

# Personal Papers and MPLP: Strategies and Techniques



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**RÉSUMÉ** En 2005, Mark A. Greene et Dennis Meissner publièrent un article exhortant les archivistes à réévaluer leurs stratégies de traitement des documents d'archives afin de placer moins d'importance sur les classements et descriptions détaillées et plus sur les efforts minimaux pour rendre les documents accessibles aux chercheurs. En 2008, l'Auburn Avenue Research Library on African American Culture and History, à Atlanta, en Georgie, a octroyé une bourse du Council of Library and Information Resources afin de traiter les documents personnels d'Andrew J. Young. Les conditions attachées à la bourse exigeaient l'adoption des techniques « plus de produit, moins de processus » de Greene et Meissner. Cet article décrit l'analyse et les stratégies qui ont mené vers la décision de se servir d'une variété de niveaux de traitement pour classer les documents d'Andrew J. Young, qui couvrent plus de cinquante ans de sa vie publique et privée. Ce projet a permis au personnel des archives de mener des expériences sur une étendue de méthodes pour classer et décrire la collection, allant d'une description minimale à une description à la pièce. Une fois le projet complété, il fut découvert que la meilleure façon de traiter une collection est de ne pas se limiter uniquement à la méthode de la description à la pièce ou à celle du « plus de produit, moins de processus », mais d'employer les techniques appropriées de diverses méthodes afin de créer une stratégie adéquate et de longue durée.

**ABSTRACT** In 2005, Mark A. Greene and Dennis Meissner published an article urging archivists to reassess processing strategies to focus less on detailed arrangement and description and more on minimal efforts to provide access to researchers. In 2008, the Auburn Avenue Research Library on African American Culture and History in Atlanta, Georgia, was awarded a grant from the Council of Library and Information Resources to process the personal papers of Andrew J. Young. The grant stipulated the implementation of Greene and Meissner's "more product, less process" (MPLP) techniques. This article describes the analysis and strategies behind the decisions made to utilize a variety of processing levels applied to the papers of Andrew J. Young, which cover more than fifty years of his public and private life. The project allowed archives staff to experiment with a range of methods to arrange and describe the collection, from minimal to item-level. Upon the completion of the project, the main lesson learned was that the best way to process a collection is not to adhere strictly to item-level or MPLP approaches but to bring together appropriate techniques from multiple approaches to create a suitable and long-term strategy.

## Introduction

When Mark A. Greene and Dennis Meissner's article "More Product, Less Process: Revamping Traditional Archival Processing" appeared in *American Archivist* in 2005,<sup>1</sup> it generated much discussion throughout the archival community. Responses ranged from disdain of breaking with archival tradition to "we already do that." While "more product, less process," or MPLP as it is called, is still not completely accepted by all institutions, many are implementing some or all of Greene and Meissner's suggestions to expedite processing so that collections can be made available to researchers in a timelier manner. Upon receipt of a three-year grant from the Council of Library and Information Resources (CLIR),<sup>2</sup> the Auburn Avenue Research Library on African American Culture and History for the first time attempted to apply MPLP practices to the Andrew J. Young Papers and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) Atlanta Branch Records. Focusing on the Andrew J. Young Papers, this article chronicles how MPLP was applied as a framework to assess and employ a range of techniques, from item-level to minimal, during the processing of the collection.

The Auburn branch of the Carnegie Library of Atlanta, the first public library branch in Atlanta for African Americans, opened in 1921. Librarians Alice Dugged Cary and Annie L. McPheeters developed the Negro History Collection, formally established in 1934. The collection included books, magazines, newspapers, and journals by and for African Americans and housed in either the downtown or West Hunter branches. The collection was transferred in 1994 to the newly built Auburn Avenue Research Library on African American Culture and History (AARL), a special library within the Atlanta-Fulton Public Library System. Located on historic Auburn Avenue, down the street from the birth home of Martin Luther King Jr., AARL actively collects materials related to African and African American history and culture, with a focus on Atlanta.<sup>3</sup> AARL archives staff have multiple duties; none are dedicated solely to processing. Focusing on a specific project to experiment with new processing techniques provided an efficient way to test feasibility and enable staff to see the practices implemented, determine how or if they worked, and consider how policy changes could set the groundwork for future projects.

1 Mark A. Greene and Dennis Meissner, "More Product, Less Process: Revamping Traditional Archival Processing," *American Archivist* 68 (Fall/Winter 2005): 208–63.

2 This was a joint grant with Emory University, Atlanta.

3 Auburn Avenue Research Library on African American Culture and History, "About Us," accessed 30 March 2013, <http://afpls.org/aboutaarl>.

