**Agenda Item VI.I.**

# Society of American Archivists
# Council Meeting
# May 16-17, 2017
# Chicago, Illinois

# Report: DACS Principles Meeting in March 2017

**(Prepared by Maureen Callahan and Adrien Hilton)**

## BACKGROUND

*Describing Archives: A Content Standard* is the guidance given to archivists about how to represent archival materials in the world. It was first published in 2004, with a major revision in 2013. The principles that foreground rules for representing archives have not been revised since they were first written.

The Technical Subcommittee on DACS has received feedback from archival educators – and from our own work – that the principles are difficult to teach, difficult to explain, and hard to evaluate for compliance. But beyond this, the current principles are so much more prosaic and less grand than our missions – to help people assemble stories and facts that let them account for the past and live a better future.

In summer 2016, at the SAA Annual Meeting, we brought together a group of archival description experts to closely evaluate the existing principles. Through exercises, writing, and discussion, we came to consensus that, yes, the principles are ready for revision. This set the groundwork for planning for a full principles revision in 2017.

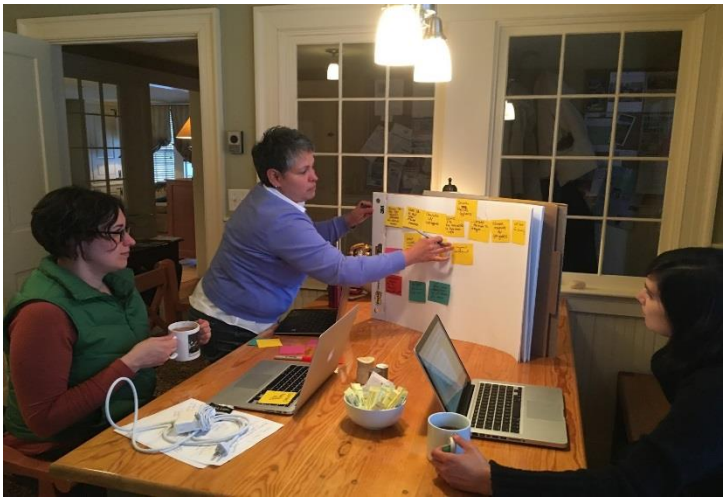
## FUNDING

During the summer 2016 meeting, we were encouraged by an IMLS program officer to apply for funding to help support an in-person principles revision meeting. We were then encouraged by SAA to apply for internal funding instead. We submitted a request in October 2016 for $22,675 to meet in Los Angeles.

The SAA Council rejected this request and provided, frankly, unhelpful suggestions to keep costs down – suggestions that would not have produced the quality of meeting that we were ultimately able to organize.

Ginning up a plan B, the TS-DACS co-chairs reached out to the leadership of the Lewis Walpole Library as a potential host for the DACS revision workshop. Yale University has a history, unparalleled (in our view) by any other institution, of supporting standards work. The Walpole and Beinecke libraries generously agreed to heavily subsidize this meeting—the Walpole

provided both free meeting space for all and free onsite lodging for eleven archivists. The Beinecke library paid $2,000 toward food costs and the Walpole picked up the rest. The SAA Council awarded $11,000 for travel, and we successfully managed this money in such a way that we came in under SAA's budget.



We encourage SAA to think about the real costs of the work done by volunteers, the consequences of this kind of arrangement, and its impact on SAA's larger goals of diversity and inclusion. Because Maureen Callahan is a former employee of Yale University and is a part of the network of folks at the Lewis Walpole and Beinecke Libraries, she (and former colleagues from Yale) were able to lobby Yale for this support – lobbying that folks not in this network would not have had access to. We heard from participants that this meeting was unlike any they had ever attended, and that it was successful because they had time and space away from their real jobs in a nurturing, supportive environment.

Working from a guest house instead of a more formal meeting environment, we were incredibly lucky to have benefited from the care of Sandra Markham, who was up before any of us and went to bed after, arranged every meal, and always had a dishwasher running. No amount of money could have paid for this degree of care – not that we would have had the budget for it anyway. This was delightful and memorable and deeply appreciated, but it's also irreproducible and can't be a model for future work. Groups need a place to work and think where logistics are taken care of. This requires catering and conference services—the kinds of services we budgeted for in the original Los Angeles proposal. Teleconferences, meetings tacked onto conferences, and other half-measures would have never sufficed. And in the end, we were able to move from a proposal to a complete (and high-quality) product in a matter of months, as opposed to the years-long process that other standards revisions have evidenced.

