Long-Term Legacies and Their Challenges in the Age of Modern Curation at the University of Georgia

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ABSTRACT

Formally established in the fall of 1947, the Laboratory of Archaeology at the University of Georgia is an archaeological research and collection repository. It is considered one of the premier institutions for curation of archaeological collections from the American Southeast. For over 70 years, the Laboratory has served as a repository for objects and associated records generated from archaeological projects and research undertaken by faculty, students, CRM professionals, and state and federal agencies. The Laboratory curates over 20,000 cubic feet of artifacts as well as paper and digital archives. In addition, the Laboratory houses the Georgia Archaeological Site File and manages data from more than 59,000 archaeological sites, including over 11,500 archaeological reports. In this paper, we explore implementation procedures for bringing legacy collections up to modern curation standards. We also outline how we migrate the data on paper records into the digital realm, articulating them within a comprehensive framework.

Keywords: Curation, collections management, rehabilitation, collection repository, legacy collection, archaeological management, artifact care, database management

Establecido formalmente en el otoño de 1947, el Laboratorio de Arqueología de la Universidad de Georgia es una instalación de depósito de investigación y recolección arqueológica en Georgia y está considerado como una de las principales instituciones para la arqueología del sudeste estadounidense. El Laboratorio sirve como depósito de colecciones arqueológicas y registros asociados producidos a través de proyectos arqueológicos e investigaciones realizadas por profesores, estudiantes, profesionales de CRM y agencias estatales y federales durante los últimos 70 años. El laboratorio cura más de 20,000 pies cúbicos de artefactos, papel y archivos digitales. Además, el Laboratorio alberga el Archivo de sitios arqueológicos de Georgia e información sobre más de 59,000 sitios arqueológicos, incluidos más de 11,500 informes arqueológicos. En el presente trabajo, exploramos algunas de las direcciones que implementamos para comenzar la incorporación de colecciones heredadas a los estándares de curación moderna, así como el translado o movimiento de los archivos de información asociados al ámbito digital donde cada dato se articula dentro de un marco integral.

Palabras clave: curación, gestión de colecciones, rehabilitación, repositorio de colecciones, colección legada, manejo arqueológico, cuidado de artefactos, gestión de base de datos

On July 26, 2017, the University of Georgia (UGA) Laboratory of Archaeology experienced a fire in the facility's adjacent crawl space. Immediately after, a collections assessment was undertaken. No artifacts were harmed, but the exterior of several artifact boxes housed in our primary curation room sustained extensive smoke damage. After evaluation by a conservator, we determined that emergency measures were necessary. Every smoke-damaged box ($n = 8,206$) was rehoused in new acid-free (pH 7.0) unbuffered 250-pound-corrugated-cardboard archival-quality boxes (measuring 12.5" W x 15" L x 10" H). The bags and containers within the boxes, however, did not suffer smoke damage and were not replaced.

At this time, we recognized an opportunity to both remediate the smoke-damaged boxes and undertake a basic evaluation of all curated collections. It became apparent that we could accomplish this during the reboxing of smoke-damaged boxes. We would then relocate the newly reboxed collections in another facility, to which a move had already been planned. As with any collections move, it is imperative to keep track of information and physical items so as not to lose information or incur further damage. Consequently, we also saw this as a chance to integrate collections information into our newly adopted, but not yet fully implemented, database system, University of Georgia Collection Management System (UGACMS). This entire process, explained below, happened rapidly. In the end, the fire was a defining moment for the Laboratory. Evaluating the collections box by box allowed us to implement collections management improvements within the Laboratory. Although our circumstances were somewhat

Advances in Archaeological Practice 7(3), 2019, pp. 274–283

DOI:10.1017/aap.2019.16

unique, both large and small repositories and/or laboratories can benefit from such an evaluation process.