## Project Background

AARL received the Andrew J. Young Papers in 1996, with the official deed of gift signed in 2004. In 2010, about a year after the project began, AARL acquired additional materials, bringing the total size to 766 linear feet. Excluding the 170 boxes of books removed from the collection, just over 100 of the boxes consisted primarily of already foldered items with some original order maintained, but the majority of the items (approximately 80 percent) were either loose in boxes or had no semblance of organization. The 156 linear feet of NAACP Atlanta Branch records appeared to have some original order because about 75 percent were in labelled folders; however, the folder titles and contents seldom matched. They were, for the most part, not organized in any coherent manner. It was not obvious how to apply to disorganized collections the MPLP techniques proposed by Greene and Meissner, but AARL was open to my willingness to experiment, and the prioritization of access created an opportunity to test the theories and practices.



**Figure 1. Example of records received as part of the Andrew J. Young Papers, showing the lack of order.** Credit: Photo courtesy of the author.

The core of what MPLP offered for processing these collections was flexibility. Though the CLIR grant stipulated the implementation of MPLP techniques, in fact a variety of techniques were utilized to process the collections:

from MPLP to item-level and in between. Not all series or even subseries were processed at the same level, and the emphasis was on creating access to a large collection of personal papers by doing the minimum necessary in the shortest time frame. As Megan Floyd Desnoyers argues, “There is no one way to arrange a collection. Archivists try to achieve what they perceive as the arrangement that will best show respect for the origin and integrity of the papers while considering the needs of the users. Usually the simpler the arrangement, the greater its usefulness.”<sup>4</sup> The project was an opportunity to knowingly process a collection imperfectly, remembering that researchers more often prefer access over a “perfectly” processed collection.

In 1997, Yale University established guidelines to estimate how long it takes to process collections,<sup>5</sup> which some institutions have used and still use as a benchmark. In their analysis of NHPRC grant-funded projects, Greene and Meissner found that processing rates ranged from 1.5 to 67 hours per linear foot, “with a large clustering of projects (7) in the 25–40 hours per foot range.”<sup>6</sup> In terms of extent, the Young and NAACP collections totalled 922 linear feet (766 for Andrew Young, plus 156 for NAACP) and both collections fit within Yale’s guideline of 30 hours per linear foot, creating a project timeline of almost 23,000 hours, or over 9½ years, to process those collections. Even utilizing the 10 hours per linear foot guideline, though that description did not match the state of either collection, the estimate was 3¼ years.<sup>7</sup> Because the grant was for three years, following either guideline would mean not completing the project on time. In the end, processing was completed in two years and three weeks, equalling about 461 linear feet per year, with Young’s collection finished in approximately one year and four months. Project staff included one full-time professional project archivist, a

4 Megan Floyd Desnoyers, “Personal Papers,” in *Managing Archives and Archival Institutions*, ed. James Gregory Bradsher (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 88.

5 Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, “Archival Processing Manual,” <http://www.library.yale.edu/beinecke/manuscript/process/index.html>, accessed 30 March 2013.

6 Greene and Meissner, “More Product, Less Process,” 228.

7 Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, “Archival Processing Manual, Processing Estimates, I.3. Rates,” <http://www.library.yale.edu/beinecke/manuscript/process/appA.html#I.3.Rates>, accessed 30 March 2013. The description for 30 hours per linear foot reads: “Used for collections that have little or no arrangement and order. Different kinds of materials are mixed together, correspondence is unsorted or stored in original envelopes, some papers and correspondents are unidentified, and extensive preservation work may be required.” The description for 10 hours per linear foot reads: “Used for collections that have no significant organizational problems. A minimum amount of interfiling and reorganization is needed. The major portion of staff time will be expended on the basic work required for all collections: reboxing, refoldering, listing, and describing the contents of the papers. Records of organizations and collections that consist primarily of manuscripts of published works often fall into the D category.”

student worker for one year, and two other students working 12 to 15 hours a week for just over one year. Adding up the number of hours worked by all staff (minus vacation, conferences, etc.), the project averaged approximately 4 hours per linear foot, complying with Greene and Meissner's suggested benchmark. Though the CLIR grant project included organizational records, this article focuses on the personal papers, as stated above.

Historically, archivists in the United States are more likely to do item-level processing on personal papers,<sup>8</sup> though Greene and Meissner note that there is much archival literature promoting non-item-level processing.<sup>9</sup> Kathleen Roe has explained that item-level processing is "appropriate only on rare occasions for records of extreme importance."<sup>10</sup> Because Young was a prominent civil rights activist, politician, and public figure, portions of the collection are considered of "extreme importance"; prior to and during processing, staff regularly received requests for access. The ultimate goal was not precision and perfection but access.

