takes us back to the beginning. What an institution puts into the system is what that institution will get out, no more and no less. The needs of researchers, staff, donors and the collections as discussed earlier must be considered. Reports such as yearly accession lists, donor lists, and abbreviated or subject guides are now possible with a minimum of fuss. Such reports are those that it would have been beneficial to have in the past, but that were too time-consuming to produce. Again, there may be a tendency for the tightrope walker to take too big a step towards that taller building and begin to wobble, but most archivists will learn quickly which reports are necessary and worthwhile in their repository and which are not. In Stanford's Special Collections, RLIN reports for manuscripts are now appended to annual reports for the department. Verification of gifts is easier and accomplished more efficiently. Information included in the online record should be sufficient for researchers, but not overwhelming or confusing. At Stanford there is an additional benefit in the form of a local online catalogue, SOCRATES, of which the manuscript records are now a part. Catalogue cards are no longer produced, and researchers are referred to the online catalogue.

The changes in workflow will not be the same everywhere. As shown, some of Stanford's forms and procedures made the transition beautifully while others have disappeared or been replaced. Procedures as well as forms may need little adjustment or be discarded in toto. Staff, in some cases, will require retraining, and adjustment in staffing configurations may be in order. Consideration of needs of researchers, staff, donors, and collections must be done carefully. Change does not need to happen overnight and adjustments continue. Perhaps the most significant change that occurs with the introduction of an automated system is that the cataloguing process—from accessioning to full cataloguing—becomes an organic process. Workflow is now based on movement and the possibility for change and update. The potential for change within the online record has influenced the basic approach to manuscript cataloguing as well as the workflow. Change in the approach to manuscript cataloguing and in workflow is ongoing.

It is possible to learn from the experience of others. Discussions among staff involved in the original implementation of RLIN/AMC indicate a variety of different experiences. At Stanford, the RLIN/AMC system has been integrated into existing departmental procedures. That integration has meant the demise of some of those procedures and the implementation of others, but the integration has been successful and as was written, somewhat hopefully at the end of 1983, the system is now being used productively and effectively.
Figure 1. Accessions Register.
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*Figure 2. Archives and Manuscripts input form.*

**ACCESSIONING**

- Accession number
- Accession date
- Physical location
- Source
- Donor address
- Method of acquisition
- Required fixed fields (such as dates of collection)
- Main entry (if applicable)
- Title
- Size
- Description—brief
- One subject heading

(Student inputs accession level record)

**PROCESSING/CATALOGUING**

- Elements in addition to those recorded in accession record:
  - Actions performed on material, e.g., processed
  - Date action was performed
  - Future action needed, e.g., conservation
  - Date action should be done
  - Additional fixed fields as appropriate
  - Fuller description of materials
  - Biographical or historical note
  - Additional access points

(Student updates record to fully catalogued)

*Figure 3. Workflow—cross section.*