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Records of a School at Sea

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This presentation is largely about strategies for dealing with legacy description. Not just in terms of data migration or updating standards, but what to do when you inherit a large scale collection that was organized using a methodology that no longer works in a 21st century context. This is what happened to me at SUNY Maritime with the college’s institutional records.
Maritime College was the first maritime school in the country, founded in 1874. As such it became a model for subsequent maritime schools. There are only five other state maritime colleges and one federal academy in the nation. These schools train students to become licensed merchant mariners. Merchant mariners operate the large-scale commercial vessels that move goods around the world. The Merchant Marine may also be called to active duty during times of war, moving troops and supplies.

Maritime College had no land-based campus until 1938. For the first 60+ years of the school’s existence, education and training took place solely on ships. In the 1930s a campus was built at historic Fort Schuyler in the Bronx, part of a massive WPA project. While the college now offers a full academic program, students pursuing merchant marine licenses still board a training ship each summer for a hands-on, immersive learning experience.

Pictured: Students using sextants aboard the Schoolship St. Mary’s circa 1902 (WR1-48); students splicing lines aboard the Training Ship Empire State VI in 2017 (CA-RG1-0007-Li-005).
What I Inherited

The Stephen B. Luce Library is the repository of the college’s institutional records, as well as special collections documenting maritime industry, culture, and social services.

The “finding aid” for the institutional collections consisted of a single 340-page document. An alpha-numeric classification scheme is followed by an extensive container list with folder level description. There is no contextualizing top-matter, i.e. no scope and content notes; no administrative history notes; no processing information, etc.

Pictured: The top level of the alpha-numeric classification scheme. Following the front page there are many more pages of subgroupings, for example:

A. Schoolship ST. MARY’S. (Institutional)
AA. Corporate Documents and Records.
AB. Trustees.
AB1. New York City Board of Education.
Etc.
To fulfill research requests I often resorted to using control-F searches and crossing my fingers. The document was so difficult to navigate that I avoided teaching others how to use it. Here I am on twitter in typical archivist fashion complaining about my predecessors.
While cleaning I found this report by Carol Finerman, a graduate student from the Palmer School who was hired to organize the archives for the first time in 1974, in conjunction with the Maritime College centennial. After reading the report my perspective quickly moved from irritation to respect and empathy. In the report Finerman outlines how the Archives at Maritime came to exist in the first place and the strategies she used to organize it. While this might seem obvious, I was reminded that the technology and standards at Finerman’s disposal in 1974 were far more limited than those at our fingertips today. Finerman did her best to draw upon existing archival theory and her own experience in another repository to organize Maritime’s records.

Finerman discusses how lack of a land base meant that records were not systematically collected or preserved during the decades when the school was at sea. Thankfully, from the late 1940s onward, librarians actively solicited alumni, faculty, and staff for materials from this early period, when the college was named the New York Nautical School. Due to these outreach efforts, several storage cabinets were filled to the brim with papers, publications, photographs, logbooks, and artifacts. Finerman brought order to this chaos, working in a dark and cave-like suite of rooms nicknamed “the dungeon.”

One of Finerman’s recommendations was that the Luce Library commit to hiring a full-time archivist to ensure the sustainability of the archives program. This was not achieved until I was hired in 2016.
The make a long story short, the system for organizing the records was stuck in the 1970s and the materials from the last twenty years languished in a “to-be-processed” area.

The librarian who had been given responsibility for the archives before me had students cross-referencing containers with the inventory and making corrections, with a plan to add “to-be-processed” records into the existing 340 page document.

I was at a cross-roads: continue with the old system or chart something new, something that would be more user-friendly and would take advantage of contemporary tools and standards.
I wanted to use ArchivesSpace to better manage and provide access to the records, but I didn’t think we’d have the resources. Installing open source software on the college’s server was not in the cards. Luckily, we were able to contract with LibraryHost to configure and maintain an ArchivesSpace instance for us. LibraryHost specializes in offering low costs services to small and medium sized institutions.

My plan for the institutional records was to break the 340 page document up into individual finding aids with contextualizing top-matter. The finding aids would be linked to the appropriate record group via the classifications module in ArchivesSpace.

After thoroughly examining the legacy description, I devised the record groups shown here. These categories are not necessarily new, they have just been teased out and reorganized from the existing content.
What I Inherited

Let's take a look once again at the old classification for comparison.

On the front page, you may notice that the word miscellaneous is used five times (it is used hundreds more times throughout the document).

Additionally, colloquial terms are relied upon to convey meaning. One might presume that components E, F, and G: Fort Schuyler refer to the building/structure; however, Fort Schuyler is actually a nickname for the school itself. As you may recall, the school established a campus at Fort Schuyler in 1938. Many graduates refer to themselves as “Fort Schuyler Grads,” not Maritime grads.

With its unique mission and pseudo-military structure for training mariners, Maritime College has a tendency towards opaqueness, and that’s reflected in the language of the finding aid. While it might make sense to insiders, it’s confusing to everyone else. The bulk of the records (administration, departments, etc.) were buried within in the Fort Schuyler section.

My goal for the new system/description was to be more precise, transparent, and explanatory, so that the average user could follow along.
The institutional records and publications comprise 500 linear feet, and I was a “lone arranger” also in charge of special collections, digitization, preservation, instruction, donor relations, etc. While I felt strongly that my strategy for revamping the institutional collection was sound, having the time to carry it out was another problem. Luckily, I was able to turn the plan into action by applying for a Documentary Heritage Grant from the New York State Archives. Project Archivist Jannette D’Esposito (pictured here) created eight new finding aids and over 1000 agent names in ArchivesSpace, thanks to this very modest grant.
Here’s a screenshot that demonstrates how individual finding aids are linked to the appropriate record group / classification (in this case, collections of Log Books are linked to the School and Training Groups record group).
Processing Information

According to a report by Finerman, “all the items that accumulated came in separately; none were deposited as a series of records from the offices of origin.”

...these records were formerly organized under the letters A (St. Mary’s-Institutional) and B (St. Mary’s-Students).

We made intensive use of Processing Information notes to document the strategies of our predecessors as well as our own interventions on the records (pictured here are excerpts from a much longer note). In these notes I quoted Carol Finerman directly and gave credit to her 1974 report. Finerman’s documentation helped me so much that I felt even more passionately about creating this documentation, not only for researchers but for future archivists who might inherit stewardship of the collection.
We carried forward some of this processing information into our digital collections site, to help contextualize where the items derived from and associated rights statements. For example, the College Photograph Collection was organized by subject without regard to provenance. This helps explain why the rights holder is unidentifiable.

Pictured: St. Mary’s Schoolship postcard (CA-RG14-0001-WR1-99).
Lessons

Transparency and documentation are useful

Take advantage of DACS elements (processing information, immediate source of acquisition, etc.)

Create project plan, implement in stages
Thank you!

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