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MPLP: From Practice to Theory

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MPLP: From Practice to Theory

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MPLP: From Practice to Theory

Cover Page Footnote

This paper is the outgrowth of a project to survey some of MPLP's earliest adopters—the eight consortium members of the Northwest Archival Processing Initiative—who applied Greene and Meissner's methods and documented their processing rates from 2005 to 2007. Some of the observations in this paper first emerged while the author wrote the literature review for this survey project, which was published under the title "MPLP Ten Years Later: The Adventure of Being among the First." The author would like to thank her coauthors of "MPLP Ten Years Later," Janet Hauck and Rose Sliger Krause, for their role as early sounding boards, and Carrie Daniels and Kevin Klesta for their valuable editorial feedback.

MPLP: From Practice to Theory

Introduction

Most American archivists are familiar with More Product, Less Process or MPLP. We are sensible of its strengths and weaknesses, and we deftly apply its time-saving methods. We embrace its techniques at institutions that span the spectrum of sizes even as we ourselves range in levels of experience from new to seasoned professionals. We justify minimal methods over more time-honored, time-consuming ones by applying MPLP's now largely accepted practices in an effort to maximize resources and prioritize competing workplace demands.

MPLP's well-known methodology is woven into many archivists' vocabularies and is frequently referenced in the professional literature, yet archivists have spent little time contemplating MPLP as a concept—as something that is more than its time-saving methods and more than its completed projects. We have made much of its application, but little of its broader impact on the nature of archival work or the archivist's role within that work. We cite MPLP in case studies and in literature reviews, but we do not often probe its meaning or trajectory.

To be fair, archivists have had an uneasy relationship with professional discourse that is not inherently pragmatic with some contending that archival work is an applied science and should focus solely on concrete solutions that guide daily tasks.¹ Meanwhile, minimal processing practices did not originate with MPLP, so even though MPLP spurred conversations around resource management and privileged certain aspects of archival work over others—such as access over preservation—MPLP did not fundamentally introduce a new concept. One could argue that MPLP, by these measures, is only a useful tool that has made an uninspired impact.

Since MPLP entered the archival landscape, though, minimal practices have expanded and evolved. MPLP originated as a processing methodology geared toward solving the problem of backlog with methods that were intended for modern, paper-based collections, but it has since morphed into a toolbox of practices that archivists have connected to nearly every aspect of archival administration—from accessioning to digitization. Archivists have applied the idea of MPLP efficiency to increasing quantities of material, adjusted it to suit different types of media, and ultimately applied it to other archival functions. With these seemingly boundless possibilities, MPLP appealed to workplace imperatives that demanded efficient and effective resource management when, especially during the post-2008 recession, archivists were pinched by financial and staffing constraints.

Despite this pragmatic thrust, some archivists have woven MPLP into weightier discussions, at times harnessing MPLP as a conceptual framework and at other times connecting it to user-centered professional values. MPLP developed and expanded out of demonstrable needs, yet archivists used MPLP to articulate a commitment to user-friendly access. In these applications, MPLP served as a code word for key professional values and was treated like a principle that embodied assumptions about the nature of archival work (making defensible choices about what and how materials are preserved) and the archivist's role within that work (as the mediators between researchers and primary sources who promote access and use).

¹ Most notably John Roberts, "Archival Theory: Much Ado about Shelving," *American Archivist* 50, no. 1 (1987): 66–74.

Drawing from the substantial literature, this paper explores how archivists have written about and applied minimal practices. It surveys MPLP's evolution from a high-level perspective and makes four broad observations that collectively suggest that MPLP has grown beyond its utility as an ever-expanding list of time-savers. It seeks to encourage a conversation about the impact that MPLP has had on the values and assumptions that inform our profession, challenging us to look beyond its hyper-efficient recommendations to consider what MPLP means for archivists and their work. In drawing these four observations from a review of the literature, it briefly sketches MPLP's growth, evolution, and trajectory, and through the lens of these four observations it argues that for MPLP to remain a relevant intellectual construct, it should be recast as an expression of principles to be both challenged and held in tension with other fundamental archival principles.

