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Harmonizing Standards for Archival Description

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Why Two Standards?: RAD2 and DACS

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Now that Jean has provided the background for the joint Canadian-U.S. content standard project and explained the process we followed, I will discuss some of the differences between the two products our efforts have produced. Throughout this talk I will refer to the Canadian version of the rules as RAD2 (which stands for *Rules for Archival Description*, 2nd edition), and to the U.S. version as DACS (which stands for *Describing Archives: A Content Standard*).

First, let me say that in some respects the two standards are very similar; in fact, many of the rules are exactly the same. So you may wonder why this project, which was intended to produce a unified content standard, instead produced two separate ones. I will try to explain some of the philosophical differences that emerged during the course of our deliberations and what impact those differences had on the rules.

For whatever reason, ISAD(G) largely has been ignored in the United States. In the Encoded Archival Description (EAD) workshop that Michael Fox and I teach for the Society of American Archivists, I ask the attendees if they've heard of ISAD(G), and rarely does anyone indicate recognition. The word "fonds" is not used in descriptions of archival materials in the U.S., although students of archives are, of course, taught *respect des fonds* when learning about arrangement and description. It will no doubt surprise some archivists in the U.S. that DACS is based so closely on ISAD(G) and ISAAR(CPF), but hopefully DACS will encourage them to embrace a larger archival description universe. Descriptive standards enthusiasts in Canada have done a much better job of familiarizing archivists in that country with international standards. This is not to say that American archivists have been entirely without descriptive standards, as we have followed *Archives, Personal Papers, and Manuscripts* (APPM) for two decades for the creation of catalog records.

RAD2 characterizes itself as providing "convenience shopping." (This is one step removed from an American concept called "one-stop shopping" where you can go into a single store and buy a loaf of bread, a bunch of bananas, a pair of blue jeans, a soccer ball, the latest best-selling novel, a DVD of your favorite film, a television, latex paint for your kitchen, and four new tires for your car. In the United States this store is called Wal-Mart.) Convenience shopping means that RAD2 provides basic rules that encompass the range of media generally found in archives, such as photographs, maps, and sound recordings, but stops short of providing every possible rule for all media. The rationale behind this is the belief that many repositories would not have access to the rules for description of specialized media, so RAD2 ought to provide at least the basics. It is worth noting that in the first edition of RAD there are separate chapters for the description of particular media; while the current draft of RAD2 incorporates media rules into each data element.

Initially the Americans thought that being media inclusive was a good idea, but ultimately determined that there were too many rules in the draft that archivists would very rarely or never use and might find their presence in the standard intimidating. So when the U.S. group began to revise the draft, the first things to be eliminated were the rules for special media and those that focused primarily on item-level description, such as the transcription of formal titles. Therefore, DACS contains no media rules as such, although many of the rules can, of course, be applied to media. DACS encourages repositories that need to describe such materials, particularly in the area of physical description, to follow the special rules developed by relevant groups, such as the Library of Congress, the Visual Resources Association, and the Archival Moving Image Association. Rules for item-level description are most prevalent in the title element, and RAD2 includes an extensive set of rules for transcribing formal titles, which are entirely lacking in DACS.

Some rather significant philosophical differences between the Canadian and U.S. archival traditions emerged in the course of the CUSTARD project meetings. I am not familiar with the situation in Canada before 1990 when implementation of the first edition of RAD began to regularize archival description, but in the U.S. descriptive practices have evolved from two very disparate traditions, those being the historical manuscripts tradition and the archives tradition. Historical manuscripts curators would describe each item or document in some detail, frequently creating a description called a "calendar" that identified the form of

the document, names of writers and recipients of letters, dates, places, and even a summary of the content. The archives tradition would be more familiar to most of you—one of description in the aggregate, where the aggregate might be a file, a series, or an entire fonds. The historical manuscripts tradition was practiced by many rare book and manuscript libraires in universities, private special collections libraries, and some historical societies, while the archives tradition was followed by the state and federal archives.

