How to Eat an Elephant: Processing a Massive Gift Collection with a Streamline Workflow
Case Study

Overview

When the Gotham Book Mart closed, an era of New York City literary history ended. Several years later, the contents of the bookstore were donated to the University of Pennsylvania Libraries.   At the time, the number of items was estimated at 200,000[1], which were delivered to the Libraries' storage facility in thousands of boxes stacked on hundreds of pallets.   A rough inventory[2] of the contents was provided, based chiefly on the location in the bookstore when the boxes were packed.

Using this inventory, curators from the Rare Books & Manuscripts division completed a triage process, hoping to identify the treasures in the collection.   They also began a more detailed inventory, removing items from pallets and shelving in high-density storage trays as they were inventoried.

In the summer of 2013, the space occupied by the pallets was targeted for a future construction project. The Library began planning in earnest for cataloging the collection. A target date of early in 2015 (approximately 18 months), was set for completion of the cataloging, and clearing of the warehouse floor.   At the time, library staff assumed a two-tiered project, with much of the collection designated for general, circulating collections, but rare or unique items cataloged for special collections.

Pilot project

A pilot project was designed initially to test a process for general collections review and cataloging.   The pilot included a quick review by subject bibliographers to make retention decisions, followed by streamlined copy cataloging.   As the pilot progressed, a review by special collections curators was added to the process, giving a different perspective on the retention decisions. The assessment of the pilot project resulted in sorting criteria[3] and in the following processing principles.

Results of pilot

The following over-arching principles have guided the development of a plan to catalog the Gotham Book Mart Collection:

- The 76 pallets at the storage facility represent the highest processing priority since their contents will need to be off the floor in one year. Of the 76 pallets, 67 are completely unprocessed. The remaining nine pallets contain serials organized alphabetically within individual boxes.

- The pallets contain material that may be:
  - Rare, and suitable for special collections.
  - Of interest to general collections.
  - Suitable for resale.

   o Suitable for discard.

- Processing must not reduce the value of rare materials ultimately selected for Special Collections or for resale.

- Processing will rely on robust, clear and easily applied guidelines to determine disposition of materials.

- A single processing workflow adaptable to multiple formats and different collections is preferable to multiple workflows specific to format or destination library.

- There will be an immediate period of assessment during which workflows are evaluated and improved, selection guidelines are refined and staffing levels are adjusted to meet project goals.

- Processing will rely on frequent communication with stakeholders in Special Collections, Collection Development, the storage facility and the cataloging department to resolve problems, identify areas of concern, and ensure that processing goals are met.

- Processing will make Gotham materials available to the public.

Problem statement

With this background, the project was scoped with 12-15 month timeframe. Size of the project was estimated as 60-80,000 monographic volumes, plus 18,000 serial items. Stakeholders included administrators (focus on minimizing costs and meeting timelines), special collections curators (desire to assume that any item was potentially rare), general collection bibliographers (wanting to make some of the collection available for circulation), and cataloging librarians (wishing to maximize workflow efficiencies).

Group discussion questions

What do you see as the major problems in this case study?
What are some steps that you would take to solving these problems?
What insights do you get from this case study which could impact your future dealings with large gifts at your institution?
How might you apply what you've learned here to other situations, beyond gift processing?

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[1] University of Pennsylvania press release (http://www.library.upenn.edu/news/540)
[2] Attachment: Gotham Book Store Inventory
[3] Attachment: Gotham Sorting Criteria