Greene and Meissner's overall message in advocating MPLP is to rethink how to process collections, primarily by eliminating item-level arrangement and description, and also to be flexible and open to applying a range of processing strategies. For the purposes of this article, item-level processing includes arranging items within folders, separating papers by format (correspondence, reports, brochures, etc.), preparing detailed item and folder descriptions, performing preservation tasks on items (photocopying acidic papers, removing metal fasteners), and completing other meticulous tasks. In contrast, Greene and Meissner suggest focusing on the series or collection level instead of the folder or item level, not rearranging items within folders, concentrating more on intellectual arrangement than physical arrangement, and not arranging all series at the same "level of intensity." For description, they suggest using "*a level of detail appropriate to that level of arrangement*" (italics in the original), writing what suffices for access (not lengthy narratives), and applying different levels of description within a collection.<sup>11</sup> As I applied a minimal processing mindset from the outset, I discovered that it fostered a more thorough thought process and assessment of how to arrange and describe the collection efficiently. Instead of trying to make the project conform to MPLP,

8 Megan Floyd Desnoyers, "When Is a Collection Processed?" in *A Modern Archives Reader: Basic Readings on Archival Theory and Practice*, ed. Maygene F. Daniels and Timothy Walch (Washington, DC: National Archives and Records Service, US General Services Administration, 1984), 310.

9 Greene and Meissner, "More Product, Less Process," 213–17.

10 Kathleen D. Roe, *Arranging and Describing Archives and Manuscripts*, Archives Fundamentals Series II (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2005), 24–25.

11 Greene and Meissner, "More Product, Less Process," 240–48.

item-level processing, or any other specific technique, I focused on methods appropriate for making the collection accessible to researchers.

### **The Project Procedure and Analysis**

As noted earlier, the Young papers had little organization or original order, with material in one box sometimes spanning fifty years or multiple formats. Additionally, many boxes contained irrelevant items, from hotel key cards to candy and even a television remote control. Techniques used for the project were not necessarily new, but behind all decisions was an assessment of how MPLP provided flexibility: rather than adhere to a prescribed processing structure, it was possible to utilize a variety of arrangement and description practices to best fit the collection. In general, the strategy for processing Young's papers was based on the content, the potential for research use, and the condition of the material.

The first step was to do a quick survey of the collection to gain basic control over it. We labelled boxes according to their contents: papers, books, artifacts/textiles, and photographs. This high-level inventory was imperfect and listed only the most prominent formats (sometimes boxes of papers also contained artifacts or books), but it provided a starting point for processing. Next, I removed 170 boxes of books from the collection and sorted them into two categories: one for AARL's collection and the other to donate to the AARL Friends of the Library book sale. Though some books fit into AARL's collection development policy, most were gifts that Young had received from authors, colleagues, and friends; they did not reflect his work or personal life. This task took about two weeks and was the first step in reducing the linear feet of the collection from 766 to 596, the latter being the basis for the rest of this analysis.

The next decision was how to organize the collection. It had little physical order, but Young's public career provided a logical structure that was potentially conducive to research. Jennifer Meehan suggests that original order should be thought of "as a conceptual framework for analyzing a body of personal records, regardless of whether or not there is a consistent, discernible order" to indicate the context in which the donor created, kept, and used the records.<sup>12</sup> The imposed order was simple to discern: it proceeded chronologically following Young's career, with separate series for personal/family, photographs, audiovisual material, and artifacts, following Catherine Hobbs's idea that personal papers have a "narrative value" and can indicate a "de

12 Jennifer Meehan, "Rethinking Original Order and Personal Records," *Archivaria* 70 (Fall 2010): 34–35.

facto autobiography.”<sup>13</sup> The Andrew J. Young Papers are arranged into twelve series:

- Series 1: Church and Ministerial, 1951–2002
- Series 2: Southern Christian Leadership Conference and Civil Rights, 1957–2003
- Series 3: Community Relations Commission and Congress, 1964–1980
- Series 4: Ambassador, 1975–1979
- Series 5: Mayor, 1978–1989
- Series 6: Gubernatorial Campaign, 1989–1990
- Series 7: 1996 Atlanta Olympic Games, 1972–1996
- Series 8: Private Career, 1977–2007
- Series 9: Personal, 1941–2002
- Series 10: Photographs, 1910s–2000s
- Series 11: Audio-Visual, 1963–2005
- Series 12: Awards and Artifacts, 1950s–2004

This organization mostly reinstates the order in which Young created his papers, even though they were not physically arranged in this order.