In this paper, we provide a broad-based outline of the evaluation procedures we have implemented—and continue to implement. We outline UGA's case in three major sections to illustrate the usefulness of this process and its adaptive application at other institutions, both in terms of when facilities experience similar events (e.g., fire, flood) or simply when curation facilities undertake large-scale evaluation. First, we briefly describe planning procedures that allowed us to assess nearly our entire collection, and we present the methodological framework for our three-phase collection evaluation procedure. Next, with broad brushstrokes, we summarize some of the major issues faced throughout this process, outlining the fact that our collections likely share many of the same characteristics as those in other repositories, especially larger institutions with long collecting histories.

Following this, we present the three-phase evaluation procedure with specific steps depicted in tables and figures. Finally, we discuss our future collections management plans.

AFTER THE FIRE

Within a week of the fire, a planning meeting with UGA officials and insurance representatives was held to discuss remediation efforts and to determine what was covered under the insurance policy. This left little time to plan. Therefore, we had to think fast and develop a strategy that could fall under the purview and tight timeframe of insurance coverage, avoid exorbitant costs to the Laboratory, and begin evaluation of our entire holdings. It was during these few days that we began to devise implementation procedures so that we could acquire a basic understanding of the scope of our collections and their condition (e.g., site name, number, and size of sites/projects, ownership, presence/absence of acid-free materials, etc.). We, of course, had been aware of many issues, particularly that we had older collections of unknown ownership in substandard condition that we were unable to address in a substantial way. We also knew that we wanted to conduct a collections evaluation that would help us plan for inevitable future rehabilitation needs. In particular, the guidelines detailed by MacFarland and Vokes (2016:163–166) helped facilitate our thought process concerning procedures: inspect the archive, catalog, and bulk collection; prepare to rehouse the collection; rehouse the collection; create a digital database; and validate the database. We decided that their outlined processes could be applied within the parameters of our unique circumstances, and from their processes, there emerged themes of assessment, rehabilitation, and incorporation. These themes, outlined here, have become for us the way to create planning and evaluation procedures to address curation issues within our repository.

With these thoughts about future rehabilitation and best collections management practices in mind, we formulated a plan. Our goal was to not only rebox smoke-damaged collections in new boxes but also conduct a basic inventory (number of boxes, number of bags in each box, status of archival conditions, etc.), and incorporate the top-level information (site number, site name, project name, provenience information) from each box into our newly adopted database system. Part of what made this plan acceptable to UGA officials and insurance adjustors was that recording this information provided some level of data security and tracking ability so that no critical data was lost. Upon presenting this in the planning meeting and stressing the value of the collections within our facility, the process was agreed on and funded through the insurance policy. In part, the insurance money became a financial catalyst that allowed us to make some proscriptive recommendations about how to effectively manage collections at both the macro (institution) level and the micro (collection) level.

UGA LABORATORY OF ARCHAEOLOGY OVERVIEW AND OUR COLLECTION PROBLEMS

The Laboratory has been around since 1938 (formally established in late 1947), and it has evolved into a teaching, research, and curation facility. Although it was not intended to be a curation repository, it has since become one of the largest in Georgia, with over 20,000 cubic feet of materials containing millions of artifacts and paper archives. It also hosts digital archives that include the state's archaeological site file with information on 59,000 archaeological sites and over 11,500 archaeological reports. The collections come from a variety of sources, including UGA fieldwork and donations, as well as state, federal, and private institutions.

The problems within our collections stem from the history of the Laboratory and archaeologists focusing on fieldwork rather than taking care of collections once excavated—an issue not uncommon throughout the United States and beyond (Bawaya 2007; Childs 2004; Fagan 1995; Ford 1977; Lindsay and Williams-Dean 1980; Lindsay et al. 1980; Marquardt 1977; Marquardt et al. 1982; Sullivan and Childs 2003; Voss 2012). As such, most of our collections have a host of curation-related issues that have gradually snowballed since 1938. For us, it is the older UGA-owner collections that we struggle with the most. Here, we define them as "legacy collections"—collections excavated and subsequently transferred to our repository but "housed and documented in a way that is not in keeping with modern curation standards and therefore cannot easily meet research demands" (MacFarland and Vokes 2016:162).

