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[[TITLE SLIDE]]

The Louisiana Research Collection (LaRC) is a research library and archives that preserves more than 4 linear miles of archival and print materials. LaRC is part of the Special Collections division of Tulane University's Howard-Tilton Memorial Library. LaRC's particular areas of strength include Carnival, the Civil War, Jewish studies, LGBT studies, Louisiana politics, social welfare, and Southern literature.

Over the last two years, we have had a major project to migrate several hundred legacy finding aids to the web. This paper will focus on the final phase of this project, during which we used the services of a vendor.

[[ONCE UPON A TIME]]

Prior to 2009, LaRC had only a handful of online finding aids, and none were encoded or created according to DACS standards. In 2009, LaRC started using Archon after rave reviews from our local colleagues at the Amistad Research Center. We were also inspired by a presentation by archivists from the College of William and Mary detailing their initial implementation of Archon by creating basic collection records with attached PDF copies of the inventories.

We followed a similar path until late 2010, when we contracted with a nationally-known library vendor to perform Archon data entry for approximately 500 finding aids. These 500 represented finding aids identified in a previous survey as being in good enough shape to rekey, requiring only what we thought would be minimal review. We already had an established relationship with the vendor due to the recovery work they were performing on our collections damaged in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. The vendor's local recovery operations were located a short drive from Tulane's main campus.

[[‘GOOD’ FINDING AIDS]]

Preparing the contract for the legacy finding aids was difficult, but crucially important. The biggest challenge was that we were on the hook for ensuring the accuracy of all legacy finding aids sent to the vendor, since all data entry was performed offsite with no physical transfers of material. Therefore, in order to prevent a garbage in-garbage out phenomenon, we had to review each finding aid to ensure accuracy before sending it out. As we began the review process of

finding aids we previously thought were in pretty good shape, we found that “pretty good” was relative, as these often had typos, incorrect dates or folder titles, or even missing boxes.

[[SLIDE ON WORKFLOW, OUR RESPONSIBILITIES]]

We had a multi-step workflow that involved myself and student workers, as illustrated on this slide

Finding aid review process:

- *Annotate copy of paper legacy finding aid to correct errors*
 - *Students check physical contents at the level described*
 - *Correct dates/titles as needed*
 - *Make notes of unprocessed materials*
- *All annotated finding aids sent as PDFs to the vendor (daily batches over 9 months)*
- *All finding aids sent with a cover sheet including any detailed instructions or requests*

[[SLIDE ON WORKFLOW, VENDOR RESPONSIBILITIES]]

The vendor was provided with sets of data entry templates. They were responsible for:

- *Collection-level information (including scope)*
- *Creator information and authorities*
- *Subject and genre headings*
- *Inventory*

The vendor sent regular release reports; weekly site meetings at vendor’s offsite location.

Sending the 500 finding aids to the vendor took us nine months, from January - September of 2011. This was ahead of schedule, as the contract allowed for the project to wrap-up in 2013. Since the vendor was also performing recovery work on collections damaged by Katrina, progress on the legacy finding aids project became a standing meeting agenda item at the weekly recovery meetings.

The vendor sent us regular updates on which finding aids they had finished. All finding aids created by the vendor were in a staff-view only mode. I would then review each finding aid for accuracy, and release it to the public.

There are a lot of things that are great about working with a vendor -- because of their staffing they can often bring more labor to the endeavor that many

repositories can muster. In theory, vendors should have qualified staff on hand. However, due to the fact that vendor's work is often performed offsite, this can lead to some major challenges in ensuring the efficiency and accuracy of any work being performed. Vendors may not be well-versed in the in-house culture of your work, and this is often something that needs to be documented at the outset. At worst, a vendor can try to monetize everything, down to the number of estimated keystrokes, and can be inflexible about changing a workflow halfway through the process because "it isn't in the contract."

[[THE GOOD]]

One of the biggest benefits for us was that the vendor had dedicated staff that were doing finding aid data entry all day every day. Even a team of committed student workers or grad students would not have been able to churn out the same amount of work in such a short period of time. Hiring extra temporary staff would have been difficult for us, since our in-house work areas are cramped. This is partially why the library leadership favored having the vendor take on the legacy contract.

In addition, having an extra set of eyes going over the finding aid meant they often caught things that we did not. However, I am not sure this is a function of the vendor's role as it is just the advisability of having multiple people reviewing legacy finding aids.

In addition, going from only a handful of finding aids online just a few years ago to now over several hundred online has meant many under-used collections are now being used more frequently by researchers.

[[THE BAD]]

Perhaps the most difficult aspect of having a vendor do this work was their offsite location. This not only forced us to devote a lot of labor to the project, indeed more than we had anticipated, but made minor problems more difficult.

The offsite location of their work meant that the onus for checking the accuracy of the legacy finding aids was on us (because we did not transfer the physical holdings of the legacy finding aids to the vendor). This exacted a heavy toll on myself, since finding aid review and the public release process, became my primary job duties for almost a whole year. It also required us to dedicate virtually all LaRC student workers for a whole year to this project.

We were already having weekly meetings with the vendor to discuss the Katrina recovery progress, so any problems with the legacy finding aids were also addressed in these meetings. If the contract had allowed for the vendor staff to take a weekly trip to our building to check for themselves, some of these problems may have been avoided. Overall, we had very few problems with simple data entry, but there were often problems with authorized subject headings and creator authorities.

[[AVOIDING THE UGLY]]

- Work with a vendor that has archivists on staff, including project managers who have experience in archival theory and background. Some of the problems we ran into were because the project managers had little experience in archives.
- The longer and more detailed your contract, the better. Trouble arises with vague, open-ended contracts.
- Require that the vendor use well-established resources such as DACS or LC Authorities, and provide tutorials or guidelines for in-house metadata practices where applicable
- Do not just hand off the project and come back later -- have periodic check ins, with a lot of review at the beginning in order to gauge the quality of the work and readjust expectations. As noted, we reviewed finding aids twice – the legacy version before sending it to the vendor, and again after they had finished entering it before it was released to the public.
- Seriously consider the implications of hiring a vendor -- in some cases, it may make more fiscal sense to find a creative way to do the work in house. With the money you could use for a vendor, you might consider offering high-quality paid internships, provided your staff can provide the necessary training and supervision.

In conclusion, there are significant benefits and drawbacks to using the services of a vendor. Significant staff time will still have to be expended to ensure a successful conversion. Using a vendor is not a one size fits all solution, and each archive must evaluate the quality and quantity of its legacy finding aids to be converted. Outsourcing is not a panacea, and one must consider how much staff time will still be required to oversee the vendor's work. Careful planning at the outset and ongoing monitoring are the keys to a successful vendor relationship.

[[FINAL SLIDE]]