In the United States over the last 20 or 30 years the historical manuscripts and archives traditions have merged out of necessity and practicality. Repositories no longer have the resources to do item-level description, save for exceptional situations, given the avalanche of records with which all are faced.

An issue that was rather hotly debated in the course of the CUSTARD meetings was how to handle the rules for so-called “artificial” collections. These are materials that have been collected by a repository in bits and pieces but which are then kept and described together, or they have been assembled by a person or family and then acquired by the repository. Archivists have sometimes had a rather elitist attitude toward collections, characterizing them as being somehow impure or second-class materials. In the United States, most repositories have such materials, particularly in special collections and archives within universities, but also in historical societies and state and federal archives. At my own institution, probably 80-90% of our holdings would fall into this category.

There is really only one fundamental difference between “traditional” archives and collections, and that is the nature of their accumulation. Archives are defined as being organically or unconsciously created in the course of a person’s or corporate body’s activities and functions. Collections are intentionally assembled, usually around some theme or topic, but also in the course of a corporate body’s or more likely a person’s activities and functions. On the other hand, both traditional archives and collections may have a logical arrangement imposed by the creator. Both possess informational, intrinsic, and evidential value. In the past in the United States, collections would most likely have been described at the item level, following the historical manuscripts tradition. More recently, archival description methods have been applied to these materials with great success. From a descriptive point of view, both types of materials can be treated in the same manner. It behooves the repository to adopt a single descriptive system for all of its holdings and it benefits the researcher to be presented with consistent descriptions of the materials. For this reason, the rules in both RAD2 and DACS apply to all types of archival materials, including collections.

Now to illustrate some of the specific differences between RAD2 and DACS.

The most logical structure for the standard was discussed at some length at the first two CUSTARD meetings, and we wavered between the two-part and three-part models. RAD2 is divided into two parts: Part I. Describing Archival Materials, and Part II. Describing Creators. DACS has three parts: Part I. Describing Archival Materials, Part II. Describing Creators, and Part III. Forms of Names. Part I of both standards contains rules that reflect the basic set of descriptive elements outlined by ISAD(G) which will be very familiar to you—identity elements, content and structure elements, related materials elements, etc. Part II of both RAD2 and DACS contain rules for identifying creators, creating administrative and biographical histories, and creation and maintenance of authority records. In DACS we chose to remove the aspects of heading control represented by the form of name chapters, which include persons and families, geographic names, and corporate bodies, to a third part. These chapters are a slight adaptation of the Chapters 22, 23, and 24 of the *Anglo-American Cataloging Rules* 2nd edition revised (AACR2), a standard that is followed in libraries and some archives in the English-speaking world. DACS combines rules for expressing relationships with the rules for authority record control into a single chapter called Authority Records. This chapter follows very closely the structure of ISAAR(CPF).

The CUSTARD group wrestled with two key concepts: 1) how to indicate levels of description, and 2) how to indicate whether a particular data element was required. These two concepts are closely linked, because a data element may be required at the highest level of description but not at lower levels. In RAD2 the rules for each element of description indicate whether or not it is required and at what levels of description, and, as in ISAD(G), there is a set of rules in the identity area for level. DACS takes a quite different approach. Chapter 1, “Levels of Description,” outlines the elements required in single-level and

multilevel descriptions, for the highest level and subsequent levels of description (without differentiating whether those subsequent levels are series, files, or items), and identifies three tiers of detail—minimum, optimum, and added value.

Even before it was decided that two national standards were going to be necessary, there were national variations in the rules. For example, at the highest level of description Canadian practice for the title element was to use the word “fonds,” while in the U.S. “papers” or “records” were preferred. The Canadians had just spent a decade advocating the use of “fonds” and were unwilling to deviate from that practice, but we could not envision U.S. archivists adopting it, and as a result the rules stated

In Canada, supply the word “fonds” for the nature of the archival unit. In the U.S., where the material being described consists of documents created, accumulated, and/or maintained and used by a corporate body, supply the word “records” for the nature of the archival unit. Where the material being described consists of documents created, accumulated, and/or maintained and used by a person or family, supply the word “papers” for the nature of the archival unit.