Unfortunately, the situation we, and other institutions, find ourselves in is largely a product of our own discipline (archaeology). Curation must start before the shovel hits the ground and continue on the shelf; however, this was not always the case. Childs and Benden (2017) address this issue and present a straightforward process for archaeologists to follow through the stages of an archaeological project. Many archaeologists, however, continue to view curation as an afterthought or, worse, a problem left for others to tend to.

Repositories, then, are left to balance the burden of curating both legacy collections and new collections that are ever growing. Consequently, many repositories like ours continue to struggle with addressing curation issues that stem from practices that occurred well before the 1990s. And although we follow 36 CFR 79 regulations (Curation of Federally Owned and Administered Archaeological Collections), which provide general guidelines about standards of care for archaeological collections for new and

https://doi.org/10.1017/aap.2019.16 Published online by Cambridge University Press

(a)

(b)

FIGURE 1. Assessment Step 1 in detail: (a) identification of collection for assessment and (b) contents with "acceptable" and "unacceptable" curation condition. Courtesy of the Laboratory of Archaeology, University of Georgia.

incoming collections, these regulations were only established in 1990.

Our purpose is not to assign blame but rather to highlight that there remains a mentality that curation should not be considered while in the field or during the pre-field planning process (Bawaya 2007; Childs 2004; Childs and Benden 2017; Childs and Warner 2019; Fagan 1995; Ford 1977; Frieman and Janz 2018; Lindsay and Williams-Dean 1980; Lindsay et al. 1980; Majewski 2010; Marquardt 1977; Marquardt et al. 1982; Sullivan and Childs 2003; Voss 2012; see Nielsen-Grimm and Haynie 2019). Even though integrating collections management strategies into early project planning is increasingly common, it still does not address projects that were once accepted in substandard condition and have now been sitting on shelves for decades.

In general, we manage two types of curatorial and repository data: artifact assemblages and associated information (e.g., field notes, manuscripts, photographs, maps, etc.). Our institution did not always accession, track, and secure funds for incoming collections, nor did it keep up with the basic standard of collections care. Furthermore, the Laboratory accepted at no cost collections, often

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TABLE 1. Phase 1: Assessment.

1. Identify condition of collection.
a) Identify boxes from a specific collection, site, or project.
b) Begin Collection Assessment Report, which should include basic information and notes associated with the steps listed below.
c) Move boxes over to assessment area; only one box per person (per station) should be out at a time.
d) If a box weighs more than 30 lb, note this because it will need to be split between two boxes.
e) Remove all bags/containers from box.
f) Organize bags in nested order: site/project followed by provenience, material class (lithics, prehistoric ceramics, glass, etc.). Analyzed artifacts (if present) should be the smallest category within the nested order.
g) Return organized bags into the box in same order, with labels facing the same direction toward the front of the box. If any bag is falling apart or ripped, place the entire bag into a new archival bag as a temporary fix until the entire collection can be addressed.
h) Within the Collection Assessment Report, note the number of bags/containers. At this time, it is only necessary to count the largest nested bags/containers present, which typically will be individual proveniences within a site/project.
i) Within the Collection Assessment Report, note the number and condition of bags/containers as Unacceptable/Acceptable. If any bag/container within a box is not in archival condition, mark the whole box as Unacceptable.
2. Begin initial database incorporation.
a) Log onto database.
b) Create site number/project information (this becomes the accession number).
c) Create a box label and box barcode with site number/project.
d) Print the box label and box barcode using high-density print-grade polyethylene labels.
e) Attach the box barcode to front of box.
f) Place the box label into the adhesive sleeve on the front of the box.
g) Create field labels for the number of largest nested bags/containers per box (field label is another name for FS/FN/LN).
h) Print field labels for the number of bags per box.
i) Add to appropriate bags/containers with the barcode readily visible.
j) Place the box back in its location on the shelf.
k) Scan the box barcode and location barcode on the shelf into database to link them together.
3. Determine ownership.
a) Research associated documents (if present) for the collection.
b) Research archaeological site file.
c) If ownership cannot be determined, classify as orphaned collection (laboratory absorbs costs or seeks external grants for rehabilitation).
4. Solicit funds.
a) Arrange discussions with owner of collection. Communication should be instituted by director of repository.
b) Create contracts/memoranda of agreements, if not present, that include not only costs for curating the collection but also rehabilitation costs with owning federal or state institution. Communication should be instituted by the director of the repository. Rehabilitation costs should take into account the state of archival condition; number of boxes; labor to rebag, organize, reinventory; and material costs for bags/containers, boxes, etc.
5. Finalize assessment.
a) Finalize contracts/memoranda of agreements.
b) If there is even one box within a collection that has been demonstrated to have unacceptable curation, full incorporation into database should not occur until that has been rehabilitated.
c) Prepare for rehabilitation. If already in proper curation condition, move to Part 3: Incorporation.