Background

Most archivists already know that MPLP originated with Mark Greene and Dennis Meissner's research article "More Product, Less Process: Revamping Traditional Archival Processing," which formally presented the methodology that acquired its acronymic name. In their seminal piece, Greene and Meissner connected the seemingly universal problem of backlog to a lack of professional consensus on both the minimum components and the labor metrics needed to process a collection. The authors argued that precious resources were wasted on unnecessary tasks built around unsustainable processing norms. As they aptly described the challenges that faced many archivists, Greene and Meissner made a case that high-level or minimal processing ought to be the go-to model for all arrangement, description, and preservation activities unless otherwise warranted. Their sensible solution was grounded in a thorough review of the literature, which showed that archivists had started to move away from item-level processing as early as the mid-1960s. Inconsistencies between and within processing manuals over the following decades coupled with what Greene and Meissner observed as a "dismaying" indifference to user access offered additional thrust for MPLP, which prioritized access to archival collections over processing minutiae and ultimately shifted focus from the archivist's work to the user's needs.²

Even though Green and Meissner's article was controversial at the time of its publication, the professional community largely embraced MPLP for its bold, practical recommendations, and "More Product, Less Process" became a touchstone in the professional discourse.³ Archivists have celebrated and debated MPLP methods at professional gatherings from the northwest to the southeast. Graduate students have met thesis requirements by analyzing its limitations and applying its methods. MPLP methodology even served for a time as an innovative hook to secure grant funding, and the Society of American Archivists has institutionalized MPLP in their regularly offered workshop for its Arrangement and Description Certificate. MPLP's reach is seen, too, in the way that practitioners adapted its methods to their needs, and its impact on the formal literature is evident from the sheer volume of citations.

² Mark A. Greene and Dennis Meissner, "More Product, Less Process: Revamping Traditional Processing," *American Archivist* 68, no. 2 (2005): 208–63.

³ Matt Gorzalski, "Minimal Processing: Its Context and Influence in the Archival Community," *Journal of Archival Organization* 6, no. 3 (2008): 187. Gorzalski observed early on that "despite the critics of the MPLP method, most writing on and presentations about minimal processing have been positive and encouraging." Stephanie H. Crowe and Karen Spilman, "MPLP @ 5: More Access, Less Backlog?," *Journal of Archival Organization* 8, no. 2 (2010): 121. In their survey of 156 respondents, Crowe and Spilman also concluded that MPLP was widely accepted for its positive outcomes.

Method

The number of published papers that Greene and Meissner's article has inspired is voluminous without adding informal publications like conference presentations and posters, reports, theses, blog posts, listserv discussions, and the like. In the interest of time, over sixty peer-reviewed articles were surveyed and provided a basis for the four observations. These articles do not constitute a comprehensive list, but were selected using Google Scholar Citation. This method offered a more complete search than any single database available to the author. Monographs, theses or dissertations, papers that were not published in a peer-reviewed journal, and articles blocked by a paywall were not included. Each article was then analyzed for relevance, breadth of application, and innovative use.

Greene and Meissner's own published works on MPLP were evaluated alongside this body of peer-reviewed writings. These three articles offer a concise view of MPLP from its originators' perspectives and capture their evolving articulation of MPLP's uses and significance. These articles consist of: "More Application while Less Appreciation: The Adopters and Antagonists of MPLP," "MPLP: It's Not Just for Processing Anymore," and "Doing Less Before It's Done unto You: Reshaping Workflows for Efficiency before the Wolf Is at the Door."

Observations

First, the literature demonstrates broad acceptance of MPLP as it evolved from a processing methodology focused on solving the problem of backlog to a growing set of minimal practices that archivists applied to nearly all aspects of archival administration.

