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# MPLP Ten Years Later: the Adventure of Being among the First

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## **MPLP Ten Years Later: the Adventure of Being among the First**

Janet Hauck, Rose Sliger Krause, Kyna Herzinger

### **Introduction**

MPLP burst onto the national archival scene at the 2004 Society of American Archivists Meeting in Boston during a session called “Real World Archives: Reports from the 2003-2004 NHPRC Archival Research Fellows.” One of six reports given during this session featured Dennis Meissner of the Minnesota Historical Society, presenting on the topic “More Product, Less Process: A Low-Calorie, High-Fiber Alternative to Traditional Processing Expectations.” His presentation was based on research conducted by him and Mark Greene of the University of Wyoming, as they studied historians’ desires and archivists’ practices regarding access to and processing of archival collections. An archivist from the Pacific Northwest listened with interest to Meissner’s talk and left the conference intent on seeking an opportunity to apply this brand-new processing method, soon to become known as MPLP.

At the same time, another Pacific Northwest archivist was writing a grant proposal to the National Historical Publications and Records Commission with the purpose of garnering funding for a large-scale regional processing project. The goal of the project would be to increase access to numerous collections of unique and vital importance to the history of the region, held by eight archival repositories in Alaska, Oregon, and Washington. As it happened, the archivist who had heard Meissner speak had also signed on to become one of the eight grant project members and immediately directed the attention of the group toward “More Product, Less Process” as a method for accomplishing the grant project’s goal. Ultimately, MPLP became the main focus of the proposal, and the group won a National Historical Publications and Records Commission (NHPRC) grant of \$178,000 for a two-year project carried out from 2005-2007 by what became the Northwest Archival Processing Initiative (NWAPI) consortium.

The NHPRC-funded NWAPI initiative was the first project to apply MPLP at a consortium-level. As a result of their research, Mark Greene and Dennis Meissner had predicted that the application of MPLP processing methods would reduce traditional archival processing time by three-quarters, and they were eager to have the

prediction tested. Both agreed to serve as consultants for the NWAPI project. Their guidance and partnership were invaluable—they were able to train the group members in MPLP and also provide acceptable adjustments to the MPLP method over the span of the project. This partnership was deemed mutually beneficial because Greene and Meissner were later able to refute a 2010 argument that MPLP was irrelevant to the majority of archives by citing, among other things, the NWAPI results.<sup>1</sup>

It is now ten years after the 2007 completion of the NWAPI grant project, and numerous archivists both inside and outside the Pacific Northwest have applied the MPLP method in their repositories. Many have reflected on its strengths and weaknesses, resulting in a wide array of publications covered in this article's literature review. As first-adopters of MPLP, the NWAPI members hold a unique position in this large group of practitioners, and they provide a foundational lens through which to view subsequent developments in the field of minimal processing. Therefore, the main purpose of this article has been to revisit the original eight grant participants via a survey in order to learn about MPLP's effects on their prior archival practice and that of the intervening decade. The survey questions were designed around trends found in the literature and centered on themes of appraisal/acquisition, description, preservation, reference/access, and digital objects/digitization. Ultimately, it is hoped that this article's findings will serve as a point of discussion as archivists grapple with future directions in the application of MPLP.

## Literature Review

NWAPI members adopted MPLP as a processing methodology that focused on mitigating backlog and increasing access to unique regional collections, but the literature shows that MPLP evolved beyond solving the problem of backlog. As the NWAPI grant drew to a close, the literature burgeoned with examples of other repositories adopting and adapting MPLP to accommodate increasing quantities of material, varying types of media, and ultimately, other archival functions. This review of the

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<sup>1</sup> Mark Greene and Dennis E. Meissner, letter to the editor, *American Archivist* 73, no. 2 (2010): 412.

literature traces the development of MPLP from a simple processing methodology introduced in Greene and Meissner's 2005 article to a guiding principle which has since affected many areas of archival administration—most recently digital collections. The literature as it has documented MPLP's evolution informed the authors' key question: have NAWPI members held onto their initial understanding of MPLP as just a processing methodology or have they adopted MPLP's expanding applications or even incorporated new uses for MPLP?

In 2005, Greene and Meissner's seminal *American Archivist* article "More Product, Less Process: Revamping Traditional Archival Processing" challenged archivists with a simple, compelling question: what is the least we can do to get the job done in a way that adequately meets user needs both now and in the future?<sup>2</sup> Their question stemmed from the observed problem that processing had floundered as archivists clung to textbook methods that were unsustainable. These practices, they argued, were evident from the nearly ubiquitous backlogs that had accumulated over decades and totaled nearly one-third of all repository holdings. While Greene and Meissner struck a resounding chord, they also offered a sensible solution that could guide preservation, arrangement, and description in such a way that collections would more quickly enter the hands of users. Their resulting methodology made a case for working in the aggregate and, unless warranted, overlooking time-consuming and often unnecessary activities like removing metal fasteners or arranging materials to the item-level. "Good Processing," the authors reasoned, "is done with a shovel, not with tweezers."<sup>3</sup>

MPLP was not a new concept—a detail that Greene and Meissner were quick to point out—so why has minimal processing garnered so much attention over the last decade? For one, MPLP offered a bold, practical solution to a big problem. Based on a thorough review of the literature and data collected from their own survey, Greene and Meissner sought to quantify the problem of backlog and showed archivists that, when paired with processing practices that were not keeping pace with acquisitions, the problem

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<sup>2</sup> Mark A. Greene and Dennis Meissner, "More Product, Less Process: Revamping Traditional Archival Processing," *American Archivist* 68, no. 2 (2005): 208-263.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 240.

of backlog was not going away. Drawing on literature that supported high-level arrangement and description, Greene and Meissner offered practical suggestions to aggressively eliminate backlog, including a recommended processing benchmark of just four hours per cubic foot. Greene and Meissner's large-scale approach was a calculated argument for making minimal methods the go-to model for processing rather than the last resort. It was not a new set of standards to be universally and thoughtlessly applied to every collection; instead, Greene and Meissner's MPLP was an invitation to shift professional focus away from processing minutia toward the core archival mission: providing access to and promoting use of archival materials. This shift was the crux of MPLP and basis by which it has adapted to a wide array of practices.

Naturally, few archivists would spurn any effort to improve efficiencies in our characteristically under-resourced institutions or openly challenge the notion that users should not be at the center of the archival mission, but some archivists did argue that Greene and Meissner's processing benchmark was inadequate and even bordered on professional negligence. These MPLP skeptics' concerns often focusing on the methods used to produce such breakneck outcomes. Andrew Mangravite was one of the first to formally express his apprehension over the loss of expertise so often gleaned from diving into the weeds of a collection and, by extension, his fear that archivists would forfeit the very knowledge that set them apart as archivists.<sup>4</sup> Others rightly expressed concern that sensitive or confidential information might be released. "Contemporary collections," archivist Carl Van Ness argued, "routinely document the lives of the currently living and, unlike the dead, they can take us to court or to task for accidentally disclosing injurious or embarrassing information."<sup>5</sup> Others argued that processing—physical arrangement, mostly—did not cause the backlog problem,

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<sup>4</sup> Andrew Mangravite, letter to the editor, *American Archivist* 69, no. 1 (2006): 12-13. See also Dennis Meissner and Mark A. Greene, "More Application while Less Appreciation: The Adopters and Antagonists of MPLP," *Journal of Archival Organization* 8, no. 3-4 (2010): 189-192. In this article, Meissner and Greene survey numerous informal discussions about the drawbacks and strengths of MPLP, including blogs, listservs, and conference presentations.

<sup>5</sup> Carl Van Ness, "Much Ado about Paper Clips: 'More Product, Less Process' and the Modern Manuscript Repository," *American Archivist* 73, no. 1 (2010): 140.

but that appraisal or descriptive standards were the cause.<sup>6</sup> More recently, a small group of archivists have criticized MPLP's reliance on repository-level preservation. One of the more acerbic critics, conservator Jessica Phillips, argued that MPLP methods endangered the very materials that archivists were expected to protect by systematically neglecting measurable, item-level preservation needs.<sup>7</sup> Mark Wolfe and Eira Tansey focused on energy consumption as repositories relied on HVAC systems to compensate for less item-level preservation, and warned that MPLP methods increased environmental impact at a time when archives should be more sustainable.<sup>8</sup>

Although reluctant adopters and outright antagonists remain, the professional literature shows that archivists have largely embraced MPLP as an accepted processing methodology. MPLP's impact is perhaps best seen in its reach—both in the prodigious literature that Greene and Meissner's article has inspired and in the way that it has been adapted to other archival functions. Even though their 2005 article dug deep into the details of arrangement and description, processing was just one area of archival administration that Greene and Meissner used to grapple with effective resource management.<sup>9</sup> Put another way, MPLP was a lens through which to view the substantial impact that seemingly inconsequential decisions could have on finite resources and institutional mission. The discussion of MPLP in the literature began with the early adopters who were focused on solving the problem of backlog among their modern, paper-based collections and evolved as archivists

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<sup>6</sup> Matt Gorzalski, "Minimal Processing: Its Context and Influence in the Archival Community," *Journal of Archival Organization* 6, no. 3 (2008): 186-200; Christopher Prom, "Optimum Access? Processing in College and University Archives," *American Archivist* 73, no. 1 (2010): 146-174.

<sup>7</sup> Jessica Phillips, "A Defense of Preservation in the Age of MPLP," *American Archivist* 78, no. 2 (2015): 470-487.