in substandard condition, from projects conducted by faculty, students, or former students. In 1948, an accession log was created to track incoming collections, but it was discontinued in the mid-1990s. Therefore, there are gaps in acquisition/accession history, and even accessioned collections did not always contain the same level of information. The Laboratory has moved several times since 1938, with documentation and materials lost along the way. Other issues include the fact that many collections were not in archival condition nor ever fully inventoried. Additionally, the exact accession history and ownership information for much of what is on our shelves is unknown. If ownership is known, then funding for collections care can be solicited, and it is possible to have a responsible party for NAGPRA-related materials. In the end, what this means is that we have some collections that conform to modern curation standards, but many are in substandard condition with a host of curation-related issues, including, but not limited to, the following:

1. Artifacts housed in substandard archival quality bags, boxes, and containers (e.g., paper, unstable plastics, affixed with rubber bands and metal fasteners, etc.)
2. Unidentified NAGPRA materials

https://doi.org/10.1017/aap.2019.16 Published online by Cambridge University Press

TABLE 2. Phase 2: Rehabilitation.

1. Research
a) Confirm site numbers, site names, project names, associated field numbers, and accession numbers using field notes, reports, etc. It may be necessary to organize and rehouse field notes at this stage to facilitate research.
b) Compile into an Excel spreadsheet and include at minimum for each bag (if present) the following: site number, site name, project, date of excavation, provenience, FN/LN/FS number, material types, and additional notes.
2. Create a project overview report.
a) Outline the current project procedure.
b) Note errors or issues, and any other information for future researchers and curators.
3. Identify potential NAGPRA conflicts.
a) Identify potential NAGPRA materials (bags/containers/artifacts as marked from burials or marked as having human remains).
b) Remove materials to separate NAGPRA boxes to assess collectively at end of evaluation. Create removal form.
c) Create a NAGPRA-specific spreadsheet to track information, including, at minimum, for each bag (if present) the following: site number, site name, project, date of excavation, provenience, FN/LN/FS number, burial number, contents, and research notes.
4. Rehouse.
a) Rebag into appropriately sized 4-mil polyethylene bags or thicker depending on size and weight of material.
b) Label the bags following the laboratory's standards.
c) Cut out old bag information and retain in new bags.
d) Sort artifacts at minimum by material class if not sorted or analyzed. Sort according to analyzed categories (if present). If analysis mistakes are noted, correct and document accordingly.
e) Bag material classes or analyzed categories individually.
f) Place into a large bag with smaller bags nested according to provenience.
g) Pull and organize all associated documentation (field notes, manuscripts, photographs, maps, etc.).
h) Rehouse associated documentation into appropriate archival folders/containers by types of documents, and organize by provenience (e.g., unit forms, shovel test forms, etc.).

3. Organization of materials by artifact type rather than by provenience
4. No associated accession documentation and/or inventory of the collection
5. Unknown ownership
6. Overpacked boxes
7. Improper housing of fragile artifacts
8. Improper conservation techniques

ASSESSMENT PROCEDURES

Because of the immediate threats of residual smoke damage, it was urgent to begin the reboxing process after the fire. On August 12, 2017, just twelve days after the fire, remediation started. A team of employees (nine laboratory research assistants with basic field and lab experience as well as a laboratory supervisor with extensive field and lab experience) from the cultural resource management firm New South Associates, Inc., was hired. Laboratory personnel trained the team, outlining reboxing protocols. Reboxing was conducted in a nearby building to mitigate the effects of residual smoke. The team was taught to differentiate between acceptable and unacceptable curation bags/containers. For example, acceptable curation bags/containers include 4-mil polyethylene bags; or acid-free lignin-free, pH-neutral boxes, folders, tissue paper, etc.