Greene and Meissner's "More Product, Less Process" has been debated, challenged, and at times, outright rejected, but American archivists have largely embraced MPLP methodologies.⁴ For some, the minimal practices that Greene and Meissner recommended were nothing new; archivists had already implemented processing shortcuts, and established institutions like Yale quickly confirmed that they had adopted series-level processing prior to 2005, noting that it was "not possible to do arrangement and description down to and within the folder."⁵ For others, it was just a matter of testing MPLP. Those who were apprehensive about MPLP methods or skeptical of its outcomes were predominantly complementary at the end of a trial run. The eight consortium members of the North West Archives Processing Initiative, for example, saw

⁴ Archivists have criticized MPLP, arguing that it would lead to a lack of intellectual control over collections or an inadequate level of description, an increase in risk if sensitive or confidential information were inadvertently released, a codification of professional negligence if item-level preservation needs were overlooked, and more recently, that MPLP could have a greater, negative environmental impact. Andrew Mangravite, letter to the editor, *American Archivist* 69, no. 1 (2006): 12–13; Carl Van Ness, "Much Ado about Paper Clips: 'More Product, Less Process' and the Modern Manuscript Repository," *American Archivist* 73, no. 1 (2010): 129–45; Adriana P. Cuervo and Eric Harbeson, "Not Just Sheet Music: Describing Print and Manuscript Music in Archives and Special Collections," *Archival Issues* 33, no. 1 (2011): 41–55; Laura McCann, "Preservation as Obstacle or Opportunity? Rethinking the Preservation-Access Model in the Age of MPLP," *Journal of Archival Organization* 11, nos. 1–2 (2013): 23–48; Jessica Phillips, "A Defense of Preservation in the Age of MPLP," *American Archivist* 78, no. 2 (2015): 470–87; 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>.

⁵ Christine Weideman, "Accessioning as Processing," *American Archivist* 69, no. 2 (2006): 275.

“astonishing results . . . despite the fact that many [of the] archivists involved were not fully comfortable with a full MPLP approach,” and those same members reported an ongoing commitment to MPLP practices over a decade later.⁶

Three of the earliest case studies to emerge in the immediate wake of Greene and Meissner’s 2005 article demonstrate MPLP’s acceptance and growth as it was quickly applied to incrementally expanding contexts—from just a single modern collection to many collections to an entire repository. In the first of these case studies, Michael Strom detailed the process and outcomes of applying MPLP to a modern political collection, noting that both the size and the uniformity of the materials made congressional papers “particularly well suited for a minimum-standards processing approach.”⁷ The implication that MPLP was useful to only certain types of collections was quickly challenged by Anne Foster who was involved in the North West Archives Processing Initiative. The minimal processing techniques that had helped Foster’s institution meet its grant targets were so efficient that Foster and her colleagues expanded their application of MPLP to “smaller, older, and otherwise less traditional collections.”⁸ Similarly, Donna McCrea experimented with MPLP by beginning with a set of seventy backlogged collections. “I was not sure how I would feel about minimal processing,” McCrea wrote, but based on Greene and Meissner’s suggestions and the success of the trial run, McCrea decided to apply the same practices to the vast majority of her institution’s holdings.⁹

Over the following years, archivists harnessed MPLP for arrangement and description of non-paper materials as they applied minimal methods to moving images, photographs, audiovisual materials, born-digital materials, and digitized analog materials.¹⁰ The timely recommendations put forth in Greene and Meissner’s 2005 article spurred ideas that were especially useful as expectations for greater online access to collections increased. Greene himself suggested that MPLP could be applied in the form of low-resolution scanning so that storage space and digitization rates could be maximized, while Max Evans suggested an on-demand rather than

⁶ Dennis Meissner and Mark A. Greene, “More Application while Less Appreciation: The Adopters and Antagonists of MPLP,” *Journal of Archival Organization* 8, nos. 3–4 (2010): 194; Janet Hauck, Rose Slinger Krause, and Kyna Herzinger, “MPLP Ten Years Later: The Adventure of Being among the First,” *Provenance* 35, no. 2 (2018): 92.

⁷ Michael Strom, “Texas-Sized Progress: Applying Minimum-Standards Processing Guidelines to the Jim Wright Papers,” *Archival Issues* 29, no. 2 (2005): 106.

⁸ Anne L. Foster, “Minimum Standards Processing and Photograph Collections,” *Archival Issues* 30, no. 2 (2006): 111.

⁹ Donna E. McCrea, “Getting More for Less: Testing a New Processing Model at the University of Montana,” *American Archivist* 69, no. 2 (2006): 288, 290.