<sup>8</sup> Mark Wolfe, "Beyond 'Green Buildings': Exploring the Effects of Jevons' Paradox on the Sustainability of Archival Practices," *Archival Science* 12, no. 1 (2012): 35-50; Eira Tansey, "Archival Adaptation to Climate Change," *Sustainability: Science, Practice, & Policy* 11, no. 2 (2015): 45-56, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15487733.2015.11908146>.

<sup>9</sup> Mark A. Greene, "Doing Less Before It's Done Unto You: Reshaping Workflows for Efficiency Before the Wolf Is at the Door," *RBM: A Journal of Rare Books, Manuscripts and Cultural Heritage* 12, no. 2 (2011): 92-103.

incorporated the methods into their work with older materials and a wider range of media. Finally, the literature revealed the growing array of practices that have paired MPLP with a multitude of archival functions.

The earliest case studies approached MPLP literally, harnessing it strictly for unprocessed backlogs. These examples, however, grew incrementally in their significance as they grew in scope.<sup>10</sup> One of the earliest published case studies, for instance, applied MPLP to just a single collection.<sup>11</sup> Though viewing MPLP as a pseudo-standard that archivists ought to apply only cautiously to certain collections, Texas Christian University's Michael Strom showed that MPLP could be adapted to the needs of each series as he applied its methods either liberally or sparingly as the circumstances demanded.<sup>12</sup> The University of Alaska's Anne Foster echoed Strom as she touted MPLP's flexibility, recognizing further that MPLP could be applied iteratively if the collection, the researchers, or the institution warranted the "added value" of additional processing. As a member institution of the NWAPI consortium, the University of

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<sup>10</sup> This literature review is not intended to be exhaustive. For others who have surveyed the literature on MPLP at various points in time, see Stephanie H. Crowe and Karen Spilman, "MPLP @ 5: More Access, Less Backlog?" *Journal of Archival Organization* 8, no. 2 (2010): 110-133; Matt Gorzalski, "Minimal Processing: Its Context and Influence in the Archival Community," *Journal of Archival Organization* 6, no. 3 (2008): 186-200; Meissner and Greene, "More Application while Less Appreciation," 174-226.

<sup>11</sup> Michael Strom, "Texas-Sized Progress: Applying Minimum-Standards Processing Guidelines to the Jim Wright Papers," *Archival Issues* 29, no. 2 (2005): 105-112. Cheryl Oestreicher's "Personal Papers and MPLP: Strategies and Techniques," *Archivaria* 76 (2013): 93-110 offers a later example. Notably, this article appeared in *Archivaria* after Greene and Meissner encouraged the Canadian journal to include representation of MPLP in a special issue focused on processing. See Mark A. Greene and Dennis E. Meissner, letter to the editor, *Archivaria* 75 (2013): 1-3. Rachel Anchor, "'More Product, Less Process': Method, Madness or Practice?" *Archives and Records* 34, no. 2 (2013): 156-174. The same year that Oestreicher's article appeared in *Archivaria*, Anchor asked a more significant question: was MPLP applicable outside of the American archival tradition? After reviewing archival theory and practice in the UK, Anchor concluded that MPLP could be a boon when applied situationally.

<sup>12</sup> Five years later, Stephanie Crowe and Karen Spilman confirmed that "some archivists have a fundamental misunderstanding of the principles behind MPLP. These archivists view it as a doctrine requiring everything to be processed at a minimal level." See "MPLP @ 5," 120.

Alaska pledged to process at least 1000 cubic feet of material, but MPLP techniques proved so “satisfactory (and speedy)” that Foster continued to experiment with older materials and other media—such as photographs—after meeting the grant’s targets.<sup>13</sup> Significantly, she proved that MPLP could be applied successfully to collections of any age and any format. Unlike Foster or Strom, the University of Montana’s Donna McCrea did not selectively adopt MPLP; instead, she applied minimal methods to her entire institution—an approach that yielded 464 linear feet of processed materials in just 623 hours.<sup>14</sup> By identifying her most abundant resource, which happened to be physical space rather than staff or time, McCrea’s application of MPLP produced folder-level inventories that could be keyword searched but abandoned time-consuming activities like weeding duplicate or irrelevant materials. One of McCrea’s most valuable contributions was to challenge the notion that MPLP was a temporary fix. “I no longer pretend that at that elusive point in the future when I have all the time and staff and resources I could ask for I will go back and reprocess those minimally processed collections,” she wrote. “The vast majority of these collections are done, and without apology.”<sup>15</sup> Robert Cox seconded this viewpoint when he argued in favor of reframing MPLP as a first step in user access, rather than the end goal.<sup>16</sup>

Archivists also explored the degree to which they could apply MPLP methods to other collection materials and formats. Paul Eisloeffel, for instance, called for an MPLP-style processing scheme for audio and video recordings that embodied the same flexibility

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<sup>13</sup> Anne L. Foster, “Minimum Standards Processing and Photograph Collections,” *Archival Issues* 30, no. 2 (2006): 107-118. A decade later, Daniel Santamaria would build on this idea of iterative processing. His MPLP-inspired approach involved creating a minimum level of access to all holdings and identifying select collections for additional processing based on user needs and collection priorities. See: *Extensible Processing for Archives and Special Collections: Reducing Processing Backlogs* (Chicago: Neal-Schuman, 2015).

<sup>14</sup> Donna E. McCrea, “Getting More for Less: Testing a New Processing Model at the University of Montana,” *American Archivist* 69, no. 2 (2006): 284-290.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 289.

<sup>16</sup> Robert S. Cox, “Maximal Processing, Or, Archivist on a Pale Horse,” *Journal of Archival Organization* 8, no. 2 (2010): 134-148.



that Anne Foster applied to photographs.<sup>17</sup> His call for a “least, best level of control” was representative of others who sought practical solutions for their specialized media and was answered by Joshua Ranger who developed a MPLP-style rubric for audiovisual materials.<sup>18</sup> Ranger’s “least, best level of control” functioned much like Greene and Meissner’s “middle way,” which was a compromise between traditional, time-intensive methods and MPLP methods.<sup>19</sup> In order to maximize access, Ranger viewed processing as a series of decisions that focused the most resources on the highest priorities and adequate resources on the lesser priorities. Gerald Chaudron, who also drew inspiration from Foster’s seminal work, found that MPLP methods not only saved time when processing photographs, but actually supported a better understanding of the images. By eliminating time-intensive item-level processing that tended to obscure a photo’s meaning with shallow, subject-driven description, Chaudron’s “least, best level of control” focused on comprehensive collection-level description that was rich in provenance and context.<sup>20</sup> Even as processing moved from physical to born-digital materials, MPLP continued to adapt. In 2014, Edward Corrado and Rachel Jaffe invoked minimal processing as they harnessed tools that extracted descriptive metadata for ingest into their content management system, and by that means, maximized user discovery with minimal effort for their “least, best level of control.”<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Paul Eisloeffel, “MPLP/AV: Musings on Minimal Processing and Audiovisuals,” *MAC Newsletter*, October 2010, 20-22.

<sup>18</sup> Joshua Ranger, “What’s Your Product? Assessing the Suitability of a More Product, Less Process Methodology for Processing Audiovisual Collections,” (New York: Audiovisual Preservation Solutions, 2012), accessed September 21, 2018, <http://www.avpreserve.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/08/WhatsYourProduct.pdf>.

<sup>19</sup> Meissner and Greene, “More Application while Less Appreciation,” 226.

<sup>20</sup> Gerald Chaudron, “To MPLP or not to MPLP: That is the Question with Photographs,” *Journal for the Society of North Carolina Archivists* 10, no. 1 (2012): 2-19.

<sup>21</sup> Edward M. Corrado and Rachel Jaffe, “Transforming and Enhancing Metadata for Enduser Discovery: A Case Study,” *JLIS.it* 5, no. 2 (2014): 33-48. Brian Dietz offers a similar argument in his blog post “Let the Bits Describe Themselves,” *Bloggers! The Blog of SAA’s Electronic Records Section*, January 7, 2016, <https://saaers.wordpress.com/2016/01/07/let-the-bits-describe-themselves/>. See also Gregory P. Johnson, “Quality or Quantity: Can Archivists Apply Minimal

With so many favorable reports, it is not difficult to understand why MPLP was quickly embraced as a processing methodology, but MPLP showed broad potential for other areas of archival practice as well. Christine Weideman, a trailblazer who implemented minimal processing at Yale prior to 2005, presented an advanced understanding of MPLP in its early years. Weideman found that minimal methods alone did not adequately reduce backlog at her institution, so she combined processing and accessioning into a single function under the umbrella of MPLP.<sup>22</sup> Matt Gorzalski, too, adapted MPLP as part of his effort to provide collection-level access to all holdings at the Kansas Historical Society. Gorzalski and his team cataloged each collection, but simultaneously identified candidates for deaccession, demonstrating that MPLP could be adapted to appraisal.<sup>23</sup> Adrienne Harling articulated perhaps the most comprehensive vision of MPLP's reach. Unlike Weideman and Gorzalski who applied MPLP methods due to their unique, under-resourced situations, Harling applied MPLP to Humboldt State University, which was not suffering a backlog crisis. If any institution justified traditional processing methods, surely Humboldt State with its slow collection growth, adequate staffing, and lack of environmental controls warranted detailed arrangement, description, and preservation. Harling, though, argued that MPLP was not a specific set of decisions, but a framework that informed resource allocation. "MPLP is a conceptual model," she wrote, "that can be used to navigate the tradeoffs between quantity and quality of processing and access in any circumstance."<sup>24</sup> Her case study argued that MPLP, when understood as a guiding principle and harnessed to serve the researcher and expand the repository's mission, could inform a wide range of administrative decisions.