A challenge with disorganized collections is finding the balance between physical and intellectual arrangement. Greene and Meissner promote the description of contents at the box or folder level when possible, assuming that there is already some order or coherence within the boxes. One approach would be to folder the contents of a box appropriately, leave them in that same box, and then create a logical and readable intellectual arrangement in the finding aid. For a collection like Young’s, that approach would have meant there would be, for example, papers related to his civil rights activities spread across potentially dozens of boxes. It is also important to take into account what would be more efficient: physically arranging the items or spending time creating identical folders in multiple boxes? Because much of the material was loose and needed to be foldered or weeded, I decided to physically arrange the entire collection. Another reason to favour physical arrangement was the discovery of a “hidden collection” within Young’s papers. The papers of Jean Childs Young, Andrew’s first wife, were uncovered and moved into a separate collection to recognize her career and contributions.

It took about two weeks to sort approximately 600 boxes of papers, artifacts, photographs, and audiovisual material into the outlined series. The sort was rough and not expected to be precise. However, as best as possible

13 Catherine Hobbs, “The Character of Personal Archives: Reflections on the Value of Records of Individuals,” *American Archivist* 52 (2001): 131.

we separated books, photographs, audiovisual material, and artifacts, and grouped papers based on the series outline. Materials were placed in boxes labelled by series or format to ease processing by series.

When deciding how to arrange the materials, I assessed each series individually for its content, potential research use, and the condition of the items. Students and scholars worldwide study the United States civil rights movement; as an activist and a close aide and adviser to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Andrew Young played an important role in that movement. Additionally, one of AARL's collecting strengths is civil rights, particularly Atlanta activists. With this in mind, "Series 2: Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and Civil Rights" received some item-level arrangement and description. Young maintained copies of his own speeches as well some by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Ralph Abernathy, Julian Bond, and numerous others. While a folder labelled "Speeches" would have offered an adequate description, we knew that patrons often request a speech from a particular day or event. Aware of the potentially high research demand, we gave more care to this series, yet we did not describe every single item. Materials were still grouped as much as possible, but some portions required more detailed description. For example, the 1968 Poor People's Campaign, under the leadership of Ralph Abernathy, was one of the first major events organized by the SCLC after King's assassination, and represented a pivotal event in the transition of SCLC leadership as well as a shift in the movement. Providing more information for researchers in the finding aid would therefore be helpful.

Few of the items placed in "Series 1: Church and Ministerial" had come in folders originally, but most were quickly identifiable based on letterhead or date. They were grouped together as much as possible under one heading and not always separated by type (correspondence, reports, brochures, flyers, notes, programs, and so forth). A folder was created with a title, such as "Church of the Brethren," and staff filed relevant items in the folder as they were found. Materials were handled individually, but there was no further arrangement within folders.

"Series 4, Ambassador" required only minimal arrangement and was one of two series for which the majority of items were in folders and in some obvious original order. Because of the condition of the original folders, all items were refoldered, but folder titles and organization were maintained nearly exactly as found. This portion of the collection had been kept for about thirty years in an environment without temperature or humidity control; the folders did not have flat bottoms, leading to bent and damaged papers, and some were curled and overstuffed. A large portion of this series comprised correspondence that had been arranged in three sections: chronological, alphabetical by writer's last name, and subject. Historical processing practices would suggest a complete reorganization of this material. With nearly 80 document cases, or about 40 linear feet, of correspondence containing thousands, if not tens

of thousands, of letters from 1977 to 1979, rearranging into one specific order would have taken months.

There are different arguments for chronological versus alphabetical arrangement of correspondence, and it is a difficult decision with no one right answer. No matter what the organization, there are multiple approaches when it comes to researching correspondence; sometimes researchers want to see if there are letters written to a certain person and sometimes they want all the correspondence from a certain time period or event. The correspondence in this collection was a good example of the challenges faced when trying to balance researchers' needs with an archivist's desire to make material accessible quickly. Because Young's ambassadorial correspondence came in a meaningful and useful arrangement, I chose to preserve that order to comply with a minimal approach.

I used the same approach for the newspaper and magazine articles, the other major portion of the Ambassador series. Of the approximately 35 document cases (about 17 linear feet) of 1977–79 articles, the majority had an original order that remained intact, though all were refoldered, as noted above. None were photocopied for preservation; all were left in their original state and folders were labelled with the year only. Scattered articles found in other boxes were placed in the last folder for the appropriate year and folders added when necessary. Not interfiling by precise date saved time, especially when not all articles indicated exact dates. This same strategy was applied to the articles in "Series 5, Mayor." Young served two terms (eight years) as mayor of Atlanta and was in the news almost daily. The Ambassador and Mayor series comprised nearly 90 document and oversize boxes full of articles. Arranging them by year gave an entry point for researchers looking for a specific event, making it feasible to apply a non-item-level arrangement.