¹⁰ Rick Prelinger, “Points of Origin: Discovering Ourselves through Access,” *Moving Image: The Journal of the Association of Moving Image Archivists* 9, no. 2 (2009): 164–75; Foster, “Minimum Standards Processing,” 107–18; 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; Reagan L. Grimsley and Susan C. Wynne, “Creating Access to Oral Histories in Academic Libraries,” *College and Undergraduate Libraries* 16, no. 4 (2009): 278–99; 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), <https://www.weareavp.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/08/WhatsYourProduct.pdf>; Susanne Belovari, “Expedited Digital Appraisal for Regular Archivists: An MPLP-type Approach,” *Journal of Archival Organization* 14, nos. 1–2 (2018): 55–77; 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.

project-based approach to scanning.¹¹ Other archivists focused on practices to minimize the amount of time spent on item-level metadata by invoking MPLP as a rationale for linking digital collections through the finding aid, harvesting metadata or harnessing OCR technology for description, and even testing user-generated tags.¹²

Still others used Greene and Meissner's MPLP as a basis for applying minimal practices to other archival functions or combining minimal practice arrangement and description with other administrative steps. Matt Gorzalski and Marcella Wiget, for example, added appraisal to their MPLP-style processing. Much like Donna McCrea, they sought to provide collection-level access to all their institution's holdings, but their project resulted in a substantial data scrub as they merged duplicate catalog records while adding thousands of subject headings. They paired MPLP with appraisal as they analyzed collections for possible deaccession and assessed materials for preservation needs. Similarly, Christine Weideman combined accessioning and processing into a single, seamless step. Weideman's now well-known approach acknowledged that minimal processing alone did not adequately reduce backlog, but that by combining accessioning with processing archivists could prevent collections from entering a backlog, ensuring immediate access at the point of acquisition. Archivists and other allied professions have applied MPLP-style practices in a similar fashion to data curation, workflows, and even staff reorganization in order to consolidate library functions.¹³

Second, in their defense of minimal processing and concurrent with the expansion of MPLP methods, Greene and Meissner enlarged MPLP's conceptual utility.

MPLP raised legitimate concerns about the impact minimal processing methods could have on reference, preservation, and protecting confidential information, but a common misconception began to circulate as well: the belief that Greene and Meissner prescribed MPLP for every collection. In their survey of 156 respondents, Stephanie Crowe and Karen Spilman discovered that although MPLP was widely accepted, many archivists fundamentally believed that everything had to be processed at a minimal level.¹⁴ Cheryl Oestreicher, for example, upheld this

¹¹ 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): 102; Max J. Evans, "Archives of the People, by the People, for the People," *American Archivist* 70, no. 2 (2007): 387–400.

¹² 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): 143–70; 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/; Larisa Miller, "All Text Considered: A Perspective on Mass Digitizing and Archival Processing," *American Archivist* 76, no. 2 (2013): 521–41; Edward M. Corrado and Rachel Jaffe, "Transforming and Enhancing Metadata for Enduser Discovery: A Case Study," *JLIS.it* 5, no. 2 (2014): 33–48; Edward Benoit III, "#MPLP Part 2: Replacing Item-Level Metadata with User-Generated Social Tags," *American Archivist* 81, no. 1 (2018): 38–64.

¹³ 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; Weideman, "Accessioning as Processing," 274–83; Sophia Lafferty Hess and Thu-Mai Christian, "More Data, Less Process? The Applicability of MPLP to Research Data," *IASSIST Quarterly* 40, no. 4 (2016): 6–13, <https://doi.org/10.29173/iq907>; 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): 405–18; 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 (2009): 261–70.

¹⁴ Crowe and Spilman, "MPLP @ 5," 120.

interpretation when she lauded MPLP's time-saving methods, but articulated them as a concrete set of practices relegated to one side of a dichotomy between minimal and item-level processing.¹⁵

Greene and Meissner had dispelled the notion that they were advocating for a rigid standard when they described MPLP methods in 2005 as “broad strokes” that could accommodate more detailed processing for some collections or series. The authors emphatically stated that they were not “simply replacing one set of processing prescriptions with some other set,” and they reiterated their stance five years later when they unequivocally wrote, “MPLP cannot be adopted as [a] go-to manual for arrangement, description, and conservation specifics.”¹⁶ In the end, Oestreicher drew the same conclusion that Greene and Meissner had previously put forward: 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.”¹⁷ They all agreed that arrangement and description should be flexible and should vary both from collection to collection and within collections.