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Processing to Electronic Records?" (Master's Thesis, UNC, 2007), <https://ils.unc.edu/MSPapers/3267.pdf>.

<sup>22</sup>Christine Weideman, "Accessioning as Processing," *American Archivist* 69, no. 2 (2006): 274-283.

<sup>23</sup>Matt Gorzalski and Marcella Wiget, "'More Access, Less Backlog': How the Kansas Historical Society got its Groove Back," *Archival Issues* 33, no. 1 (2011): 7-24.

<sup>24</sup>Adrienne Harling, "MPLP as Intentional, not Necessarily Minimal, Processing: The Rudolf W. Becking Collection at Humboldt State University," *American Archivist* 77, no. 2 (2014): 497.

Harling articulated what Greene and Meissner themselves maintained, that MPLP is a principle that should guide archivists as they consider what they can and should do with the resources at hand, be they limited or not.

Deciding whether to describe the materials in a collection in meticulous detail, or whether the collection materials ought to have crisp new folders, and, indeed, whether those folders ought to be buffered, acid-neutral, or Office Max ordinaire, are simply incremental decisions that, one hopes, are being thoughtfully figured into a larger and more important decision about what share of available resources we ought to be investing in a particular collection.<sup>25</sup>

Greene and Meissner may have been the greatest champions for this broad implementation of MPLP, but others have supported this vision by presenting diverse examples of MPLP in action and citing MPLP as a justification for activities that range from streamlining descriptive standards through software development to consolidating library functions through reorganization to improving digitization workflows.<sup>26</sup>

After 2010, the literature suggests a particular interest in applying MPLP to digitization. Where processing methods once dominated, concepts like low-resolution scanning, aggregate description, and linked resources have since burgeoned within the professional discourse. Mark Greene recognized MPLP's potential for digitized collections and argued that if "researcher use is the purpose of all archival effort, we must adopt approaches to scanning

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<sup>25</sup> Meissner and Greene, "More Application while Less Appreciation," 175.

<sup>26</sup> Scott W. Schwartz et al., "Archon: A Unified Information Storage and Retrieval System for Lone Archivists, Special Collections Librarians and Curators," *Partnership* 2, no. 2 (2007): 1-17; Gregory C. Colati, Katherine M. Crowe, and Elizabeth S. Meagher, "Better, Faster, Stronger: Integrating Archives Processing and Technical Services," *Library Resources & Technical Services* 53, no. 4 (October 2009): 261-270; Joyce Chapman and Samantha Leonard, "Cost and Benefit of Quality Control Visual Checks in Large-Scale Digitization of Archival Manuscripts," *Library Hi Tech* 31, no. 3 (2013): 405-418.

that dramatically increase how much we can make accessible for the same or even fewer resources.”<sup>27</sup> At the American Heritage Center, Greene abandoned old practices like digitizing materials only once and at a high resolution. He opted, instead, to scan at a lower resolution, thereby reducing scanning time and maximizing existing storage space. Other practitioners have offered enterprising solutions to time-intensive digitization as well. Max Evans, for one, recommended an “on demand” approach in order to focus resources on known researcher needs. Evans imagined a digital reading room where the archivist’s key descriptive tool—the finding aid—would serve as a gateway to request and view entire folders, series, or collections that had been digitized upon the researcher’s request.<sup>28</sup> Some archivists have since jettisoned the practice of item-level description in favor of connecting digital surrogates to existing, minimal descriptions.<sup>29</sup> Shan Sutton’s case study successfully applied similar practices to the John Muir Papers by describing digitized photos, journals, and drawings collectively according to the level in which they were hierarchically organized.<sup>30</sup> It was Larisa Miller, though, who defied nearly all conventional practices when

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<sup>27</sup> Mark A. Greene, “Doing Less Before It’s Done Unto You: Reshaping Workflows for Efficiency Before the Wolf Is at the Door,” *RBM: A Journal of Rare Books, Manuscripts and Cultural Heritage* 12, no. 2 (2011): 100. See also Mark A. Greene, “The Power of Archives: Archivists’ Values and Value in the Post-Modern Age,” *American Archivist* 72, no. 1 (2009): 17–41 and Mark A. Greene, “MPLP: It’s Not Just for Processing Anymore,” *American Archivist* 73, no. 1 (2010): 193–194.

<sup>28</sup> Max J. Evans, “Archives of the People, By the People, For the People,” *American Archivist* 70, no. 2 (2007): 387–400. It is worth noting that Evans referred to MPLP as an indispensable tool for processing collections in preparation for digitization, but he did not explicitly connect MPLP to his recommendations for mass, on-demand digitization.

<sup>29</sup> Jody L. DeRidder, Amanda Axley Presnell, and Kevin W. Walker, “Leveraging Encoded Archival Description for Access to Digital Content: A Cost and Usability Analysis,” *American Archivist* 75, no. 1 (2012): 143–170; Tracy M. Jackson, “I Want To See It: A Usability Study of Digital Content Integrated into Finding Aids,” *Journal for the Society of North Carolina Archivists* 9, no. 2 (2012): 20–77, [http://works.bepress.com/tracy\\_jackson/1/](http://works.bepress.com/tracy_jackson/1/). Unfortunately, Jackson’s usability study found that novice researchers struggled to understand the finding aid, which posed a barrier to linked digital content.

<sup>30</sup> Shan C. Sutton, “Balancing Boutique-Level Quality and Large-Scale Production: The Impact of ‘More Product, Less Process’ on Digitization in Archives and Special Collections,” *RBM: A Journal of Rare Books, Manuscripts, and Cultural Heritage* 13, no. 1 (2012): 50–63.

she explored how mass digitization and optical character recognition (OCR) could make unprocessed, text-based materials more quickly available by completely bypassing physical arrangement and description.<sup>31</sup> In this way, Miller realized Greene's exhortation that "archivists should consider—not the traditions of the past—but the mission, audience, and resources of the present; and that collections and even series should be assessed individually using the most rational, user-friendly approach."<sup>32</sup>

Archivists, though, have struggled to assess the impact that minimally processed collections have had on discovery. Have aggregate or minimal descriptions of more materials actually helped or hindered reference staff and researchers? Greene and Meissner insisted that more materials with "crisp...verbiage" but broad context was adequate; "it needn't be long-winded, laborious, or minutely detailed to be effective."<sup>33</sup> As sensible as their perspective was, Tiah Edmonson-Morton was among the first to collect user data for MPLP-processed collections during her work with the Northwest Digital Archives.<sup>34</sup> Her study concluded that user behavior was complex. Researchers did not always prefer more description, but they did favor sufficient context, skim-able lists, and uniformity across finding aids. Meanwhile, surveys across the profession have shown that a majority of reference staff believe that MPLP has improved discovery and, by extension, access.<sup>35</sup> Perhaps the ultimate success of MPLP, as Shannon Bower Maier argued, will depend on stronger collaboration between processing staff, reference staff, and researchers.<sup>36</sup>

Though not uncontested, the literature shows a remarkable commitment to MPLP as it has evolved from a simple processing methodology focused on solving the problem of backlog to a guiding

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<sup>31</sup> Larisa Miller, "All Text Considered: A Perspective on Mass Digitizing and Archival Processing," *American Archivist* 76, no. 2 (2013): 521-541.

<sup>32</sup> Greene, "MPLP: It's Not Just for Processing Anymore," 176.

<sup>33</sup> Greene and Meissner, "More Product, Less Process," 246.

<sup>34</sup> Tiah Edmonson-Morton, "SAA 2007 Session #307," *Archival Musings* (blog), September 4, 2007, <http://www.temarchivalmusings.blogspot.com/2007/09/saa-2007-session-307.html>.

<sup>35</sup> Gorzalski and Wiget, "More Access, Less Backlog," 7-24; Crowe and Spilman, "MPLP@ 5," 110-133.

<sup>36</sup> Shannon Bowen Maier, "MPLP and the Catalog Record as a Finding Aid," *Journal of Archival Organization* 9, no. 1 (2011): 32-44.

principle that has affected a wide array of practices. This use of MPLP as a touchstone to promote efficiency in all areas of archival administration shaped the way that the authors of this article approached their survey of the NWAPI consortia members. First, the literature highlighted specific applications of MPLP that affected accessioning, appraisal, description, and access. The literature also pointed to areas of dispute like whether MPLP adversely affected preservation and reference. These became natural topics of inquiry. More importantly, the authors of this article wanted to see if NWAPI members would mirror the expanding application of MPLP that was observed in the literature. NWAPI members, after all, matched the attitudes of many of the archivists already mentioned who were intrigued by the new methodology and hopeful that it would maximize access to their holdings, but who were somewhat apprehensive. As Greene and Meissner observed, the NWAPI members “were not fully comfortable with a full MPLP approach,” but achieved “astonishing results” despite their discomfort.<sup>37</sup> If the NWAPI members were not the most enthusiastic adopters, but found MPLP methods useful, the authors of this article wondered if the NWAPI archivists had continued to apply MPLP practices after the grant concluded or had expanded their application of MPLP to include more innovative uses of the framework. Greene was adamant that MPLP’s most basic tenets could affect the way archivists do their jobs.<sup>38</sup> Would the NWAPI members who validated MPLP processing in its earliest days also confirm Greene’s more sweeping assertion?