Young's mayoral papers provided an opportunity to expand on previous strategies of combining as many items under one description as possible. A folder would be labelled (e.g., "Cable TV") and material continually added, no matter what office or person had created the document or whether it was correspondence, a report, or another format. When the folder became full, a new folder was created behind it. No arrangement was done within folders, and if there were multiple folders, all included the entire date span (in this case 1981–87); they were not separated by chronological or another order. The rationalization was that researchers would be more likely to search for the subject and therefore willing to look at all available material on that subject, rather than trying to find, say, a specific report written in 1983. Even if the latter might sometimes be the case, it would not take a lot of extra time for a researcher or staff member to look through multiple folders.

Both the Ambassador and Mayor papers provide examples of how different strategies were applied to different series within the same collection. As noted earlier, the civil rights speeches received item-level arrangement and

description. The speeches Young gave while he was ambassador and mayor were sorted into chronological order but labelled simply "Speeches," with a year added. Two factors prompted this decision: all the speeches were his and most did not have obvious titles. For example, a heading such as "Frankfurt Airport," accompanied by a date, would not likely provide the researcher with relevant information. Sorting speeches by year ensured that the researcher could more easily find a given one for a specific time or event.

Deciding on an appropriate level of processing for the photographs was a challenge. As Nancy E. Malan notes, "For purposes of physical and intellectual control, it is useful to deal with photographs as collections rather than as individual items,"<sup>14</sup> an approach that worked well for Young's collection. The decision to create a series for the nearly 40,000 photographs was based on three factors: a large portion of them were initially housed at another institution and when transferred to AARL they came with an inventory; the majority of the remaining photographs were already separated and seldom combined with other material; researchers often requested photographs individually. Grouping all the photographs was a simple task because most were found in original envelopes from photo-processing stores, or in photo albums or frames. Roughly two-thirds were originally housed at a different institution and semi-processed with series assigned and an inventory created. However, the list of photos often did not match the series heading. For example, "Post-Olympic Career" contained photos of family vacations as well as the 1996 Summer Olympics in Atlanta.

Instead of strictly following the previous repository's series outline, I instead chose to arrange the photographs to closely match the collection's series, though some were arranged by person or event. Whenever possible, staff documented names, events, and dates. The staff member who processed this series had studied civil rights and African American history, and was able to identify numerous people, places, and events. Additionally, Andrew Young and his eldest daughter came to the AARL for about three hours to help identify unlabelled photos.

14 Nancy E. Malan, "Organizing Photo Collections: An Introspective Approach," in *A Modern Archives Reader: Basic Readings on Archival Theory and Practice*, ed. Maygene F. Daniels and Timothy Walch (Washington, DC: National Archives and Records Service, US General Services Administration, 1984), 184.



**Figure 2. Andrew Young visits the AARL to help identify unlabelled photos.** Left to right are Brenda Tindal, Andrew Young, Michael Kaiser, and the author. Credit: Photo courtesy of Kerrie Cotten-Rama, AARL, Georgia.

Their participation not only increased the amount of description provided to researchers, but also facilitated good donor relations by allowing Young to be involved briefly and gain an appreciation of how archivists process collections. Young shared numerous stories about the people and events depicted, which helped staff gain a deeper understanding of his activities. He had not seen many of the photographs for years, if not decades, and enjoyed reviewing them and reflecting on his life and activities.

Archivists employ a variety of approaches when describing photographs. Previous and current practices include extensive physical description; for example, “35 slides in metal mounts with glass” or “25 photographs (1 album) platinum prints.”<sup>15</sup> At times, this type of description aids researchers in dating

15 Elisabeth Betz Parker, *Graphic Materials: Rules for Describing Original Items and Historical Collections* (Washington, DC: Library of Congress, 1982), 47–52; Mary Lynn Ritzenthaler and Diane Vogt-O’Connor, *Photographs: Archival Care and Management* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2006), 174.

the item or identifying photo-developing procedures.<sup>16</sup> However, any attempt to describe a collection containing nearly 40,000 photographs, negatives, and slides in terms of format-specific details was impractical and impossible within the three-year time frame. Besides, researchers are generally more interested in the content of the photos, not the format. Therefore, description focused on subjects and people, not physical attributes.