Time constraints prevented any other examinations of the materials (e.g., accuracy of information on or in bags). The team completed the reboxing and subsequent assessment in one month. Our unique circumstances allowed us to place nearly all our collections into new acid-free boxes. In general, however, the reboxing of materials should be part of rehabilitation procedures (discussed in more detail below).

Assessment steps include identifying the condition of a collection, initial database incorporation, determination of ownership, solicitation of funds, and finalization of the data (Figure 1 and Table 1). Whenever possible, we recommend that assessments be completed for entire holdings and that they be done at one time rather than piecemeal. We understand that this is not always possible due to financial limitations, so assessing individual collections one at a time is acceptable. Our assessment process is not yet complete, but we now know that we have 15,746 archaeological sites/projects from multiple states, the federal government, private institutions, and donations, as well as those that are unprovenienced or of unknown ownership, along with UGA-owned collections that are now housed in 8,880 boxes. Of those, 6,666 boxes have some form of unacceptable curation condition. This number will undoubtedly increase as we begin the assessment process for the remaining 2,700 boxes (housed in a separate facility at the time of the fire) that were not smoke damaged and therefore could not be covered under insurance funds.

The assessment has provided us with basic information about all our collections (up to this point, the information was fragmentary), and it has provided us with a good starting point. Now, we can begin the next step in our evaluation procedure by

https://doi.org/10.1017/aap.2019.16 Published online by Cambridge University Press

FIGURE 2. Rehabilitation Step 4 in detail: (a) collection being rebagged; (b) final bag with original and new labels; and (c) final bag organization within an archival box. Courtesy of the Laboratory of Archaeology, University of Georgia.

prioritizing particular collections based on size, curation condition, ownership, and funding opportunities. As a result of the initial assessment, it is now apparent that the ownership of some of our legacy collections will be more difficult to determine than others (e.g., collections from the 1940s). Additionally, the assessment also revealed collections that needed rehabilitation and that had easily determined ownership (discussed in more detail below).

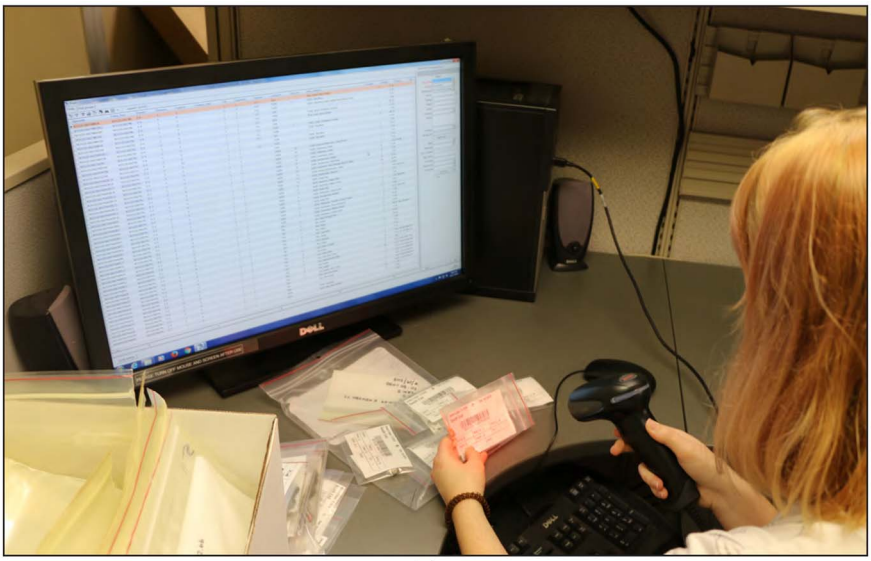
REHABILITATION PROCEDURES

Rehabilitation steps include researching the site or collection, creating project overview reports, determining ownership, identifying potential NAGPRA cultural items, and rehousing the site or collection (Table 2; Figures 2 and 3). Overall, we define "rehabilitation" as the process of organizing and sorting a project, site, or collection and its rehousing. This is done by looking at the project, site, or collection in its entirety; organizing artifacts and their associated documents by provenience; and rehousing them in acid-free folders, boxes, and 4-mil polyethylene archival-quality bags. This process also addresses any other curation issues or needs.