## Background

### *Northwest Archives Processing Initiative (NWAPI), 2005-2007*

The Northwest Archives Processing Initiative was the product of a generous \$178,000 NHPRC grant to increase access to collections of unique and vital importance in the history of the Pacific Northwest held by eight archival repositories in Alaska, Oregon and Washington. Eleven institutions in the Pacific Northwest had previously received National Endowment for the Humanities

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<sup>37</sup> Meissner and Greene, “More Application while Less Appreciation,” 194.

<sup>38</sup> Greene, “MPLP: It’s Not Just for Processing Anymore,” 199.

(NEH) funding to develop a common database for finding aid discovery and display—first known as the Northwest Digital Archives, and now called Archives West

<http://archiveswest.orbiscascade.org/>. A subset of this group wanted to process a greater number of collections in order to have better representation of their resources in the common database; hence, the eight participants in the NWAPI project. The following points were enumerated in the project's work plan:

- Process collections totaling approximately 1,120 linear feet of manuscripts, photographic images, oral histories, and moving image film.
- Apply Greene and Meissner's minimal processing techniques, outlined in their NHPRC-funded research titled "More Product, Less Process."
- Strive for Greene and Meissner's processing standard of one linear foot per 7-8 hours.
- Keep statistics on the actual time spent in MPLP processing.
- Hire Mark Greene and Dennis Meissner as Processing Standards Consultants.

The NWAPI consortium was privileged to utilize both Mark Greene and Dennis Meissner as onsite consultants. When approached, Greene had written, "I am pleased and honored to be asked to serve as a consultant for this grant. Your grant will be the first wide application of our research. I hope to learn a great deal from my participation, as well as (I hope!) being able to provide some assistance."<sup>39</sup> Both were very interested in the project's statistical findings, since they had predicted that the application of MPLP methods would reduce archival processing time by three-quarters, and they were eager to see if their prediction would be borne out. Greene met with the eight participants at the beginning of the project's first year to provide MPLP training and help set project groundwork. Meissner met with participants at the beginning of the second year to address findings, concerns, and a path for project completion.

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<sup>39</sup> Mark A. Greene, email message to author, May 26, 2005.

An important result of this second meeting was Greene and Meissner's development of a specialized chart for the NWAPI consortium that they named the "MPLP Middle Way." The chart introduced procedures that allowed for flexibility in decision making when applying MPLP to materials of varying ages and types. This "middle way" is discussed in further detail below, where the project's second year is outlined in more detail.

*First Year of Project Period: July 2005-June 2006*

The grant period started on July 1, 2005, and participants began work at their institutions by hiring processing assistants and preparing chosen collections for MPLP processing. In August, all eight participants gathered at Whitworth University, the lead institution, for a daylong orientation meeting. In the afternoon, Mark Greene provided training in MPLP processing methods and fielded questions from participants about their unique needs, according to type of repository or format of materials. Participants then returned to their institutions to begin applying MPLP, keeping statistics on amount of linear feet processed along with hourly processing rates.

By the time the first six-month report was due to NHPRC, consortium members had achieved a cumulative processing rate of 2.8 hours per linear foot of material. This figure far surpassed Greene and Meissner's prediction of 7-8 hours per linear foot, and the project director wondered whether it was correct. When the second six-month report came due, and consortium members reported a cumulative total of 2.9 hours per linear foot of processed material, it appeared that the figure was indeed accurate. In a 2006 *Archival Issues* article, one participant noted that, at her institution, "NWAPI exceeded our goals, maintaining an average rate of processing of less than two hours per linear foot and surpassing our goal of a thousand feet of processed materials not long after the midpoint of the project."

*Second Year of Project Period: July 2006-June 2007*

By the beginning of the project's second year, all participants had tested MPLP methods on a variety of material types and assessed the effectiveness of the resulting finding aids to their repository users. In August 2006, participants came to the second meeting with informed insights and questions for proceeding into the final year of



the project. Dennis Meissner led a debriefing of the MPLP implementation, addressed questions, and listened intently to insights shared by the group. Feedback included a concern about processing photographs using MPLP, since photographs often necessitate processing at the item-level and require extra time and attention. Another issue was the impact of MPLP on reference needs at a state archives where archivists needed the ability to locate documents for their users in a timely manner. It soon became apparent that the speed at which processing had progressed at several institutions had caused some concern.

As a result, Greene and Meissner developed a “middle way” of applying MPLP (Appendix C), which stated that for any collection or group of collections at least half of the processing steps should be “adequate” (or minimally processed) and the other half completed using traditional methods. An average processing rate of 7-8 hours should still be obtained, or, when averaged over a set of collections, the materials needing less processing would balance out the average rate with those needing more. They introduced their “middle way” method with this statement:

Since the MPLP method is based on the premise that one size does not necessarily fit all, and that processing should be flexible across collections and even within collections, it seems counterproductive to define a specific compromise between traditional processing and the MPLP’s “adequate” processing. Instead, a middle way can be defined for any collection or group of collections by ensuring that at least half the steps listed below will be done “adequately” rather than traditionally [emphasis added]. Precisely which half must be left to the repository and processing supervisor.<sup>40</sup>

As the third six-month project period got underway, each institution continued to process collections and record statistics, now armed with methods that constituted a “middle way” of MPLP processing.

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<sup>40</sup> Greene and Meissner, “More Product, Less Process: Answer to the Request for a Middle Way” (working paper, Northwest Archives Processing Initiative, 2005).

This slight change in method led to a minimal rise in the processing rate to 3.05 hours per linear foot. However, by the end of the fourth and last six-month period, the pace had returned again to a consortium rate of 2.9 hours per linear foot, and the final consortium average was the same: 2.9 hours per linear foot. The eight NWAPI members successfully processed 3,620 linear feet of material vital to the history of the Pacific Northwest, and contributed 224 finding aids to the Northwest Digital Archives Database.

Reflecting on the grant project at its end, an NWAPI participant summed up her MPLP experience:

While the habits of prior practice were initially difficult to break, arrangement and description at [my repository] are no less professional now than they have ever been in the past. Within about two years of implementing MPLP in this lone arranger shop, the estimated 350-linear-foot backlog shrank to a manageable 30 linear feet. But every careful reader of Greene and Meissner knows that the slaying of backlogs is not an end in and of itself. Rather, it is a necessary task in managing archival programs efficiently and effectively, and a step toward ‘professional maturity’—the honest assessment of what is and is not possible given the conditions under which we work.<sup>41</sup>

Another participant blogged that she had seen a noticeable increase in collection usage as a result of MPLP, including many collections that never before had been used.<sup>42</sup>

### *Tenth Anniversary of Grant Project*

As reflected in the review of the archival literature, MPLP has seen widespread adoption over the last ten years. In June 2017, with a decade having elapsed since the completion of the NWAPI grant project, the time was ripe to investigate the long-term effects of

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<sup>41</sup> Northwest Archives Processing Initiative (NWAPI), *Final Narrative Report Submitted to the National Historical Publications and Records Commission*, June 2007.

<sup>42</sup> NWAPI, *Final Narrative Report*.

MPLP on the first consortium-wide application of MPLP's methods. In addition, Mark Greene's unexpected passing that same June lent a bittersweet timeliness to the investigation, since the NWAPI grant outcomes had supported the value of MPLP for the entire archival profession. With this in mind, the authors of this article set out to investigate if NWAPI grant participants had maintained their MPLP processing rates over the last decade, how participants had extended the principles of MPLP to other areas of archival practice, and if participants had extrapolated a resource management philosophy from their MPLP training and experience.

### **Survey Methodology**

The authors conducted an email survey with ten questions to gather key data from the original eight participants in the NWAPI grant project. The purpose of the survey was to gauge how successfully archivists intentionally trained in MPLP were able to institutionalize this method for physical processing over the last ten years, as well as how the MPLP "philosophy" impacted other areas of archival practice, including digitization. The survey questions were informed by three things: the original grant proposal and purpose, the final grant report and results, and an extensive survey of the MPLP literature over the previous decade. Questions specifically addressed maintenance of grant processing rates; impact on archival practices, including appraisal and acquisition, description, preservation, reference, and access; impact on digitization practices; and application of MPLP as a philosophical approach. Each question consisted of a query for which the survey-taker chose one option from a Likert scale of four responses, along with a space for elaboration on the response. The quantitative data determined participants' degree of agreement with each question and allowed for the standardization of responses. The qualitative data provided context for the participants' answers and gave survey-takers the opportunity to share additional information. The authors chose the survey method in order to provide a quick and efficient way for participants to give feedback; however, the ability to add comments for each survey question also let participants elaborate on context and reflection, if needed. (Appendix A)

All eight NWAPI participants completed the survey, although response rates were low for some of the questions. Some respondents

were no longer with their NWAPI institution, while others had retired from the archival profession. The authors' choice to collect responses from the original NWAPI grant participants, rather than current institutional employees, was a conscious one. This was done in order to obtain information from the individuals intentionally trained in MPLP during the grant project. The fact that these unique individuals were among the first archivists ever to apply MPLP was an additional consideration for this decision. Ultimately, these individuals were most familiar with the purpose and outcomes of the NWAPI grant project. In reporting the survey results below, the authors included both the number of responses and "No responses," for a total of eight responses to each question. This approach prevents the lower response rate on some questions from skewing the results in favor of only those results from respondents who answered the question.<sup>43</sup>

Two of the survey respondents were administrators of the survey and co-authors of this article. While this situation is unusual, it was important to capture the input of all eight members of "the first wide application" of MPLP, in order to gain a full view of all NWAPI grant participants' experiences.<sup>44</sup> The co-authors did not view the survey responses of any other respondent before submitting their own, so that neither of their responses could be influenced. The survey questions were informed by the literature, and not by any experience of the co-authors; therefore, the questions were deemed to be applicable to all participants. In cases where the response rate fell below the 75 percent range, results may or may not be significant.