Though recent guidelines express a preference for item-level description, there are also suggestions for collection-level description, deciding how many levels of description are needed, and minimum description.<sup>17</sup> Some subseries were appropriate for minimal arrangement and description, primarily the 24 document cases, or about 12 linear feet, of family photos. Listing every single family member for every folder would have created an extremely lengthy finding aid and would not have offered the researcher any additional information. Instead, staff sorted them roughly by decade, and included a list of all family members in the subseries description. When the main subject in the photos was a specific family member, these were separated from the others to help create some organization and clarity. When possible, description followed the labels on the envelopes (e.g., “Holidays,” “Vacations,” and “Special Events”). Personal photos of Andrew Young have more detailed descriptions. Vacations and travel were organized by continent or country and date, when identifiable. Staff had to look at loose photographs individually to place them in appropriate folders, but groups of photos were left as found and were described accordingly. As a cross-reference for patrons, a note for other series is included in folder lists: “Photographs – See Series 10.” Much effort went into balancing the need to provide researchers with detailed description versus describing photos as a group instead of individually.

Plaques and artifacts were a unique challenge. As a prominent public figure, Young received hundreds of plaques, certificates, awards, and gifts spanning about fifty years. Assuming that these had little research value and would most likely be used only for exhibits or other non-scholarly purposes, the plaques and awards were sorted roughly into decades, based upon Young’s particular office or position at the time. To save space and for preservation purposes, staff removed certificates from frames. Though this added processing time, many frames were dirty, cracked or broken, and did not add any value to the items themselves. Unframing was the most time-consuming preservation activity conducted, but it made the certificates easier to house and handle, and saved about five linear feet of space. Artifacts were grouped

16 Joan M. Schwartz, “Coming to Terms with Photographs: Descriptive Standards, Linguistic ‘Othering,’ and the Margins of Archivy,” *Archivaria* 50 (Fall 2000): 154.

17 Ritzenthaler and Vogt-O’Connor, *Photographs: Archival Care and Management*, 169–170, 180; Pam Hackbart-Dean and Elizabeth Slomba, *How to Manage Processing in Archives and Special Collections* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2012), 48.

by type; for example, textiles, hats, and bags. Because of the variety of types, most were described as “artifacts,” with further details given in the series description instead of at the box level.

I decided that audiovisual material, meaning audio cassettes and reels, video, and film, required item-level treatment for three primary reasons: to aid in easily identifying whether researchers could access the format; for storage purposes; and to group by content. Items were then sorted alphabetically by the description noted on each; the majority had labels and few required viewing or listening for identification. Though these materials received primarily item-level arrangement and description, staff applied minimal description to some portions. For example, there were more than one hundred  $\frac{3}{4}$ -inch videotapes for Young’s 1990 gubernatorial campaign. Instead of transcribing all the details, especially because there were duplicates, the tapes were listed as “Campaign, Gubernatorial” with a reference to the quantity. Though a minimal approach might have been to apply descriptions such as “Mayor Speeches” or “Ambassador,” the reality is that researchers often inquire about a particular speech or event. With over 800 audiovisual items, not having item-level arrangement and description would unnecessarily increase research time for staff and patrons.

This project also provided an opportunity to experiment with minimal description. There is always the concern that researchers need extensive details or they will not be able to find the appropriate material. However, it is impractical to provide all the details that will create access points for researchers, particularly with a collection as large as Young’s. The approach with this collection was to eliminate unnecessary and repetitive words in folder titles and in the finding aid’s front matter. For example, it is easy to find information about Andrew Young through a Google search, and therefore the biographical note was limited to two paragraphs summarizing the most pertinent information about Young’s life.

### **Addressing Privacy, Preservation, and Weeding**

Archivists who have not embraced MPLP techniques often raise concerns about not being able to find all private and confidential information if a collection is not fully processed.<sup>18</sup> During this project, however, we found it easy to identify such information. Bank statements and cancelled cheques dating back to the 1960s were removed; it was not necessary to examine every piece of paper to find them. I quickly reviewed several boxes of received mail, both opened and unopened, and removed any medical information and financial

18 Carl Van Ness, “Much Ado About Paper Clips: ‘More Product, Less Process’ and the Modern Manuscript Repository,” *American Archivist* 73 (Spring/Summer 2010): 140.

documents. I purposely spent extra time on unopened ambassadorial correspondence stamped “Secret” and/or “Confidential.” Most often, these items turned out to be upcoming travel itineraries that were to remain confidential until Young had left for or returned from a business trip. Applying MPLP techniques does not mean disregarding privacy and is not an either/or situation. For portions of collections that potentially contain confidential information, it is worth spending extra time to examine documents thoroughly.

