Standard Bearers: Research into the Current State of Archival Standards

The archival community has developed a strong interest in the creation and application of standards in recent years in an attempt to both improve the quality and consistency of archival description and to further expand opportunities for collaboration and access. These standards and the products of diverse institutions, communities, and projects and have many different forms. Current standards, such as DACS and SAA/CRC, establish what information is necessary to describe archival materials, their contexts and content, and date. Data structure standards, such as EAD, METS, and MODS, provide means to organize and structure the information required by the archival standards, usually by establishing a vocabulary of XML tags and attributes for their use. The use of XML is common because it provides the ability for interoperability between systems and resources, enabling functions such as search and print. Other standards include comprehensive strategies, such as CIDOC CRM and Dublin Core, which are attempts and developing terminologies that are not independent of specific data structure standards but can be used in the creation to represent such records. OAIS is an example of a data model for conceptualizing the requirements of long-term digital preservation and has been implemented in a variety of digital projects.

While the interest and enthusiasm about best practices as well as national and international consensus demonstrated by these interests in standardization is largely positive, we found that the number of similar yet distinct standards currently being developed and promoted can result in confusion and competition. As a result, archivists may be hesitant to adopt any standard for fear that it might be outmoded and thus not worth the time and expense to implement. There have been efforts to coordinate the creation of standards to increase cooperation between different systems. We have grouped the standards presented here in relation to other comparable standards where possible. A focus on maximizing "crosswalks" for data between different structures and vocabularies, instead of rigid adherence to one framework, would have the benefit of capturing the widest array of relevant information while also promoting consistency and access to archival materials.