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<sup>43</sup> In administering the survey, one respondent submitted two responses, one with no comments, the other with comments. The administrators were able to identify the response with no comments and to delete those responses from the final results.

<sup>44</sup> Greene, email message to author, May 26, 2005.

Question	Number of responses	Percent of total respondents
1	8	100%
2	8	100%
3	8	100%
4	8	100%
5	7	87.5%
6	7	87.5%
7	7	87.5%
8	5	62.5%
9	4	50%
10	6	75%

Figure 1: Survey response rate

The survey instrument may be found in Appendix A. The complete survey results, as well as comments, are provided in Appendix B.

**Discussion and Analysis**

While Appendix B presents the results of the survey in their entirety, selected tables from these results are also reproduced as figures below. Overall, the survey responses reflect the finding that NWAPI grant participants have, for the most part, maintained and institutionalized the MPLP method for physical processing over the last ten years and that the participants perceive medium to high

positive impact from the implementation of MPLP. Surprisingly, NWAPI grant participants reported a low impact of MPLP methods on their digitization practices, which runs counter to the professional literature on the application of MPLP to large-scale digitization. NWAPI participants reported less effect on their appraisal and acquisition practices, but more effect on their descriptive practices, preservation practices, and reference and access.

### *Maintenance of Physical Processing Rates and Practices*

The high number of respondents (87 percent) who reported in Question 1 that they were either “very effective” or “somewhat effective” at maintaining their NWAPI grant processing rate over the last ten years (Figure 2) indicates that the grant-funded participants incorporated MPLP practices and principles into their processing programs. In addition, in Question 3, all respondents reported either using some or all MPLP processing practices over the last ten years (Figure 3), including level of description (collection-level versus folder- or item-level), not removing fasteners (paper clips, staples, etc.), and retaining original folder descriptions and arrangement of items in folders. One respondent noted that he/she did more extensive processing, “depending on the materials.”

Response	Number
Very effective	3
Somewhat effective	4
Not effective	1
TOTAL	8

Figure 2: Over the past decade, how effective have you been at maintaining your institution’s NWAPI grant processing rate? (Question 1)

Response	Number
Used all MPLP practices	2
Used some MPLP practices	6
Used no MPLP practices	0
TOTAL	8

Figure 3: Over the past decade, what has been your continued use of MPLP processing practices (both tangible and digital materials)? (Question 3)

Interestingly, in Question 2, although 87 percent of NWAPI participants reported maintaining their institution’s processing rate, only 50 percent reported that they “very frequently” or “somewhat frequently” use the baseline NWAPI grant standard of one linear foot per 7-8 hours (Figure 4). The survey administrators asked this question in order to tie the survey back to the NWAPI grant specifications, and it is interesting that participants were less likely to use the grant standard than their institutional rate. The comments for this question, however, are helpful in understanding the responses. Two respondents wrote that they do not “consciously” or “habitually” refer to the NWAPI standard. Others commented that they used the NWAPI standard when processing “a fairly ‘straight-forward’ collection” but required different methods when processing photographs or other “non-standard collections” and that “each collection has varied.”

Response	Number
Very frequently	1
Somewhat frequently	3
Not frequently	4
TOTAL	8

Figure 4: Over the past decade, how frequently have you used the NWAPI grant processing standard of 1 linear foot per 7-8 hours? (Question 2)

Two comments about the impact of non-professional staff adopting MPLP practices are noteworthy in that they provide insight into the impact of position types on processing rates. One respondent commented that his/her volunteer processor was “not as interested in processing collections in a minimal way. Therefore, the collections we chose to process were those that required more ‘traditional’ processing (refolding, removal of staples/paper clips, weeding).” Another respondent noted that he/she has “used MPLP and maintained this rate in my own processing, but my volunteer and interns went at a slower rate.” Literature regarding volunteer or student processors is scant and most of it focuses on how best to use these types of workers and what workers gain from the experience. The most pertinent discussion about use of volunteer and student labor with regard to MPLP comes from Greene and Meissner’s discussion of MPLP detractors who have argued that assigning students and volunteers to the time-consuming activities of traditional processing (removing fasteners, photocopying clippings, etc.) means the tedious work is not being done by paid professionals. Greene and Meissner argue that volunteers and students can be assigned to more relevant projects that “not only [further] the mission of the repository, [they provide] more satisfaction for the



workers.”<sup>45</sup> Because there is little literature that focuses on the processing rates of volunteers, students, and interns—whether trained in MPLP or not—this is a potential area of future study.

### *Impact on Other Areas of Archival Practice*

The survey administrators were interested in the impact of MPLP practices on all areas of archival practice, including appraisal and acquisition, descriptive practices (including MARC catalog records and finding aids), preservation practices, and reference and access, which were areas of noted impact in the professional literature. Respondents reported more effect on their descriptive practices, preservation practices, and reference and access, than on appraisal and acquisition practices.

### *Appraisal and Acquisition*

In Question 4, no respondents reported a high level of effect of MPLP practices on their appraisal and acquisition practices (Figure 5). Out of eight respondents, half noted a “medium level of effect” and half reported a low level of effect. One participant noted that materials entered his/her repository based on institutional records retentions schedules, and therefore MPLP had little impact on acquisition. One respondent commented that his/her institution “used researcher notes to add to collection descriptions with their permission” while another noted that he/she tried to create at least box-level descriptions at the time of acquisition.

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<sup>45</sup> Meissner and Greene, “More Application while Less Appreciation,” 215.

Response	Number
High level of effect	0
Medium level of effect	4
Low level of effect	4
TOTAL	8

Figure 5: Over the past decade, what has been the level of effect of MPLP practices on your appraisal and acquisition practices? (Question 4)

The low to medium level of effect on appraisal and acquisition reported by NWAPI grant institutions runs counter to the professional literature, particularly the implementation of “accessioning as processing” as reported by Weideman.<sup>46</sup> However, the reported low impact on appraisal and acquisition practices for NWAPI institutions may reflect the more typical implementation of MPLP to reduce existing backlogs, rather than to avoid increasing the existing backlog. Further research in this area could explore how archivists have or are implementing “accessioning as processing” methods in their repositories.

### *Preservation Practices*

The survey administrators were interested in the impact of MPLP processing methods on preservation practices of NWAPI repositories. Greene and Meissner advocated reliance on climate control for the majority of preservation needs, rather than spending time removing metal or refolding and reboxing into acid-free enclosures. As reflected in the “Middle Way” approach developed during the NWAPI grant (Appendix C), collection-, folder-, and item-level preservation activities were considered unnecessary if applying MPLP’s “adequate” processing approach. However, Greene and Meissner acknowledged that “processing should be flexible

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<sup>46</sup> Weideman, “Accessioning as Processing.”

across collections and even within collections.”<sup>47</sup> The survey administrators were interested to find out if the NWAPI institutions reported criticism of collection- or repository-level preservation, especially since at least one highly critical essay has been published on the topic of preservation.<sup>48</sup>

Seven of eight individuals responded regarding the effect of MPLP on preservation practices. Three noted that MPLP had a medium level effect on their preservation practices. Equal numbers of institutions (two each) identified that MPLP had a high level of effect or a low level of effect on their preservation practices. Two respondents commented that they relied on environmental controls to mitigate preservation issues, although one also noted “because of frequent mechanical malfunctions and water leaks, we were always very aware of the need to anticipate preservation issues.” Two respondents commented that they continued to refolder and rebox collections in order to 1) “create a high level of respect for the materials,” and 2) “aid researchers in putting folders back in correct locations and in citing the material correctly.” Both respondents noted that the reason for reboxing and refolding had to do with the populations using the materials—in one case, undergraduates, in the other, a range of individuals from those with no experience using primary sources to experienced historians.

The quantitative results did not distinguish between positive and negative levels of impact on preservation practices. The fact that almost half of institutions reported a medium level of effect on preservation practices may indicate that institutions have taken to heart the directive to rely on aggregate-level preservation through climate control; however, it may also indicate that NWAPI institutions have not institutionalized an approach that limits other types of preservation activities, such as reboxing and refolding, as indicated by the two comments about continuing to refolder

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<sup>47</sup> Mark Greene and Dennis Meissner, “More Product Less Process: Answer to Request for a ‘Middle Way’” (handout, Northwest Archives Processing Initiative grant, 2006). Reproduced in Appendix C. Later published in Meissner, Dennis and Mark A. Greene, “More Application while Less Appreciation: The Adopters and Antagonists of MPLP,” *Journal of Archival Organization* 8, no. 3-4 (2010): 226.

<sup>48</sup> Phillips, “A Defense of Preservation in the Age of MPLP.”

materials. Further research could be done to identify more granular levels of reboxing and refolding of collections that are considered “minimally” processed, and the rationale for these activities.