Sara S. Hodson has considered the questions about privacy, noting that there are no simple solutions or guidelines and recommending that individual institutions balance legal and ethical issues with the desire for open access.<sup>19</sup> Young’s collection contained material that fell outside of legal and ethical standards and was instead subject to interpretation. When staff members found such items, I reviewed them to decide on the appropriate course of action. Often material was set aside to shred or return to the family. Though family papers were most often removed because of privacy concerns, in some cases it was because they were deemed irrelevant to Andrew Young’s collection as a whole. Examples include his children’s diplomas, yearbooks, and school notebooks. After Young donated his collection, one family member raised the issue of personal letters exchanged by Young and his first wife, Jean, from the time of their courtship in the early 1950s, throughout his years of travel while leading citizenship schools and other civil rights activities, and into the 1960s. Aware of the situation, I read the letters to assess the content and potential privacy issues. As a public figure, Young knowingly relinquished the idea of personal privacy to a certain extent. The letters provide insight into his relationship with his late wife, adding a dimension to a lesser-known side of him. Additionally, they provide personal and previously unpublished details of his ministerial and civil rights activities. Though a family member raised concerns, preference was given to Young’s (as the creator and donor) personal acknowledgement and approval that the letters remain in the collection. This action aligns with Greene’s argument that it is the donor’s responsibility to make the “ethical judgment” about whether to protect or make material accessible.<sup>20</sup>

However, following that concept is not always straightforward. Young’s collection contained letters written by his children to him or other family members, some of which I deemed to be of a private nature. Though donated as part of Young’s collection, it was unlikely that the individual family members knew of them, much less wanted them to be part of the collection.

19 Sara S. Hodson, “In Secret Kept, in Silence Sealed: Privacy in the Papers of Authors and Celebrities,” *American Archivist* 67 (Fall/Winter 2004): 211.

20 Mark A. Greene, “MPLP: It’s Not Just for Processing Anymore,” *American Archivist* 73 (Spring/Summer 2010): 198.

Because they were not about Young or his activities, I removed them and returned them to the family. These examples show the variety of potential confidential and private material that can be involved, and demonstrate that applying MPLP does not equate to discounting these concerns but instead allows for evaluation of such materials when necessary.

Another challenge to an MPLP approach is preservation. In his 2010 follow-up article, Greene notes that the goal of preservation should be “to maintain the totality of a repository’s holdings, rather than efforts taken to preserve or conserve individual items” through, for example, temperature and humidity control of the stacks.<sup>21</sup> Pam Hackbart-Dean and Elizabeth Slomba agree that a proper environment is the ultimate goal, and they also recommend basic tasks including “removal of large fasteners, such as paper clips and three-ring binders, inserting spacers to keep folders upright in boxes, and generally straightening up the collection.”<sup>22</sup> AARL has an appropriate storage environment; therefore staff made minimal preservation efforts while processing the Young papers. Staples and paper clips were seldom removed, though staff removed papers from binders and binder clips, more for space reasons than solely for preservation reasons. Newspaper articles remained where found and were not photocopied, largely because of the volume (at least 50 linear feet), but also because it was deemed an unnecessary task. Photographs were inserted into protective polyester sleeves only if they were torn or already damaged; small photos were placed in envelopes to prevent them from falling out of folders. Other than foldering and refoldering out of necessity, and removing items from frames as described previously, staff performed few item-level preservation tasks as part of applying minimal practices.

Another activity that Greene and Meissner suggest reducing, if not eliminating, is weeding, insisting that “the small amounts of space saved by weeding at the item level are remotely worth the amount of time such action takes.”<sup>23</sup> I followed this idea when discovering excess material, but my consideration was not whether to weed but what was worth the time to eventually save space. As a public figure, Young constantly met people and therefore collected hundreds of business cards. The cards do not have particularly high research value and were a potential candidate for weeding. Reviewing a sample showed that Young sometimes made notes on them. The time to review them further would not correlate to saving much space, at most one to two linear feet; therefore all remained in the collection. I applied this same decision to the photographs. A large part of the later 1990s–2000s family and vacation photographs had duplicates. Not all of the doubles were next to each

21 Ibid., 181.

22 Hackbart-Dean and Slomba, *How to Manage Processing in Archives and Special Collections*, 61.

23 Greene and Meissner, “More Product, Less Process,” 243.

other, which meant staff would have had to sort and weed individual photographs. As with the business cards, the space savings did not warrant the time that would have been spent.

