The University of Maryland Libraries Special Collections and University Archives began a two-year long assessment of all archival holdings from 2013-2014. For two years, project staff gathered key data about the location, size, existing documentation, and level of public access of all collections housed in the repository. While the work provided a wealth of data, a lack of standardization in the data meant that little more could be done without further analysis and evaluation. In 2016, the Special Collections Access Team spent extensive time standardizing this data and found new opportunities for its reuse and reapplication.

Understanding the Data

The raw data is depicted above. Note the variability in units of measure and inventory values. In order to create interoperability across spreadsheets for each collection area, project staff created new repository standards for measuring size and processing status of collections.

Aggregation & Analysis

After standardizing and cleaning the data, all of the raw data collected in 2013 could be aggregated and analyzed. Below is an visualization of that data that allows staff to see the state of collections across the repository.

An analysis of the new standardized dataset confirmed several suspicions about potential problems in the workflow for processing and collection management. We noticed that nearly all of the largest collections in our repository (larger than 100 linear feet) lacked full finding aids. We also found that collections measured at the item level (almost always large collections of audiovisual materials) often lacked both inventories and online access points.

New Directions

In 2018, Special Collections and University Archives internally released over 100 pages of guidelines and standards for archival processing. The manual includes information on how to effectively implement minimal processing across collecting areas and how to record basic assessment information in newly adopted systems, like ArchivesSpace.

Between 2017 and 2018, the access team used curator’s rankings in one collection area to prioritize collections to receive processing work over the course of a year. Prioritized collections had high research value and use among patrons, but descriptive information was not currently available online. Ultimately, the new assessment data helped direct work, making several hundred linear feet of material from multiple disciplines discoverable for the first time.

Lingering Questions

After nearly five years of working of repurposing and recycling assessment data, the staff at Special Collections and University Archives began asking additional questions:

- What makes assessment data effective for repurposing and reuse?
- What assessment measures are most useful to keep up to date?
- What assessment measures can be recorded iteratively through automated systems?