### *Description*

Based on the literature,<sup>49</sup> survey administrators expected MPLP to have at least some effect on descriptive practices. Seven of the eight respondents answered Question 5, with four noting a “high level of effect” on descriptive practices, three noting a “medium level of effect” on descriptive practices, and none noting a low level of effect (Figure 6). The comments provided for this question were generally about the positive impact of MPLP for descriptive practices. Three respondents commented on taking a “flexible” approach to the depth and level of description, depending on the collection, and creating “minimalist” collection-level finding aids and MARC records. Other respondents noted that the type of collection dictated the depth of description, that MPLP practices influenced the standardization of descriptive practices, and that they created collection-level finding aid records. Finally, one respondent remarked on the extension of MPLP descriptive practices for two- and three-dimensional object collections, “in order to provide baseline descriptive access to collections that had never been item-level cataloged.”

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<sup>49</sup> See especially Schwartz et al., “Archon”; Chaudron, “To MPLP or not to MPLP”; Gorzalski and Wiget, “More Access, Less Backlog”; Harling, “MPLP as Intentional, not Necessarily Minimal, Processing.”

Response	Number
High level of effect	4
Medium level of effect	3
Low level of effect	0
No response/skipped question	1
TOTAL	8

Figure 6: Over the past decade, what has been the level of effect of MPLP practices on your descriptive practices (including MARC catalog records and finding aids)? (Question 5)

One respondent noted that MPLP affected descriptive practice in adverse ways: “Folders in the early collections processed for the NWAPI ... grant were often described as ‘miscellaneous’ or ‘undated’” and these terms are so nebulous that they are not useful for researchers, especially those working in the online environment. Another respondent observed that his/her “cataloger took more time to describe the collections so researchers had cues to their topics” but did not explain if this was because the finding aid descriptions were too general or if this was a best practice used by the cataloger. The additional work done by the cataloger could be seen as an adverse effect of more streamlined descriptive practices for MPLP-processed finding aids; however, without more information, it is difficult to identify if the additional cataloging work was a positive or negative byproduct of MPLP processing.

### *Reference and Access*

The survey administrators anticipated a range of interpretations regarding MPLP’s impact on reference and access. On one hand, MPLP allowed NWAPI institutions to make more collections available to researchers in a shorter amount of time. On the other hand, NWAPI institutions may have found that minimally processed collections required researchers and archivists to spend additional time locating relevant materials since the descriptions of

collections may not be granular enough to allow for quick identification of particular items.

Seven of the eight participants responded to Question 7 about reference and access (Figure 7), with the highest number (62 percent; 5 institutions) noting a medium level of MPLP effect on reference and access. Two participants responded that there was a low level of effect on reference and access. One respondent noted “Most MPLP descriptions are fine for reference and access, but some is too brief to be of use, especially when the researcher is searching remotely.” Another commented that their institution had a “high level of novice researchers who don’t understand that not all materials are described to the item-level, therefore it has always been difficult to orient researcher[s] to non-item-level described materials.” One respondent observed that he/she “didn’t notice that researchers were less able to find the materials they wanted” but that “[p]reviously, there were complaints about not being able to see collections that had not been processed,” a testament to the positive impact of MPLP.

Response	Number
High level of effect	0
Medium level of effect	5
Low level of effect	2
No response/skipped question	1
TOTAL	8

Figure 7: Over the past decade, what has been the level of effect of MPLP practices on reference and access to materials at your institution? (Question 7)

The statistical results for this question did not distinguish between the positive or negative aspects of MPLP’s impact on reference and access. The medium level of effect on reference and access for five of the participants either could reflect increased burden on reference staff or increased positive response from patrons

when they learned collections were available for use. Further research could be conducted to try to tease out the nuances in this area, especially through studies that build on previous research and case studies, including Shannon Bowen Maier's "MPLP and the Catalog Record as a Finding Aid," the Society of American Archivists Reference, Access, and Outreach Section's "MPLP Task Force Report," and Stephanie H. Crowe and Karen Spilman's "MPLP@5: More Access, Less Backlog?"<sup>50</sup>

### *MPLP and Digitization*

The survey administrators expected to see a strong connection between MPLP practices and digitization practices, whether these were adverse connections, such as reprocessing needed for digitization, or the implementation of large-scale digitization methods that used similar descriptive strategies as MPLP.<sup>51</sup> However, only five of the eight institutions answered the question about how MPLP practices and digitization practices impacted each other (Question 8). Of the five respondents, three reported a low level of impact, one reported a medium level of impact, and one reported a high level of impact. Two respondents commented that they did not have knowledge of the impact of MPLP practices on digitization because they were no longer at the institution, and one commented that even while at the institution, digitization was only done on-demand for reference requests.

In terms of large-scale digitization practices, two respondents commented that they were struggling to move to higher-level descriptions of digitized resources (collection-level, folder-level, series-level). One specifically noted that their digital asset

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<sup>50</sup> Bowen Maier, "MPLP and the Catalog Record as a Finding Aid"; Society of American Archivists, Reference, Access, and Outreach Section, *MPLP Task Force Report*, accessed February 5, 2018, [http://files.archivists.org/groups/rao/MPLPTF\\_survey\\_report.pdf](http://files.archivists.org/groups/rao/MPLPTF_survey_report.pdf); Crowe and Spilman, "MPLP@ 5."

<sup>51</sup> See the literature related to digitization: Greene, "Doing Less Before It's Done Unto You"; Joyce Chapman and Samantha Leonard, "Cost and Benefit of Quality Control Visual Checks in Large-Scale Digitization of Archival Manuscripts," *Library Hi Tech* 31, no. 3 (2013): 405-418; DeRidder, Presnell, and Walker, "Leveraging Encoded Archival Description for Access to Digital Content"; Jackson, "I Want To See It"; Sutton, "Balancing Boutique-Level Quality and Large-Scale Production"; Miller, "All Text Considered."

management system “relies on item-level” records and does not allow for an aggregate structure. The other remarked that he/she considered application of minimal metadata as an application of MPLP process and that a future project at his/her repository requires a more extensive set of metadata elements. These comments reflect the growing connection between MPLP practices and digitization practices among the NWAPI participants. However, the low number of comments about these issues—combined with the low response rate to this question—may simply relate to other factors, such as institution size and capacity for embarking on digital projects and programs. This could be an area of further research, especially with regard to small to mid-sized institutions, particularly non-university institutions, of which there were two in the NWAPI consortium.

### *Application of the MPLP “Philosophy”*

The survey administrators were interested in finding out if NWAPI institutions broadened their application of MPLP as a philosophical approach to decision-making and resource allocation, as discussed by Greene and others.<sup>52</sup> Six of the eight institutions answered Question 10 about applying the MPLP “philosophy” to other areas of their repository (Figure 8), with three responding that they have applied the MPLP “philosophy” to other areas of their repositories and three responding that they have not. Two respondents commented that they have applied the MPLP “philosophy” to budget cuts and cost-benefit analysis. One respondent commented that he/she has moved out of the archives and special collections field, but that he/she continues to refer to the concept of selecting the most appropriate approach for descriptive levels, especially for digital materials.

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<sup>52</sup> Greene, “MPLP: It’s Not Just for Processing Anymore”; Harling, “MPLP as Intentional, not Necessarily Minimal, Processing”; Colati, Crowe, and Meagher, “Better, Faster, Stronger.”



Response	Number
Yes	3
No	3
No response/skipped question	2
TOTAL	8

Figure 8: Is there any other way you have applied the MPLP “philosophy” (i.e., efficient use of resources) to other areas of your repository? (Question 10)

Because the question did not provide a lengthy explanation about what was meant by the MPLP “philosophy,” this may have affected the way participants responded to the question. However, the comments indicate that some participants have applied what they consider the MPLP “philosophy” to other areas of their repositories, such as resource allocation and digital materials.

*Overall Impact of Using MPLP*

Four of the eight participants responded regarding the overall positive impact of using MPLP (Question 9). Out of these, two identified a high overall level of positive impact and two identified a medium level of positive impact. The comments provided some background in terms of the low response rate to this question. Two respondents noted that they had retired from their institutions. Of those who did respond, the overall comments were positive, with participants noting that there was a “[h]igh level of impact at my institution before I retired - it enabled us to complete a good portion of our collections,” that “MPLP has been my ‘go-to’ practice for the backlogs in my repository,” and that “[m]ore collection[s] are available, more quickly—always a good thing.” One participant noted that resource constraints were the main reason he/she was “never really able to institutionalize as many MPLP practices as I would have liked” but also noted the “positive impact for access” created by “shifts in our descriptive practices.” The low response rate to this question made extracting meaning from the data problematic.

While those participants who chose to answer the question reported medium and high positive impact, it is unknown if the lack of response from the others indicated no level of positive impact or an unknown level of positive impact. Therefore, even though the responses submitted were of a positive nature, the authors are unable to report definitively on overall impact.

### **Limitations and Further Research**

Limitations of the survey include the small sample size (8 respondents), as well as the low response rate to some of the questions (one question received only a 50 percent response rate). Because this study focused only on NWAPI grant participants, little could be done about the sample size, but adjustments to the survey instrument may have clarified or even strengthened the results. For instance, survey questions could have required answers, rather than allowing respondents to skip questions, or included an option to respond “I don’t know” or some other equivalent. In addition, a longer survey that tried to elicit levels of both positive and negative impact for some areas, especially for preservation, reference, and access, may have provided more insightful information about these areas of practice. Future research could include gathering additional qualitative information from the eight participants through oral interviews.

