# UNM Center for Southwest Research & Special Collections

# Dennis Chávez Papers

<https://nmarchives.unm.edu/repositories/22/resources/4521>

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INFOST 750 Section 202

Arrangement & Description in Archives

October 7, 2024

The New Mexico Archives Online contains the Dennis Chávez Papers, which spans between the years of 1921-1963. The collection papers are material from Dennis Chávez’s political career, including his time in the New Mexico State Legislature and United States Congress. The collection contains correspondence, personal papers, congressional papers, photographs, and legislation, in addition to other materials. The collection is comprised of 386 boxes (383 cu. ft.) and one oversize folder. The overall collection materials are in English, but there are also collection materials in Spanish. Seven boxes in the collection are only accessible via microfilm or digital files. The repository for this collection is the University of New Mexico (UNM) Center for Southwest Research & Special Collections. (staff 2000)

Dionisio “Dennis” Chávez was the first Hispanic elected to a full term in the US Senate and the first US Senator to be born in New Mexico, which was a US territory at the time of his birth in 1888. A Georgetown University Law school graduate, who practiced law in Albuquerque, Mr. Chávez also found success in defending organized labor and as defense counsel in high profile murder cases. He was a court interpreter, editor, and private contractor before entering politics. Mr. Chávez’s distinguished political career began in the US House of Representatives in 1931 and concluded in the US Senate in 1962, upon his death. Mr. Chávez holds the distinction of being the longest serving Hispanic US senator. [[1]](#footnote-1)

An examination of the New Mexico Archives Online website’s finding aids looks at how the finding aids supports concepts such as findability, structure, and navigation for end users. First, the structure of the website contains three heading descriptions (collection overview, collection organization and container inventory). The collection overview provides the following information:

* scope and content of the collection,
* dates, creator information, language of materials,
* access restrictions, copy restrictions, bio,
* extent, related material, separated material
* processing information, subjects, related names
* finding aid & administrative info, revision statements, repository details,

The level of description meets the DACS definition of a finding aid- a description that typically consists of contextual and structural information about an archival resource (Dictionary 2005-2024).

Next, the collection organization tab provides the end user with an eight-part series inventory list. The series is numerically organized with a general heading hyperlink. For instance, clicking on Series l: Correspondence link, opens a drop-down menu on the right side that includes sub series information about general correspondence and the archival record box and folder this information is stored at. This finding aid is useful because of its specificity. An end user who is looking for correspondence from a certain year, from a certain person, or property taxes, can access this information easily and quickly. Quick and easy access to individual items within a collection with minimal clicks is a recommendation made in the article *Looking* *for Answers: A Usability Study of Online* (Walton, 2017) The finding aid visual cues, series and subseries list provide the end user with a sense of control when browsing the collection by narrowing down the choices to meet the searching desires of the end users.

Selection choice by the end user of what materials they seek out is an easy task to carry out on the main page of the website. For instance, of what materials are beneficial to the end users through the finding aid filter. Typing in the words Dennis Chavez in the search filters, retrieves the paper collection link. However, entering “US senator” in the search filter, yields the Dennis Chavez Pictorial Collection and the Dennis Chavez Oral History Project link, which is a standalone oral history collection. The keywords “House of Representatives” retrieves information about biographical notes, congressional reports, publications, and congressional records from the Dennis Chavez Oral History Project. Evaluating the key word searching at the collection level that recommends should be at the collection level and global level (Walton 2017)

A Google search of the keywords Dennis Chavez does retrieve the Dennis Chavez Papers; therefore, the global search does direct an end user to New Mexico Archives website. Ashlyn Velter’s article *Assessing Finding Aid Discoverability After Description Improvements* *Using Web Analytics* states When asked what information is valuable to them, users indicated that detailed component-level descriptions, scope and content notes, and biographical historical notes were all useful. They also described the importance of keywords and subject headings in their search efforts.[[2]](#footnote-2) The Yahoo website search for the keywords Dennis Chavez, did not immediately refer to the Dennis Chavez Papers collection and did not show as a result until the third page of the results were uploaded. Using the keywords Dennis Chavez in the Bing search engine, resulted in a search on the 1st page that links to the UNM digital repository. The different search engines did retrieve information within a global parameter by using a keywords David Chavez, whether the results appeared on the 1st or 3rd page. However, it should be noted that an end user would have to specifically enter the keywords Dennis Chávez Papers, to retrieve a top result that links back to the UNM digital repository. The finding aid is easy to navigate and is accessible through mobile devices. The mobile device experience is compatible to the web browser experience for the finding aid.

A disappointing aspect about the finding aid is that it is not conducive to the needs of blind or low vision internet users. The finding aids do not include text to speech, nor does the finding aid list any type of reference to any type of assistive ADA support. How does a blind person research a collection? Are repositories doing all they can to make sure papers are accessible to visually impaired? The Article *Sensing the Archives: A workshop for visually impaired students [[3]](#footnote-3)* recounts the day the National Archives held a workshop for blind or visually impaired students. An innovative creation of 3D printed tactile versions of the repository documents were created which translated what was on paper. Tactile maps and hint bags with sensory clues about a document were introduced to the students to foster engagement and learning. Hopefully in the future the finding aid will be able to incorporate technology that will benefit the visually impaired. Archivist will hopefully develop the tools that will bring paper collections to life via tactile touch, sound, or smell. This approach will certainly bring more work to the archivist, but this type of task may also help with the initial curating of the collection by hiring staff that can record documents or create materials that represent documents. Perhaps reaching out to the community to find those who are willing to do this type of vital work will supplement staff and offer a different perspective on the collection itself.

A review of the finding aid and Walton’s ten recommendations for improving online finding and interfaces, shows the finding aid does meet most of the requirements, such as an interface that is not visually overwhelming by using a white background and blue act as a link to other materials. A novice researcher or an advanced researcher will fill the finding aid is suited to their research skills and knowledge level with the use of expandable drop-down menus. Walton is not too concerned with the quality of the content at times, and doesn’t caution the end user to vet the finding aid and make sure the content is informative and not just a warehouse of links that lead to more links and not enough content. Otherwise, the finding aids does have a collection hierarchy that give the finding aid cohesiveness, through using three headings, collection overview, collection organization, and container inventory. This simplification of the contents in the collection did reduce the number of clicks needed to access specific information, which help with avoiding the sense of drowning in too much information.

The level of description on the finding aid is very basic and an end user should have no problem finding correspondence if that is what they are looking for. The description does become more detailed once a link is selected such as Series V: Press Releases. From the drop-down menu a user can select press releases in English or Spanish, press releases sorted by year, newsletter, or political files. The finding aid is providing contextual and structural information about the press release resource. The strength of the finding aid is its consistency in presenting the supporting documentation it promises the end user. The finding aid also cross references itself to provide additional structural information to the end user that can provide more information the user may not have thought of or had knowledge of. The consolidation of the information that is vast in scope serves the user by still keeping the finding experience easy and uncomplicated. The principles of DACS are well represented in the finding aid and by providing the administrative history of the finding aid by referencing the repository, or stating provenance in New Mexico, the curator being Dennis Chavez. The organization of the finding tool illustrates a detailed account of all inventories. This finding tool is represents most of the Walton criteria and DACS criteria for organization and information.

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   Dennis Chávez Papers,, MSS-394-BC-Pt. 2. UNM Center for Southwest Research & Special Collections. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. (Velte 2023) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. (Ordesson, Rhodes, and Carter 2024) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)