Standards will suffer if they are only produced by members of wealthy institutions. We believe that if SAA wants standards work to succeed, we all need to have a much more realistic understanding of the costs (financial and human) of this all-volunteer labor. We hope that the next time a group comes to the Council with a well-developed proposal to provide free work and an excellent product, Council will have more foresight.

In the end, the greatest expense was the time and expertise of the archivists that participated in this event. We worked from 9:00 a.m. to 7:00 p.m. every day, which amounts to 680 person-hours of time. This does not include the tens of hours that went into preparation before the meeting and the effort that will be required after the meeting to ensure successful adoption of the principles. Considering that the typical work-year is 2,080 hours, this was an enormous outlay of

volunteer time and energy among archivists at points of great responsibility in their careers, and must be recognized as such.

## THE MEETING

A four-day, in-person meeting was held at The Lewis Walpole Library of Yale University in Farmington, Connecticut, March 13-17, 2017. Seventeen archivists were able to attend. Participants represented small and large institutions and were selected based on their record and experience writing, teaching, and working with archival description.

Over the course of the meeting, the participants engaged in both reflective and generative activities. Each day's exercises built on and added to the work from previous sessions. Communication was engineered to be intentionally non-oppressive and supportive; disagreement was encouraged. Room for discussion was encouraged until near consensus was built, although we did, on occasion, ask participants if they would be willing to stand outside of consensus so that we could move forward.

Our activities drew upon methodologies used in software development as well as the long history of archival theory and the group's previous work. We employed principles of design thinking to place the user and user needs at the forefront of our design.

### Day 1 – Understanding What Came Before

The meeting began with an overview of our community expectations for anti-oppressive engagement, based on the Aorta Collective's guidelines.

The goal of the first day was that participants would understand how the principles around archival description developed, the current consensus in archival (and allied) literature around priorities for archival description standards, and that participants would have a framework for thinking about the values and needs of users of DACS principles. We accomplished this by first reviewing what had already been achieved at the August 2016 Annual Meeting. We asked participants to engage in a deep listening exercise where they shared two ideas from the Annual Meeting that they feel should move forward, and to report their partner's ideas back to the group.

In the afternoon, we asked participants to form groups, read from a pre-selected reading list, and report back to the group about which ideas could help inform the new principles. We believed that this would help ground us in the wisdom of archival theory. One particular group of readings

covered the history of archival standards development, so that we could make sure we were sensitive to the desires and motivations of previous and companion standards.

Finally, we started a generative exercise that became the basis for the rest of the work – a user-centered design process by which we took the experiences of real people and the real ways that they use archives to come to terms with the ways that archival description can be successful for users – or extremely frustrating. This process was expertly led by Hillel Arnold.

Here, we used personas developed by archives software projects (ArcLight and Project Electron) and thought about tasks that these individuals might typically want to accomplish. We asked teams to walk through every single step of that process as it would realistically happen – including all setbacks, work-arounds, frustrations, and termination points.

We encouraged participants to think, in particular, about how archival description led to these outcomes, and to start thinking about how better archival description might have resulted in more favorable outcomes for users.

**Day 2 – Preparing to Write**

The goal for the second day was that participants would have the skills they need to write and revise the DACS principles. Based on an exploration of the needs of users of archives, the group created, by the end of the day, a liminal and thoughtful list of principles to further develop.

We started each day with a housekeeping and check-in meeting, an opportunity for participants to reflect on what they had accomplished the day before, and any thoughts that may have come to them since then. That morning, Bill Landis generously provided a workshop about effective technical writing. This helped us develop a rubric by which we would later be able to judge our own technical writing.

Later that morning, we returned to the user stories that we had diagrammed the previous afternoon, and attempted to identify principles that would have resulted in better outcomes for these users. Each participant took quiet time to generate those principles for her or himself. We then created an "affinity diagram," a visual representation of where our ideas for new principles converge and build on one another.