There are several areas for further research regarding the long-term impact of MPLP for not only NWAPI participants, but also the archival profession as a whole. Topics already investigated by previous researchers that could be expanded upon include accessioning as processing, effect on descriptive practices, and impacts on reference and access. Given that the NWAPI institutions encompassed mainly small to mid-sized institutions, further investigations could include the effect of institutional size on MPLP adoption and adaptation; the impact of non-permanent staff (volunteers, students, interns) on processing rates when minimal processing methods are used; and the influence of MPLP practices on digitization practices.

### **Conclusion**

This article has investigated a small, yet diverse set of archival repositories that all learned and applied MPLP at the same

time for a specific purpose. As some of the earliest implementers of MPLP, the NWAPI participants provide a long-term perspective on the impact of minimal processing over the last decade. Survey results showed high continued implementation of NWAPI grant processing rates among participants, yet there was mixed effect on other areas of archival practice, including description, preservation, reference and access. Appraisal, acquisition, and digitization were areas where grant participants reported little impact from MPLP. Based on a review of the literature of the last decade, the authors had anticipated that NWAPI grant participants would expand their application of MPLP principles beyond the processing of physical materials. However, while participants reported a high continued implementation of NWAPI processing rates, they reported little to some effect on other areas of archival practice and resource management. Several reasons may exist for this; the primary one may have been the size of the institutions involved in the NWAPI grant project. Many archivists in these institutions were “lone arrangers” who may not have had the resources to keep up with the expanded application of MPLP principles reported in the professional literature.

The high level of maintenance of grant processing rates, however, does show that intentional training in MPLP can positively impact the long-term implementation of MPLP practices. Perhaps a training program connecting MPLP principles to decision-making and resource management would spur archivists to more widely apply these principles throughout archival practice, successfully bringing the profession closer to Greene and Meissner’s goal of reframing professional conversations “to better appreciate the consequences of certain choices that archivists make every day.”<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Greene and Meissner, “More Product, Less Process,” 209.

(ARCS), and also previously served as President of the Northwest Archivists. Janet holds an MLIS from the University of Washington, and certification from the Academy of Certified Archivists. She curates the Pacific Northwest Protestantism Collection at Whitworth, along with the University's Institutional Records Collection. Janet's publications include "Researchers at Work: Assessing Needs for Content and Presentation of Archival Materials," and she has administered grants from ALA, NEH, NHPRC, IMLS, and the Washington State Library.

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**Kyna Herzinger** joined the Archives and Special Collections at the University of Louisville in 2016. As the Archivist for Records Management, she works with university records through all stages of the records lifecycle—from active use to archival preservation. She previously served the State Archives of North Carolina as an appraisal archivist and records analyst. Kyna received her B.A. in History from Whitworth University in Spokane, WA where she met and worked with Janet and Rose. She holds an MLIS and MA from the University of South Carolina.

## **Appendix A: Survey Instrument**

### ***SURVEY: MPLP Ten Years Later***

You are special! You are a member of the original group of eight institutions that took part in the NWAPI Phase II MPLP processing project carried out in 2005-2007, and your input is highly desired! I have had a proposal accepted to write an article titled "MPLP Ten Years Later: the Excitement of Being among the First" and I appreciate your willingness to complete this short 10-question survey. The questions will ask you to reflect on your experience with MPLP during the decade since the project finished. I know that several of you have moved on to different positions, and a few others have retired. Please answer each question to the best of your ability, according to your own situation. Your identities will not be revealed in the article, nor will the identities of your institutions.

As background; the project was enabled by an NHPRC grant of \$178,000, and the (revised) grant narrative contained the following stipulations with regard to processing:

- NWAPI Phase II will use Greene and Meissner's processing standard of 1 linear foot per 7-8 hours.
- All institutions will strive for the standard of 1 linear foot per 7-8 hours, but some may require slightly more, due to the fact that different ages and types of materials require more or less processing.

Thanks so much!

**1. Over the past decade, how effective have you been at maintaining your institution's NWAPI grant processing rate (listed below)?**

- Very effective
- Somewhat effective
- Not effective

Elaborate below about your processing rate:

*Institution processing rates, as reported in the final NWAPI grant report:*

- Institution A: 1.5 hours/cu. ft.
- Institution B: 17.4 hours/cu. ft. (high number due to large amount of photographic materials in collections)
- Institution C: 2.3 hours/cu. ft.
- Institution D: 1.6 hours/cu. ft.
- Institution E: 1.25 hours/ln. ft. (rate for one collection processed in final quarter of grant; no overall rate reported)
- Institution F: 4.8 hours/ln. ft. in final 6 month period; 2.8 hours/cu. ft. average over entire grant period
- Institution G: 3.5 hours/ln. ft.
- Average linear feet/hour figure: 2.9 hours/ln. ft. (Figure excludes Institution B)

**2. Over the past decade, how frequently have you used the NWAPI grant processing standard of 1 linear foot per 7-8 hours?**

- Very frequently
- Somewhat frequently
- Not frequently

Elaborate below about your processing rate:

**3. Over the past decade, what has been your continued use of MPLP processing practices (both tangible and digital materials)?**

- Used all MPLP practices
- Used some MPLP practices

- Used no MPLP practices

Elaborate below about your adoption of MPLP practices:

**4. Over the past decade, what has been the level of effect of MPLP practices on your appraisal and acquisition practices?**

- High level of effect
- Medium level of effect
- Low level of effect

Elaborate below about the effect on appraisal and acquisition practices:

**5. Over the past decade, what has been the level of effect of MPLP practices on your descriptive practices (including MARC catalog records and finding aids)?**

- High level of effect
- Medium level of effect
- Low level of effect

Elaborate below about the effect on descriptive practices:

**6. Over the past decade, what has been the level of effect of MPLP practices on your preservation practices?**

- High level of effect
- Medium level of effect
- Low level of effect

Elaborate below about the effect on preservation practices:

**7. Over the past decade, what has been the level of effect of MPLP practices on reference and access to materials at your institution?**

- High level of effect
- Medium level of effect
- Low level of effect

Elaborate below about the effect on reference and access:

**8. Over the past decade, how have MPLP practices and digitization practices impacted one another at your institution?**

- High level of impact
- Medium level of impact
- Low level of impact



Elaborate below about the impact of MPLP and digitization practices on one another:

**9. Over the past decade, what has been the overall level of positive impact of using MPLP?**

- High overall level of positive impact
- Medium overall level of positive impact
- No overall positive impact

Elaborate below on the overall positive impact of MPLP:

**10. Are there any other ways you have applied the MPLP “philosophy” (ie, efficient use of resources) to other areas of your repository?**

- Yes
- No

Elaborate below on ways you have or have not applied the MPLP “philosophy”:

## Appendix B: Survey Results

*Note: The results reported below include the number of participants who skipped or did not respond to a question, if applicable.*

Question 1: Over the past decade, how effective have you been at maintaining your institution's NWAPI grant processing rate (listed below)?

Response	Number
Very effective	3
Somewhat effective	4
Not effective	1
TOTAL	8

5 comments:

1. I have used MPLP and maintained this rate in my own processing, but my volunteer and interns went at a slower rate.
2. The rate was plus or minus depending on the kinds of materials in the collection. We also put an emphasis on informational value of the collection. Materials in demand received a more thorough processing but our average was 1.5.
3. I retired in 2013 and until that time I tried to continue the rate of processing materials. The position was part-time. The current archivist could give a better answer.
4. After the grant we were not able to have a paid processing archivist. We had one volunteer who did most of our manuscript processing and he was not as interested in processing collections in a minimal way. Therefore, the collections we chose to process were those that required more

- "traditional" processing (refolding, removal of staples/paper clips, weeding).
- 5. Since I've changed institutions, it's hard to quantify consistency.

Question 2: Over the past decade, how frequently have you used the NWAPI grant processing standard of 1 linear foot per 7-8 hours?

Response	Number
Very frequently	1
Somewhat frequently	3
Not frequently	4
TOTAL	8

7 comments:

- 1. When processing a fairly "straight-forward" collection; yes. But I have been doing a lot more processing of photos and other non-standard collections, so this requires a different method.
- 2. This standard stayed in place during my tenure until May 2008 when I retired.
- 3. To clarify, while we don't habitually refer to the NWAPI grant processing standard, our institution's processing rate still consistently exceeds this.
- 4. To clarify, we haven't made a point of consciously referring to the NWAPI standard, but our processing rate already exceeded/exceeds this baseline.
- 5. Again, since I retired in 2013, I am not certain about the processing rate.

6. We were not able to convert our volunteer processor into using minimal processing practices, and we did not have paid staff available for processing large collections.
7. Each collection has varied.

Question 3: Over the past decade, what has been your continued use of MPLP processing practices (both tangible and digital materials)?

Response	Number
Used all MPLP practices	2
Used some MPLP practices	6
Used no MPLP practices	0
TOTAL	8

5 comments:

1. I have continued to use MPLP for as many collections as possible.
2. During my tenure -- until May 2008.
3. As part of project management for processing projects, we identify quite specifically what level and type of arrangement and description work is to be applied. This will vary from collection to collection, but examples of MPLP approaches that we employ may include: describing records at collection-level only (and online distribution of collection-level descriptive instances), leaving staples/metal fastenings in place (unless rusty), acceptance of "existing" folder-level description and/or refraining from item-level organization of materials within folders.
4. Since retiring, I have volunteered at an institutional archives, one day a week. My time was spent processing records and I

tried to use MPLP practices, although frequently, depending on the materials, I did more intensive processing.