Greene and Meissner reasoned that a blanket standard made little sense if users' needs—when held in tension with one's mission and resources—truly drove processing decisions.¹⁸ As the authors defended MPLP, they harnessed this user-centered framework to shift focus from processing minutiae and the problem of backlog to any number of the archivists' daily choices. Greene concluded that even though “MPLP focused exclusively on processing, its premises [could] be applied to other aspects of archival administration.”¹⁹ The duo reasoned that “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 either help or hinder one's greater mission of public service.²⁰ MPLP was not about specific processing actions, and MPLP was not about achieving efficiencies for their own sake; MPLP was, instead, about serving users through access to collection materials.

In aligning the archivist's mission with public service and asserting the researcher as the primary driver for archival work, Greene and Meissner appealed to the core values that serve as a foundation for the archivist's behavior.²¹ Resource limitations were expected, but if user access was the fundamental reason for keeping archives and the very crux of the archival mission then the drive to make collections available ought to inform all administrative decisions and not only

¹⁵ Cheryl Oestreicher's “Personal Papers and MPLP: Strategies and Techniques,” *Archivaria* 76 (2013): 93–110. An earlier obvious example of this tendency to view MPLP as a universal method can be seen in Jeannette Mercer Sabre and Susan Hamburger, “A Case for Item-Level Indexing: The Kenneth Burke Papers at the Pennsylvania State University,” *Journal of Archival Organization* 6, nos. 1–2 (2008): 24–46.

¹⁶ Greene and Meissner, “More Product, Less Process,” 209, and “More Application with Less Appreciation,” 176.

¹⁷ Oestreicher, “Personal Papers,” 110.

¹⁸ Mark A. Greene, “MPLP: It's Not Just for Processing Anymore,” *American Archivist* 73, no. 1 (2010): 176.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 199.

²⁰ Meissner and Greene, “More Application while Less Appreciation,” 175.

²¹ Greene and Meissner, “More Product, Less Process,” 212. Pointing to the disconnect between archivists' behavior and the values of their profession, the authors noted that there was “evidence to suggest that we tolerate this situation [backlog] in part because our profession awards a higher priority to serving the perceived needs of our collections than to serving the demonstrated needs of our constituents.”

the ones about processing.²² In this way, the authors prioritized access to collections above other professional imperatives and paved the way to expand MPLP's conceptual utility.

Third, examples from the literature are limited, but since 2010, some archivists have harnessed MPLP as a broad conceptual framework focused on professional values. In these examples, assessment shifts away from MPLP's time-saving practices toward the values that drive all archival work.

When they divorced MPLP from corner-cutting practices and recast it as a decision-making process guided by user access, Greene and Meissner shifted focus (somewhat amusingly) from the product to the process—from what archivists do to why they do it. Adrienne Harling embraced this reading of MPLP when she applied minimal processing methods at a repository with slow collection growth and adequate staffing, but which lacked environmental controls. If any circumstance justified more detailed arrangement, description, and preservation, surely this was it, but Harling did not view MPLP as processing techniques born out of resource limitations. She saw MPLP as a conceptual model that had the power to inform a wide range of decisions when used to serve the researcher and the repository's mission. In this way, Harling's case study provided a concrete example of MPLP processing in which Harling focused on the best use of her time in exchange for the greatest access at each step in the process. MPLP was the framework by which she decided to donate a portion of the collection to another campus unit, intensively process some parts of the collection, and develop a highly variable preservation plan for the collection's various media. The values that imbued MPLP, she demonstrated, could guide archivists as they considered what could or should be done under any circumstance. Because Harling's institution did not operate with limited resources or have a backlog of unprocessed material, her case study served as a counterpoint to writings that harnessed MPLP methods in restricted circumstances. It also encapsulated Greene and Meissner's evolving articulation of MPLP, and consequently, bridged the gap between professional practice and professional principle. Harling ultimately showed how key values can drive big and little administrative decisions.²³