Further, U.S. archivists had the option of specifying material types in the title element. The rule stated

Optionally, in the U.S., where all the material in the fonds consists of one or two specific forms of material, supply those form(s) for the nature of the archival unit.

The rationale for the option is that when material types are so limited, it is a service to the end user to state specifically what they are in the title. These options are available to Canadian archivists in RAD2 at the series, file, and item level of description, but not at the fonds level.

Another area of national variation related to the date element, particularly for undated materials. The Canadians wanted to require that dates be estimated at every level of description, but the U.S. archivists felt that estimating dates, particularly at the file and item level, could be misleading. Additionally, date information is inherited from higher levels of description. So again there were separate rules

In the U.S., when recording date(s) at the file and item levels, if the unit being described bears no date, and the institution does not wish to record an estimated date, use “undated.”

In Canada, always estimate the date as instructed in rule 4.4B7; do not use “undated” at any level of description.

RAD2 distinguishes between five types of nominal access points for persons, families, and corporate bodies—author, collector, creator, custodian, and provenance—with at least a provenance access point required at the fonds level. Creators of fonds are distinguished from authors of individual documents. DACS conflates these aspects of creatorship into a single concept that can be applied at all levels of description. The creator of a single document may or not be the same as the creator of the entire body of materials, and if it is not, the creator of the document must be identified at the appropriate level of description.

There were, on the other hand, many rules we absolutely agreed on. Both RAD2 and DACS discourage the use of abbreviations such as ca. (circa), and AMS (autograph manuscript signed). The rationale is that abbreviations may not be understood by all users, particularly in an international context, and that the use of abbreviations is ultimately a hold-over from library cataloging, where descriptions were shortened to fit on a 3x5 card.

Another area agreed upon was the use of square brackets for information in the description that is supplied by the archivist. There is no provision for the use of square brackets in either RAD2 or DACS. The assumption is that most of the information in a description of archival materials is supplied by the archivist, and if this needs to be explained in certain circumstances it can be done in a note.

There are a couple of areas where DACS goes further than RAD2 in providing guidance. DACS contains an introductory section on access points. While there is a chapter in both RAD2 and DACS that discusses the identification of creators as access points, other types of access points, such as topical subjects, form and genre terms, functions, and occupations were never discussed in the context of the CUSTARD project. Since access points are such a useful tool in retrieving descriptions of archival materials, and since we know users do not always search for materials by creator, we felt it was important to at least discuss these other types of access points even if there are no rules in DACS to govern their inclusion in archival descriptions. This section includes pointers to thesauri and authority files that do govern the formulation of such access points.

At the end of every set of rules for a particular element of description, for example title, DACS includes some examples encoded in both Encoded Archival Description and in MARC 21. Many of you know of EAD, which is a data structure standard for finding aids; MARC 21 is a data structure standard for online catalogs. While the rules in DACS and in RAD2 are intended to be used for any kind of descriptive output, archivists in the U.S. most frequently create their finding aids in EAD and their catalog records in MARC. Archivists found the MARC examples in *Archives, Personal Papers, and Manuscripts*, the predecessor of DACS, to be very helpful in clarifying the rules, so it was determined to continue that practice. In addition, DACS has an appendix containing examples of complete finding aids and catalog records, encoded in EAD and MARC 21, for four types of archival materials—government records, personal papers, a collection, and an item.

Even though it failed to create a unified bi-national content standard, the CUSTARD project successfully achieved other goals. In Canada, RAD2 may or may not replace the *Rules for Archival Description*; they are still trying to determine that. In the U.S., we now have a content standard to replace *Archives, Personal Papers, and Manuscripts*, which provides rules for description not only for catalog records but also for finding aids. This was one of the primary reasons for proposing the project. Most importantly, we have initiated a dialogue, one that I believe we all hope will continue for many years.