- 5. I have used minimal processing practices mostly for 1) accessioning tangible materials (ie, doing a minimal amount of box-level description so that the materials could be usable right away by researchers), and 2) descriptive practices (ie, describing at a collection- or series-level, rather than item-level).

Question 4: Over the past decade, what has been the level of effect of MPLP practices on your appraisal and acquisition practices?

Response	Number
High level of effect	0
Medium level of effect	4
Low level of effect	4
TOTAL	8

4 comments:

- 1. My appraisal and acquisition practices are not closely related to MPLP. Due to the fact that I am a one-person shop, I must necessarily come back later in time to do processing of collections I've acquired.
- 2. We tended to use collections that were described more thoroughly when there was a choice. Some researchers enjoyed using papers/photos with minimal processing because of the possibility of finding a "treasure" no one else had discovered! Also we used researchers notes to add to collection descriptions with their permission.

3. Before I retired, materials came into the archives based on the institutional records retention schedule, so there wasn't much impact of MPLP practices on acquisition.
4. I have tried to create at least box-level descriptions for new acquisitions, if possible. If the collection is small, I may only generate a collection-level description and a box-folder list.

Question 5: Over the past decade, what has been the level of effect of MPLP practices on your descriptive practices (including MARC catalog records and finding aids)?

Response	Number
High level of effect	4
Medium level of effect	3
Low level of effect	0
No response/skipped question	1
TOTAL	8

5 comments:

1. MPLP has highly affected my descriptive practices, but often in adverse ways. Folders in the early collections processed for the NWAPI II grant were often described as "miscellaneous" or "undated." With the increase in online searching, it is very apparent that no one searches on those terms!
2. The cataloger took more time to describe the collections so researchers had cues to their topics. (We were lucky to have a very conscientious cataloger who was willing and able to accomplish this.

- 3. Although this practice preceded involvement in NWAPI, we take a flexible approach to the level and degree of description for different collections. This includes the creation (and online dissemination) of collection-level finding aids, and creation of MARC catalog records that are DACS compliant, but may be relatively "minimalist" in nature.
- 4. While working, I did try to use MPLP practices to speed up the rate of processing and to standardize descriptive practices. In my volunteer project since then, my goal has been to standardize and simplify descriptive practices when possible; at other times it seemed necessary to do more detailed description. This may not be directly MPLP, but our institution recently converted MARC records for archival collections into collection-level EADs. The intention was to utilize the collection-level descriptions already available to create "baseline" records that could be added to if there was a need to do so. For many collections, the collection-level record is enough to provide researchers a sense of what is in the collection. The ability to determine what level or depth of description is needed, based on the collection and its anticipated use, is a principle I've continued to apply. In the institution where I worked during the NWAPI grant, we also applied some MPLP descriptive principles to our three-dimensional and two-dimensional object collections, in order to provide baseline descriptive access to collections that had never been item-level cataloged.

Question 6: Over the past decade, what has been the level of effect of MPLP practices on your preservation practices?

Response	Number
High level of effect	2
Medium level of effect	3

Low level of effect	2
No response/skipped question	1
TOTAL	8

### 3 comments:

1. Many preservation practices were affected by MPLP, such as stopping the removal of staples and paper clips, but I continue to re-folder and re-box collections, to create a high level of respect for the materials. This is done because I work quite often with undergraduates and their research, so I want to encourage care and respect.
2. We spent less time and effort on contents of collection and more resources on environmental controls. We were already in the planning stage of a new building with proper environment. That building (beautiful, new) is now in operation.
3. 1. Because the clientele for archival materials ranged from historians to those with no experience using primary sources, we continued to refolder and rebox collections as much as possible. This aided researchers in putting folders back in correct locations and in citing the material correctly; most researchers didn't understand what a finding aid was, nor how it matched up to the physical materials. 2. Because our storage area was climate-controlled, we could generally rely on the physical space to provide an adequate preservation environment. However, because of frequent mechanical malfunctions and water leaks, we were always very aware of the need to anticipate preservation issues. This meant that we continued to put photographs in individual sleeves, both within photograph collections and in mixed-material collections, in order to help mitigate issues, should they ever arise.



Question 7: Over the past decade, what has been the level of effect of MPLP practices on reference and access to materials at your institution?

Response	Number
High level of effect	0
Medium level of effect	5
Low level of effect	2
No response/skipped question	1
TOTAL	8

4 comments:

1. Most MPLP descriptions are fine for reference and access, but some is too brief to be of use, especially when the researcher is searching remotely.
2. I didn't notice that researchers were less able to find the materials they wanted. I also do not remember any complaints. Previously, there were complaints about not being able to see collections that had not been processed.
3. This is difficult to gage in relation to MPLP. A variety of factors have increased awareness of our holdings and the discoverability of our online description instances.
4. Our institution has a high level of novice researchers who don't understand that not all materials are described to the item-level, therefore it has always been difficult to orient researchers to non-item-level described materials. We continued to refolder and rebox collections even when using a minimal processing approach because we knew it was useful for researchers to have box and folder numbers and

legible folder titles. The except to this practice was for our institution's own records which we generally did not rebox or refolder. If we did minimal processing for photograph collections (i.e., not item-level cataloging), then we would item-level catalog at least a few images into our photograph finding aids so that researchers would find that the larger collection existed. We would also try to put copies of the photograph collection's finding aid in with the item-level records so that researchers would find these (generally, the access systems for collection-level vs. item-level materials were separate).

Question 8: Over the past decade, how have MPLP practices and digitization practices impacted one another at your institution?

Response	Number
High level of impact	1
Medium level of impact	1
Low level of impact	3
No response/skipped question	3
TOTAL	8

#### 5 Comments:

1. I have chosen to digitize the collections that are the most straight-forward and require minimal metadata, so I would consider this an application of MPLP processing. My next digitization project will definitely not be MPLP, because it will be my photographs collection, which requires multiple metadata elements assigned to each photo.

- 2. I don't believe I can answer the above question as I don't have the longevity.
- 3. I only did digitization on demand - for reference requests. This was both at my institution before I retired, and at my volunteer position afterwards.
- 4. I wish we could do more folder- or series-level digitization. Unfortunately, our DAM does not allow for this type of structure; it relies on item-level records.
- 5. At the original institution, we moved to describing collections at album or collection level to save time. We're struggling with trying something similar at the new institution.

Question 9: Over the past decade, what has been the overall level of positive impact of using MPLP?

Response	Number
High overall level of positive impact	2
Medium overall level of positive impact	2
No overall positive impact	0
No response/skipped question	4
TOTAL	8

5 comments

- 1. MPLP has been my "go-to" practice for the backlogs in my repository. It has saved massive amounts of time in this one-person shop.
- 2. Again, I don't have the longevity.
- 3. High level of impact at my institution before I retired - it enabled us to complete a good portion of our collections.

Medium impact at my volunteer position in archives at the monastery, it has helped me set priorities in description and processing.

4. Because of resource constraints, we were never really able to institutionalize as many MPLP practices as I would have liked. However, I think the shifts in our descriptive practices (adding collection-level records in with item-level records) was a major positive impact for access.
5. More collection are available, more quickly--always a good thing.

Question 10: Is there any other way you have applied the MPLP “philosophy” (ie, efficient use of resources) to other areas of your repository?

Response	Number
Yes	3
No	3
No response/skipped question	2
TOTAL	8

4 comments:

1. I have also applied the MPLP philosophy to projecting required budget cuts.
2. No more than always looking for efficiencies.
3. I am no longer at the institution that received the NWAPI grant and have shifted out of "archives and special collections" into cataloging and metadata. However, I frequently refer back to the principle of choosing the most appropriate "processing" approach when I make decisions about descriptive levels, especially for digital resources. Does

this collection warrant item-level metadata or is a collection-level description adequate for general access?

4. Cost-benefit analysis is key component of most new projects.

## Appendix C: More Product, Less Process: Answer to the Request for a “Middle Way”<sup>54</sup>

Since the MPLP method is based on the premise that one size does not necessarily fit all, and that processing should be flexible across collections and even within collections, it seems counter-productive to define a specific compromise between traditional processing and the MPLP’s “adequate” processing. Instead, a middle way can be defined for any collection or group of collections by **ensuring that at least half the steps listed below will be done “adequately” rather than traditionally**; precisely which half must be left to the repository and processing supervisor.

	<i>Traditional</i>	<i>Adequate</i>
<b>Arrangement</b>		
Un-foldered material into folders	Yes	Yes
Folders into series	Yes	Maybe, if size/complexity of collection warrants
Folders within series	Yes	No
Items within folders	Yes	No
<b>Description</b>		
Collection/Record Group	Yes	Yes

<sup>54</sup> This table was provided courtesy of Mark Greene and Dennis Meissner, 2006. It was subsequently published in Meissner, Dennis and Mark A. Greene, "More Application with Less Appreciation: The Adopters and Antagonists of MPLP," *Journal of Archival Organization* 8, no. 3-4 (2010): 189-192.

Series	Yes	Maybe, if size/complexity of collection warrant
Folders	Yes	May list, not describe
Items	May list or describe	No
<b>Preservation</b>		
Re-folder	Yes	Only if original folders brittle or otherwise damaged
Remove fasteners	Yes	No
Segregate and/or photocopy clippings, carbons, onionskins	Yes	No
Segregate and/or sleeve photos	Yes	No
Encapsulate or mend torn documents	Yes	No
Interleave scrapbooks and photo albums	Yes	No
<b>Metrics</b>		
Hours per cubic foot	15	4