At the same time that Greene and Meissner articulated MPLP's larger application, Melanie Griffin connected MPLP to several key archival principles by exploring the common values that informed both minimal processing practices and contemporary professional theory. Griffin demonstrated that pragmatic MPLP methods and seemingly impracticable postmodern theory were not diametrically opposed, but were built on similar notions of transparency, social responsibility, and accessibility. MPLP, she concluded, was an opportunity “to evaluate the purpose and function of archival collections, to consider the political and social roles that archivists play as they arrange and describe collections, and then to practice their profession in

²² “SAA Core Values Statement and Code of Ethics,” Society of American Archivists, last modified March 30, 2018, <https://www2.archivists.org/statements/saa-core-values-statement-and-code-of-ethics>.

²³ Adrienne Harling, “MPLP as Intentional, not Necessarily Minimal, Processing: The Rudolf W. Becking Collection at Humboldt State University,” *American Archivist* 77, no. 2 (2014): 489–98. See also Colleen McFarland, “Rethinking the Business of Small Archives,” *Archival Issues* 31, no. 2 (2007): 137–49. Several years earlier, McFarland tackled the question of what comes after implementing MPLP. Although not seen as a framework for decision-making, McFarland similarly focused on the broader context of users' needs. She concluded that when “released by MPLP from the burden of meticulously grooming our collections, we can finally turn our attention from our professional microcosm to the larger context in which archives users operate.”

light of these reflections.”²⁴ As Griffin persuasively argued, MPLP was a mechanism through which to consider and assert a commitment to one’s core professional values.

If Griffin saw MPLP as a vehicle through which to express archival values on a micro level, Kate Theimer viewed MPLP as one example of a broader macro-level change. Theimer argued that Greene and Meissner’s 2005 article was one expression of a larger ideological shift within archival practice, which fell under the term “Archives 2.0” and embodied values like engagement, openness, and adaptability. MPLP was an example of this professional shift, and “Archives 2.0” gave name to those shared values and provided a common architecture for similar approaches. Theimer infused MPLP with value-laden meaning that associated the archivist with attributes like flexibility and innovation and that defined archival work as iterative, experimental, and outward facing.²⁵

Fourth, over the last ten years, archivists have continued to cite Greene and Meissner’s 2005 article, but a growing number of those individuals treat MPLP as an uncontested archival norm.

MPLP is multifaceted—a rich term with applications that range from pragmatic practices to value-laden principles. For this reason, MPLP is worth exploring and scrutinizing, yet many authors cite Greene and Meissner’s 2005 article without considering MPLP’s competing meanings. Many of the articles that focus primarily on MPLP were written between 2005 and 2010; these have been noted above and range topically from case studies that explore implementation of MPLP and its resulting impact to surveys that analyze the profession’s adoption and use of MPLP to research that considers the more philosophical aspects of MPLP’s methods. Articles published since 2010, though, have frequently treated MPLP as an undisputed tool. Where the literature once examined and interrogated MPLP, it now offers a seemingly cursory citation in the context of user-centered efficiencies.

To be fair, minimal methods are extremely useful in a resource-constrained profession, and user needs are a deserving focus for those who want to meet the demands of their researchers. A familiar concept like MPLP can provide the grounds to implement new practices for achieving these two ends. Additionally, the profession has grown with MPLP as its meanings have evolved, so MPLP can easily serve as a touchstone for a range of projects. By way of example, Elizabeth Novara cites MPLP as a springboard in a case study on digitizing collections to meet user needs. Tracy Jackson, while evaluating the usability of institutional finding aids with linked digital content, cites MPLP as a method of streamlining arrangement and description within a larger conversation about improving access to digitized collections. Laura Estill, in her analysis of digital humanities projects, cites MPLP simply to offer a contrasting method to the highly detailed attention that most Shakespearian texts receive. Others follow this pattern, citing MPLP for its efficiency in the context of collection surveys, cataloging ecosystems, sustainability, and

²⁴ Melanie Griffin, “Postmodernism, Processing, and the Profession: Towards a Theoretical Reading of Minimal Standards,” *Provenance* 28, no. 1 (2010): 103. It is worth noting that Autumn Wetli, “Promoting Inclusivity in the Archive: A Literature Review Reassessing Tradition through Theory and Practice,” *School of Information Student Research Journal* 8, no. 2 (2019), <http://scholarworks.sjsu.edu/slissrj/vol8/iss2/4>, puts forth a brief counter reading of MPLP. Witli argues that, because of its hasty methods, MPLP does not leave space for counter narratives and therefore contradict postmodernism’s focus on processes that promote inclusivity.