In order to implement a pilot project for this step, we identified one collection with a known owner. This collection consisted of a series of surveys, excavations, and surface finds gathered between 1972 and 2008 from over 200 archaeological sites on Ossabaw Island, which is located off the Georgia coast and owned and managed by the state. In the fall of 2017, we solicited and acquired funds from the Georgia Department of Natural Resources, Historic Preservation Division (GDNR HPD) to rehabilitate this collection.

Within a year of writing of this manuscript, one full-time laboratory technician has rehabilitated the entire Ossabaw Island legacy

https://doi.org/10.1017/aap.2019.16 Published online by Cambridge University Press



(a)

(b)

FIGURE 3. Incorporation Steps 1 and 3 in detail. Courtesy of the Laboratory of Archaeology, University of Georgia.

collection (103 boxes), including organizing documents, assessing the condition of each box, creating a bag-level inventory with provenience and site number, and rehousing collections into proper archival-quality bags. Additionally, NAGPRA materials (bags marked as having human remains or coming from burials) were identified and separated. These will be investigated later by UGA's director as well as archaeologists from GDNR HPD. If NAGPRA materials are identified during the rehabilitation process, then they are subject to a separate course of action as outlined by the law. This should begin after all NAGPRA materials are identified within a collection. At the time of this writing, the Ossabaw Island project is not quite finished, as we have not yet incorporated the bag-level detail into UGACMS. This work will begin in August of 2019, and we anticipate one part-time student employee (working 12–20 hours per week) can finish the database incorporation within two semesters.

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TABLE 3. Phase 3: Incorporation.

1. Begin database incorporation.
a) Pull box, ideally first box in provenience sequence of a collection.
b) Log on to database.
c) Open site number/project number.
d) Add artifact information (finds) for each smaller bag/container within larger nested bag (typically this is the sorting of bulk material within one field [FS #] label produced per material category). This can be broad or detailed based on the level of completed analysis.
e) Print artifact barcodes per smaller bag/container or according to analyzed category, which will replace the field (FS#) label barcode and remain with the sorted artifacts/material.
f) Add to appropriate bags/containers with barcode readily visible.
g) Return box to recorded location. Update box location as necessary.
2. Digitize and incorporate associated documentation.
a) Pull all associated documentation (field notes, manuscripts, photographs, maps, etc.), Project Overview Report, and any additional documentation.
b) Digitize into pdf. Apply OCR (optical character reader) to each document.
c) Digitize according to specific archival formats.
d) Link documents within database according to specific level of information.
3. Finalize incorporation.
a) Ensure all information is incorporated within database.

INCORPORATION PROCEDURES

The final collection evaluation procedure consists of incorporation and connection of all data (artifacts and associated documentation) into UGACMS (Table 3 and Figure 3). The platform for our database system is InTerris Registries Archaeological Information System (Figure 4). We chose this product over other commonly used (museum) collection management systems (e.g., PastPerfect, Argus, Re:discovery, TMS) because of its reasonable cost and its functionalities from the field to the repository. In addition to the system being barcode capable at multiple data levels (provenience, boxes/containers, repository shelving locations, etc.), it can also accommodate spatial data through its own integrated GIS. This allows for greater research potential within collections and the wider database. The Laboratory uses this system during fieldwork, allowing newly excavated collections to be seamlessly integrated into the curation functions of the database once the collections are accessioned. For us, it was the functionalities of accommodating archaeological project data from the start of fieldwork into the curation repository that fulfilled UGA's field and repository database needs. Although each repository must select a database platform suited to its needs, we do recommend one that not only incorporates all levels of data and stages of research but also includes barcode tracking.