Based on these "affinities," we came up with a draft, liminal list of principles, and also formed groups to work on each of these principles. This was a high-octane discussion, a reckoning with our values and how we can best serve our users. We were grateful for the opportunity for a brief

break to take a fascinating tour of the Lewis Walpole Library.

**Day 3 – A Full Draft**

The goal for the third day was to produce full, complete, and well thought-through drafts of each DACS principle that we intend to submit for revision.

This kind of writing is very difficult. Each principle is typically less than fifty words, but we knew that they would have to be the perfect fifty words to explain very complicated ideas clearly. We prepared a worksheet that would help groups through this process. The worksheet encouraged writers to go deep and question their own assumptions – to explain why the principle is important, imagine how it will affect users, and fit it into the long tradition of archival literature about description.

Throughout the day, we scheduled meetings for groups to check in with the larger group for feedback. We all learned compassion for ourselves and each other – this is very difficult work!

A full draft of the DACS principles was due by 7:00 p.m. that evening.

**Day 4 – Setbacks, Pressing On, and Documentation**

The goal for the fourth day was to tidy up any remaining work, and to spend significant time making sure that the choices that went into our draft principles were documented. We had noted during this process that we had a difficult time understanding the choices guiding the original DACS principles, and hope to provide more accountability for those that may follow us.

We started the meeting by reviewing our rules of engagement, and then each member of the group took turns going around the table and reading the principles we had come up with. The consensus around the room was that we were very close to a minimum viable product.

We then went through the draft again, highlighting areas that needed revision or further care, and assigned groups to work on these revisions. When we came back together to share our work, we noticed that something was wrong – somehow, the revised version was worse than what we had

started with. The same principle, in new hands that hadn't engaged for the previous day thinking through the nuances of ideas, was too easy to completely re-write. After toiling through for an hour, TS-DACS leaders decided to halt the process and roll it back to what we had produced the previous evening, with the plan that TS-DACS leadership would zip up the draft when they returned to work.

We encouraged participants to put on their sneakers and meet us out front for a photograph and a walk to the graveyard to say goodbye to the original principles. We then spent the afternoon documenting our work and celebrating our accomplishments.

**MEETING FEEDBACK**

We asked participants to submit feedback about the meeting on (and after) the last day. Full feedback is available here. Participants' comments were overwhelmingly positive, as evidenced below:

"I really appreciated the day we spent getting on the same page in terms of writing and thinking empathetically. Too many standards revision processes jump right into writing, without delving into the assumptions underlying that work. It also got us to think broadly and positively, which is really key to writing principles!"

"I was pretty wowed about the effectiveness of the exercises you prepared to get our creative thinking going while also channeling it towards tangible output. It was a great scaffold to get us from strong vision to actionable statements. And this is coming from someone who is more of an I - need - to - let - this - percolate - in - the - back - of - my - mind - for - just - another - eon - or - so kind of person!"

"I wish I would have had the foresight to record our discussions (with everyone's permission, of course!). It was a fascinating and enlightening week and greatly improved my thinking on archival theory. I am so humbled and honored to serve on the TS-DACS Committee!"

"The facilitators of the meeting set guidelines for the meeting that resulted in participants demonstrating a great deal of respect for one another and created positive results. I believe the successful outcome is a direct result of the manner in which the meaning was run. I am proud of the product and look forward to sharing it broadly."

"This was awesome and empowering. I cannot thank you enough for organizing it the way you did to give everyone to find ways to participate and contribute even if speaking to a group of

experts isn't that naturally comfortable for them. The retreat idea was so effective, just everyone in it together and producing a lot of good work."

"It felt so, so good to be part of an anti-oppressive, feminist and user-centered standards process. This is a BIG FUCKING DEAL and you should be very proud of what you've made happen. I don't think this has before in an archival standards process (and it's probably a rarity in standards processes in general), and it was such an honor to be part of this."

## POST-MEETING AND BEYOND

Over the course of the last month, TS-DACS co-chairs transformed the draft principles into something ready for distribution. We then sent the revised principles to a list of first reviewers including participants of the 2016 SAA Annual Meeting in August as well as community members who were unable to attend the meeting in Farmington.

We created a toolkit for gathering community feedback in a structured way. The toolkit includes a reading list, a guide for facilitating group discussion, and a web form for submitting comment. The deadline for community comment is July 1, 2017.