²⁵ Kate Theimer, “What Is the Meaning of Archives 2.0?,” *American Archivist* 74, no. 1 (2011): 58–68.

teaching with primary sources. In each instance, MPLP appears as a professional norm that informs projects as a fundamental feature of the profession.²⁶

Discussion

Since the 2005 publication of “More Product, Less Process,” archivists have adopted and adapted minimal methods, and they have done so in the name of MPLP. Archivists have used MPLP to quickly process collections, but they have also applied minimal practices to other archival functions, turning MPLP into a growing list of approaches that save time, maximize resources, and have ultimately evolved into an authoritative tool. At the same time that archivists across the US were grappling with MPLP, Greene and Meissner recast their methods as a conceptual framework that could inform any administrative decision when guided by a core professional value: promoting and providing access to materials.²⁷ Archivists like Melanie Griffin and Kate Theimer, in turn, harnessed MPLP as an expression of professional principles, suggesting that MPLP could be a toolbox of values rather than simply a toolbox of practices.

These two overlapping developments capture the broad evolution of MPLP, but they also underscore its overwhelmingly favorable reception within the profession. As archivists have embraced the efficiencies gained by minimal methods, some have observed that MPLP could liberate and even empower the archivist in their daily work.²⁸ Such outcomes fueled an enthusiasm for MPLP that has since overshadowed its remarkable transformation from a once controversial processing methodology to a near uncontested norm. But as archivists connected MPLP to varied time-saving methods, they homed in on efficiencies without fully interrogating the underlying drivers. As MPLP increasingly became a touchstone, archivists and allied professionals invoked MPLP more with the assumption, rather than the declaration, that access and use guided their corner-cutting methods.

Two issues emerge from this tendency to equate MPLP—at times only implicitly—with access and use. First, when the values that inform archival practice are overlooked, Greene and Meissner’s construct becomes ill-defined. As techniques alone, MPLP runs the risk of being both too narrow—having outgrown its use solely as a processing methodology—and too broad—having been diluted in its association with any approach—to be meaningful. If MPLP is synonymous with countless different practices, it is anything and therefore nothing—merely a code word for efficiency that keeps archivists focused on their own quotidian tasks. Second,

²⁶ Elizabeth A. Novara, “Digitization and Researcher Demand: Digital Imaging Workflows at the University of Maryland Libraries,” *OCLC Systems & Services* 26, no. 3 (2010): 166–76; Jackson, “I Want to See It: A Usability Study of Digital Content Integrated into Finding Aids,” 20–77; Laura Estill, “Digital Humanities’ Shakespeare Problem,” *Humanities* 8, no. 1 (2019), <https://doi.org/10.3390/h8010045>; Jody DeRidder, “First Aid Training for Those on the Front Lines: Digital Preservation Needs Survey Results 2012,” *Information Technology and Libraries* 32, no. 2 (2013): 18–28, <https://doi.org/10.6017/ital.v32i2.3123>; Gracen Brilmyer, “Archival Assemblages: Applying Disability Studies’ Political/Relational Model to Archival Description,” *Archival Science* 18, no. 2 (2018): 95–118; Heidi N. Abbey, “The Green Archivist: A Primer for Adopting Affordable, Environmentally Sustainable, and Socially Responsible Archival Management Practices,” *Archival Issues* 34, no. 2 (2012): 91–115; Matthew Cook, “Build It and They Will Come: Integrating Unique Collections and Undergraduate Research,” *Collection Building* 34, no.4 (2015): 128–33.

²⁷ “SAA Core Values Statement and Code of Ethics,” Society of American Archivists, last modified March 29, 2012, <https://www2.archivists.org/statements/saa-core-values-statement-and-code-of-ethics>.