At this point, we have not quite begun the incorporation steps for the collections from Ossabaw Island, and this stage will be ongoing. However, we know that integrating these collections will occur by entering detailed artifact information at the bag level into UGACMS, printing out the barcodes on high-density print-grade polyethylene labels, and placing the barcode labels inside each bag to track all levels of associated collections information. It is better to wait until legacy collections have been assessed and rehabilitated before barcoding at the bag level so that there is a clear understanding of the history and quirks unique to each collection. After the contents of each box are entered into the database, the box can be returned to the shelf. One thing to note within our steps is the vague reference to digital files and media formats. We have not yet implemented a process to migrate our digital data to archival file formats. We are still working through this internally. Currently, we are consulting standards outlined by the Society of American Archivists and National Archives. Future plans include producing detailed standards for this step. In general, however, the steps specified in Table 3 are the basic procedures that we have begun to follow when incorporating a collection.

THINKING ABOUT THE FUTURE

Although not yet completed, our planning and implementation of procedures for our collections has yielded positive results. We knew problems were present, but without a repository-wide evaluation, we were not aware of their extent and scale. We recommend that facilities with similar collection histories develop a plan to assess all their collections, as we found this to be worthwhile. An event such as the fire, however, does not need to happen in order to implement these ideas. With a plan in place, any repository can begin to solicit internal, external, or private funds to accomplish some of the same collections rehabilitation goals or improve curation in other areas. In our case, we are in a better position than ever to solicit funds for targeted state and federal collections that are in substandard condition. Our end goal is to bring all collections up to archival and museum standards and to have all information about the collection within our database tied to its related data (field excavation records, other documents, field maps, reports, media, etc.) through bag-level barcoding.

https://doi.org/10.1017/aap.2019.16 Published online by Cambridge University Press