Participants from the meeting are holding a group session at the Society of California Archivists meeting, April 27-29.

Although early feedback is only trickling in, it is already strong. This blog post, by Archives and the Old Mole, testifies to the power of the DACS principles revision as the necessary work of putting our values first.

We feel that an aggressive education strategy must accompany a successful adoption of the revised principles. To this end, TS-DACS is planning to host a pop-up session at the 2017 SAA Annual Meeting in Portland. Numerous participants have agreed to facilitate group discussion in the coming months, whether at regional and local meetings or at home institutions.

Hillel Arnold, a participant, wrote a summary of the process for Bits and Bytes, a Rockefeller Archive Center blog. The co-chairs of TS-DACS are planning to submit a paper outlining our methodology for revising the principles. We want to provide clarity and transparency regarding process and decision-making and hope that ours can serve as a model for standards maintenance and development going forward.

Once feedback has been collected and analyzed, we will determine whether the community supports this change. If it does, we will follow normal procedures to send the revised principles through Standards and ultimately to the Council.

**DACS Revision Participants**

**TS-DACS**
Maureen Callahan (co-chair), Smith College Libraries
Adrien Hilton (co-chair), Houghton Library, Harvard University
Hillel Arnold (co-chair through 2016), Rockefeller Archive Center
Elise Dunham, University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign Libraries
Adriane Hanson, Russell Library, University of Georgia
Susan Luftschein, Special Collections, University of Southern California Libraries
Elena Perez-Lizano, State Archives of New Mexico
Cory Nimer (through 2016), Brigham Young University Libraries
Cassandra Schmitt, Orbis Cascade Alliance
Carrie Hintz (ex officio – Standards Committee co-chair), Rose Library, Emory University

**DACS 2016 Principles Revision Meeting Invited Guests**
Mary Caldera, Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University Library
Jillian Cuellar, UCLA Library Special Collections
Jarrett Drake, Mudd Manuscript Library, Princeton University
Audra Eagle Yun, Special Collections & Archives, University of California, Irvine
Gretchen Gueguen, Digital Public Library of America
Bill Landis, Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University Library
Dennis Meissner, Minnesota Historical Society
Trevor Owens, Institute of Museum and Library Services
Mario Ramirez (unable to attend in person), University of California, Los Angeles
Dan Santamaria, Tufts Digital Collections and Archives

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Hillel Arnold, Rockefeller Archive Center
Mary Caldera, Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University Library
Jillian Cuellar, UCLA Library Special Collections
Audra Eagle Yun, Special Collections & Archives, University of California, Irvine
Tamar Evangelestia-Dougherty, California Rare Book School (unable to attend because of travel delays)
Gretchen Gueguen, Digital Public Library of America (unable to attend because of travel delays)
Regine Heberlein, Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Libraries
Linda Hocking, Litchfield Historical Society
Bill Landis, Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University Library
Sandra Markham, Lewis Walpole Library, Yale University Library
Dennis Meissner
Dan Santamaria, Tufts Digital Collections and Archives

**Revised DACS Principles for Community Feedback**

1. **Archival description expresses professional ethics and values.**

   Professional ethics and values drive archival work, including descriptive practice. Archival description is an iterative, ethical practice that requires continual engagement with core values. Rooting standards in values helps archivists enact these values consistently and makes them explicit to our user communities.

   Ethical description:
   - produces trust in and between users, archivists, and repositories
   - encourages a diverse archival record
   - promotes responsible and responsive descriptive practices
   - holds archivists accountable to users and to each other
   - privileges equitable access and accessibility

2. **Users are the fundamental reason for archival description.**

   Archives exist to be used. Archivists make descriptive choices that impact users. Archivists must have an awareness of how users find, identify, select, and use the records in order to produce effective description.

3. **Archival description must be clear about what archivists know, what they don't know, and how they know it.**

   Archivists must always provide honest description. Honest description mitigates human bias and limitations by requiring that archivists cite their sources of knowledge. This builds a culture of accountability and trust.

   Honest description:
   - delineates the limitations of archivists' knowledge and authority
   - acknowledges that archivists are people, and people are biased
   - acknowledges archivists' expertise in records, recordkeeping systems and documentary forms

4. **Records, agents, events, and the relationships between them are the four fundamental concepts that constitute archival description.**

   Meaning in archival records is revealed through their contexts as much as through their contents. Archivists expose contextual significance by describing records, agents, events, and the relationships between them.