²⁸ McCrea, “Getting More for Less,” 289; Meissner and Greene, “More Application while Less Appreciation,” 184; Colleen McFarland, “Rethinking the Business of Small Archives,” 146–47.

although user access is a commendable value that should inform archival practice, a singular focus on making collections available reduces the role of the archivist to that of a producer supplying goods to a consumer and neglects the equally meaningful values like accountability, advocacy, and selection that have also informed MPLP. Equating MPLP solely with user access creates the sense that the archivist's role is limited and, by extension, that their social and cultural impact as those who shape the historic record and hold institutions accountable is also limited.

Yet a compelling lens through which to view MPLP exists within the literature. Greene and Meissner's own efforts to shift the archivist's focus away from processing minutiae and toward access to and use of archival materials—from what the archivist does to why they do it—serves as a launching point, but Melanie Griffin and Kate Theimer's focus on the many values that inform MPLP's pragmatic methods sets a trajectory and hints at MPLP's future. During his tenure as SAA president, Mark Greene expressed a commitment to articulating and codifying the core values that inform the archival profession. He believed that the meanings of values evolve to inform practice and thereby produce effective results.²⁹ Ironically, MPLP's evolution represents a reversal of this model, having produced effective results from widely adopted practice, but without a clear articulation of its many underlying values. Since MPLP has demonstrated itself to be a useful framework, archivists should recast MPLP not as ever-expanding methods, but as values that imbue methods with meaning. Archivists need only to follow the model set by Griffin and Theimer who showed how transparency, social responsibility, and engagement, along with user access, have deeply motivated MPLP methods, and to shift the discourse away from MPLP as pragmatic practices and toward MPLP as the theoretical principles that inform the archivist's work.

Conclusion

A survey such as this focused solely on MPLP will have contextual limits, yet evidence suggests that MPLP has reoriented the way that archivists both frame and navigate their work. First, MPLP has given archivists a language to describe the give-and-take relationship of competing resources. Although Greene and Meissner acknowledged that minimal processing was not a new concept, MPLP reframed assumptions about archival practice in a world of dwindling resources and empowered archivists to evaluate the trade-offs—the exchanges between staff time, money, physical space, and level of detail—that would inform their priorities. Second, MPLP reinvigorated minimal processing and expanded minimal practices. Greene and Meissner's extensive review of the literature lent professional credibility to the evidence that efficiencies have always had a place in archival processing. This evidence paired with its heightened visibility allowed MPLP to serve as a springboard for considering the role that minimal methods could play in all areas of archival practice. Finally, MPLP encouraged archivists to make user access a priority. Because of Greene and Meissner's persuasive belief that user access should inform and drive all archival activity, MPLP has strengthened awareness of how and to what extent daily tasks are informed by the overarching purpose of the collections and the role of the archivist.

²⁹ Mark Greene, "The Power of Archives: Archivists' Values and Value in the Postmodern Age," *American Archivist* 72, no. 1 (2009): 39.

More importantly, MPLP has served as a vehicle through which to consider the values that drive the archivist's behavior. MPLP has been an expression of trust as the role of the archivist has shifted from one who guards the records to one who facilitates access. MPLP has been an expression of service as archivists have promoted the needs of the users above the needs of the collections and the personal desires of the archivist. MPLP has been an expression of accountability as archivists have allowed institutional transparency to outweigh the technical quality of processing. And MPLP has been an expression of social responsibility as the archivist has freed the records from their own descriptive powers, allowing for more voices of interpretation.

Although this paper has traced MPLP's development through four broad observations, it seeks to reframe how archivists engage with MPLP and its diverse approaches. This paper considers MPLP's larger impact by encouraging a conversation around how professional values have found a voice in MPLP and, in turn, to consider MPLP's impact on the values that drive the archival profession. As such, archivists must continue to work toward an understanding of what MPLP means for the archivist and their work. They must shift their focus from the efficiencies to the implications, from what is done to why it is done, and from the practices to the values that inform archival theory. These malleable values should be held in tension with other fundamental archival values, and ultimately, MPLP should prompt a thoughtful consideration of the many core ideas that have informed and energized archival work across social, cultural, and historical contexts.

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