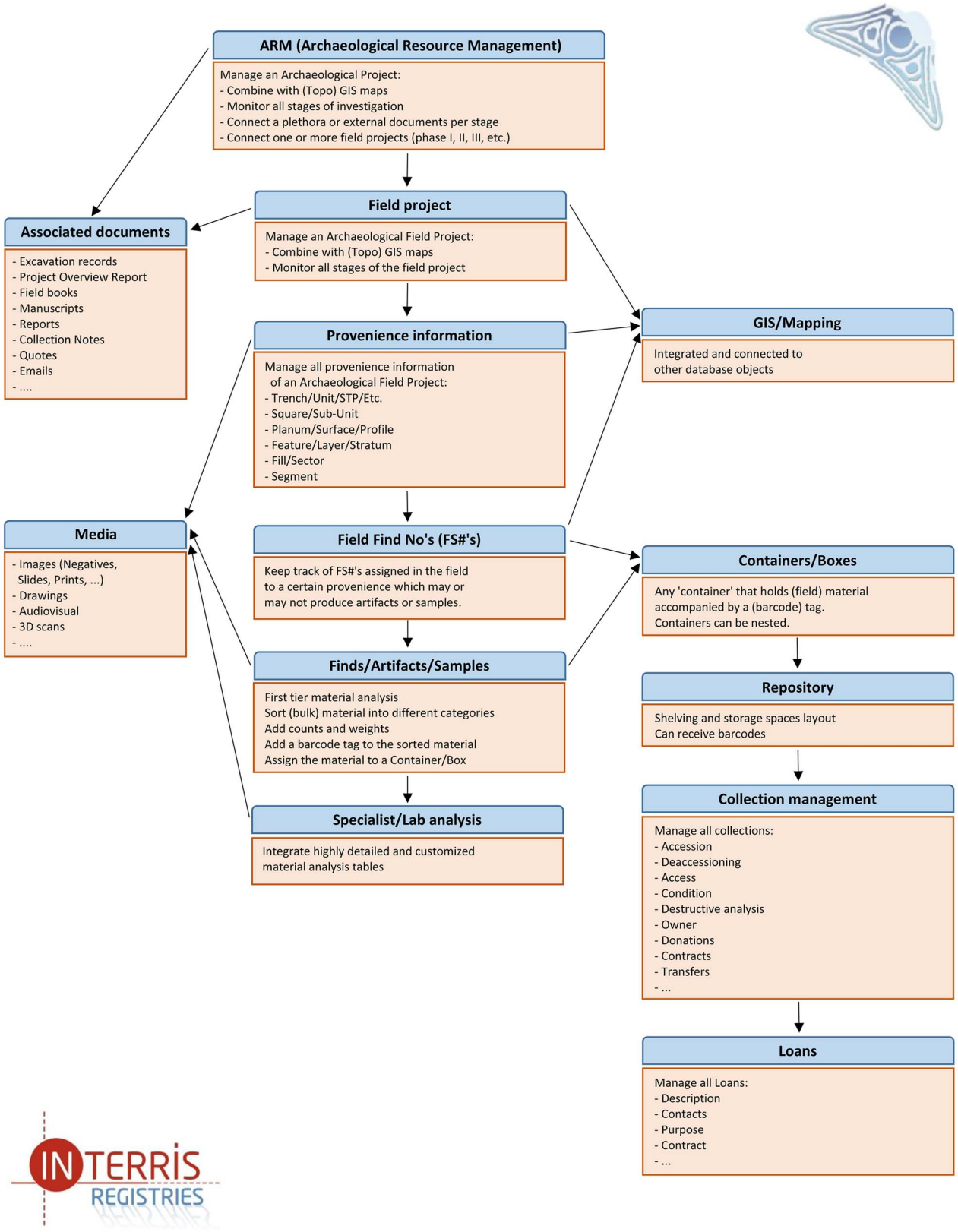

FIGURE 4. A general and highly simplified schematic of the InTerris Registries system, its available data levels and how these are connected within the database. Courtesy of InTerris Registries Archaeological Information System.

https://doi.org/10.1017/aap.2019.16 Published online by Cambridge University Press

It is imperative that archaeological repositories attempt to maintain the highest level of curatorial standards to meet the needs and requirements of state and federal agencies as well as CRM firms. Our mission is to preserve and curate archaeological records and collections, yet there are constant obstacles. We recognize the difficulty in obtaining funds for long-term care of collections, not to mention staffing to manage and rehabilitate legacy collections. There are, however, funding sources, such as through the National Endowment for the Humanities, Save America's Treasures, the Institute of Museum and Library Services, or state grants such as those listed under the Collections Assessment for Preservation Program.

Lack of documentation and differences in accession log and provenience recording make it difficult to know what is in a collection, let alone if different collections are split across multiple repositories. Our larger point is that curation issues are not just the result of past practices or larger issues in the field. They also come from addressing (or ignoring) everyday curation needs, which require constant reevaluation in order to maintain a sustainable model for the future. As a result, it is up to each institution to incorporate the history of its collections and work within the parameters of its resources. We hope that our case study provides some broader lessons and specific processes that can aid in developing and implementing long-term plans at institutions that face similar issues and circumstances.

Acknowledgments

The Laboratory of Archaeology is supported by the Department of Anthropology and the Franklin College of Arts and Sciences at the University of Georgia. A number of individuals facilitated our work with the collections after the fire, including Carl Bergman, David Leigh, Krista Coleman-Silvers, Ervan Garrison, Ted Gragson, Jeff Speakman, Vance Silcott, and our amazing graduate and undergraduate students. We would also like to thank Bryan Tucker and GDNR HPD for their support of our rehabilitation program of the Ossabaw Island materials. We also extend our gratitude to Sergio Quesada for assisting us with the Spanish abstract. We also thank the reviewers for their comments, which helped improve this manuscript. Finally, we would like to acknowledge Torben Rick for suggesting that we write this paper, as well as Danielle Benden and Michelle Knoll for inviting us to contribute and for all their help with the manuscript.

Data Availability Statement

All collections referenced herein are curated in perpetuity at the University of Georgia Laboratory of Archaeology. All inquiries regarding access to these collections can be addressed to the director of the Laboratory of Archaeology. Contact information is available at https://archaeology.uga.edu/archlab/people.

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https://doi.org/10.1017/aap.2019.16 Published online by Cambridge University Press