However, other portions were conducive to weeding, which focused mostly on removing stacks of magazines, copies of articles, or excess campaign memorabilia. As the majority of the items were loose, this did not require extra time or effort but instead was easily integrated into arrangement by removing one or two copies of an item to add to a folder and discarding the remainder of the pile. Of the 596 linear feet used for this analysis, going through these items reduced Young's collection by at least 50 linear feet, or about 11 percent. This amount is helpful as the AARL is a small public research library with limited stacks space, which requires keeping some collections off-site.

## Conclusion

To process 922 linear feet in two years and three weeks required an open and adaptable approach that balances researchers' needs with archival practices. Utilizing Young's collection as a case study for applying MPLP techniques to a disorganized collection of personal papers provided an opportunity to gain experience and knowledge about practices that I later applied to additional collections – first and foremost, the necessity of being flexible and accepting that a collection can be, and should be, processed at different levels. There is no one way to process a collection; therefore there is no “perfect” way to process a collection. Though some archivists still adhere to the “craftsmanship” of a “clean and ordered” collection,<sup>24</sup> researchers are willing to accept a less than ideally processed collection if they are able to have access.<sup>25</sup> Processing a collection is less about an archivist's desires to arrange and describe perfectly and more about providing access to researchers.

The overall approach applied to the CLIR project was to think less about subscribing to specific processing methods and more about utilizing techniques appropriate for a particular series, subseries, or format, whether item-level, minimal, or somewhere in between. As Greene and Meissner argue, “the goal should be to maximize the accessibility of collection materials to users,” a concept also supported by Hackbart-Dean and Slomba.<sup>26</sup> While many practices performed when processing Andrew Young's papers were not new, reframing them within an MPLP context aligned with Greene and Meissner's

24 Van Ness, “Much Ado About Paper Clips,” 141.

25 Greene and Meissner, “More Product, Less Process,” 234.

26 Ibid., 240; Hackbart-Dean and Slomba, *How to Manage Processing in Archives and Special Collections*, 80.

argument to rethink archival processing. Doing so allows for creativity and experimentation that may or may not adhere to the minimal standards Greene and Meissner suggest. It is less important to use a single approach than it is to create flexible practices.

Because the original project was completed with nearly a year left within the grant's time frame, CLIR graciously permitted us to continue with more civil rights collections: the Center for Democratic Renewal (CDR) Records, the Southern Regional Council (SRC) Records, the National Coalition for Burned Churches and Community Empowerment Records, and a start on the Donald Hollowell Papers. This resulted in increased access to other collections in addition to the Young papers and NAACP records.<sup>27</sup> Lessons learned with Young's papers led to further testing of minimal techniques, including not refolding, doing more intellectual than physical arrangement, and not listing every individual folder within each box. The original grant was to process 922 linear feet, and by reframing processing approaches and techniques, the collections processed in just under three years totalled approximately 1,900 linear feet, averaging over 600 linear feet per year, which is above and beyond Greene and Meissner's recommendation. What this also indicates is that using a range of processing techniques, from item-level through to minimal, is possible and can be productive, enabling researchers to access the records sooner.

Sometimes it is not until a task is complete that one realizes a better approach. For example, Andrew Young's finding aid lists numbered and dated folders individually. When writing the finding aids for the CDR and SRC collections, this task was eliminated and folders were not numbered or listed individually. Instead, the SRC finding aid indicates a date range for the box with a list of folders; if there are multiple folders with the same title, that title is listed only once. For the CDR finding aid, I took this idea even further. The CDR was in existence for twenty-nine years and nearly every item in the collection fell within that date range; therefore the date range is indicated at the collection level and not at the box or folder level. Additionally, most of the collection was left in its original order, with little refolding or reboxing, focusing more on intellectual rather than physical arrangement.

Each collection is unique, and by continually experimenting with and learning different techniques, archivists have the opportunity to implement a more flexible approach to processing. The main point Greene and Meissner make is that we must revise strategies to enable the processing of more collections in less time and thereby create more access for researchers. The Andrew

27 Electronic finding aids are available for the following collections: Andrew J. Young Papers; National Association for the Advancement of Colored People Atlanta Branch Records; Center for Democratic Renewal Records; Southern Regional Council Series 1: Southern Regional Council Series 2. To access them, search by title at AARL, "Finding Aids for Archives and Manuscripts," <http://aafa.galileo.usg.edu/aafa/search>.

J. Young Papers and other collections processed for this CLIR project gave me a chance to try new ideas, techniques, and strategies, which can be further developed and revised to accommodate a collection's needs. Overall, the main lesson learned is that the best way to process a collection is not to adhere strictly to item-level or MPLP approaches, but instead to bring together appropriate techniques from multiple approaches to create a suitable and long-term strategy.

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