   - **Records must be described in aggregate and may be described in parts.**

The whole gives meaning and coherence to the parts. Description of the aggregate is therefore an indispensable component of establishing context and must be provided before proceeding with the description of component parts.

- **The relationships among records, agents, and events are essential to understanding archives and must be described.**

  Relationships, which connect agents, records, and events, convey meaning that may not be apparent from the contents of records alone. Relationships may be simple or may comprise a complex network of interactions among multiple records, agents, and events.

- **Record creators and other agents must be described sufficiently to fully understand the meaning of records.**

  Agents act on records or interact with other agents across time. Agents may be human or machine.

  A category of agents, those responsible for the creation, compilation, and maintenance of records is particularly important and must be described. Describing these agents requires archivists to document agents' roles, functions, occupations, and activities.

  Archivists must be transparent about the sources of their description and recognize that agents have the right to define their identities, which may change over time.

- **Events that are essential to understanding records must be described.**

  Events, whether biographical, historical, or administrative, provide important contextual information. Describing biographical and historical events adds information that may be absent from the records themselves. Describing administrative events helps users understand how the records were affected over time by the actions of various agents following their creation.

5. **Archival description privileges intellectual content in context. Descriptive rules apply equally to all records, regardless of format or carrier type.**

   Descriptive standards must recognize that not all cultures and communities document in the same ways, and our descriptive standards must be flexible enough to accommodate all the ways that human experience is recorded.

   Archivists must adapt and respond to changing recordkeeping practices and technologies. Applying a common set of descriptive rules allows archivists to create consistent descriptions. It encourages confidence in professional judgment and gives archivists the flexibility to apply standards judiciously and thoughtfully.

Consistent description across formats:

- supports universal description and access
- lowers cognitive load for users
- maintains records' contexts as well as intellectual content

**6. Each collection within a repository must have an archival description**.

The absence of archival description is a barrier to users and good stewardship. In order to access archival collections, users must know which collections a repository holds. No matter how basic a description may be, it is more advantageous to users than no description at all.

Creating these archival descriptions helps archivists meet stewardship needs. This results in:

- Access to a better, broader sense of the scope of our holdings
- The ability for archivists to gather information about how collections are used
- Guidance for future appraisal and acquisition choices

It is incumbent upon repositories to deploy their resources in a way that permits them to describe all of their collections as part of their normal business operations.

7. **Archivists must have a user-driven reason to enhance existing archival description.**

When deciding how comprehensively to describe a collection, the goal should be to maximize the availability of all collection materials to users.

Once all collections in a repository have been described at a minimum level, archivists may choose to add more description. This choice must be based on demonstrated user needs or the goals of the repository.

8. **Archival description should be easy to use, re-use, and share.**

Archival description is an archivist's primary intellectual output. It is valuable, often resource-intensive, and is a form of data. Archival description consists of discrete data elements that can be expressed in a variety of useful outputs.

Users are best able to use, re-use and share archival description when:

- it is discoverable
- it is structured
- it is machine-readable
- it is machine-actionable
- it is available under an open license

Archivists must understand the ways that their data can be consumed by a broad range of users, including people and machines.

9. **Archival description is accessible and intelligible.**

Users of archives encounter barriers to accessing archival description that may be physical, technological, linguistic or geographic. Archivists limit or remove these barriers to finding and interacting with description.

Accessible archival description engages creators and communities being documented to reflect their complexity, nuance, and fluidity. It builds trust between archives and those being documented.

10. **Archivists must document and make discoverable the actions they take on records.**

Archivists and archival repositories are agents whose actions affect records and the ways that all users can access and interact with those records.

Archivists have an obligation based in professional values of accountability and responsible custody to thoroughly and transparently describe their own interventions in the course of their work. These interventions may potentially affect users' understandings of records and are an essential part of archival description.

11. **Archival description is a continuous intellectual endeavor.**

Description must be iterative. It continually reflects deeper understandings of agents, records, events, and the relationships between them. It is responsive to users. It is flexible, reflecting changes in knowledge, practice, and values.