

The Steering Committee of the Reference, Access, and Outreach Section concurs that the issues identified as strategic priorities by the Council of the Society of American Archivists are significant and should be addressed by the profession. As archivists come from a variety of backgrounds and institutions, our responses will vary. While addressing these issues, SAA should continue to strive to be an all-inclusive organization that supports its members.

Strategic Issue #1 Technology

One significant oversight in this document is the lack of discussion of the digital (i.e. technology) divide between the haves and have nots. This divide exists among archives and their users. Many small archives have limited resources which make taking advantage of the web challenging. Is there a way that SAA can assist these smaller institutions in making their collections web accessible? Would an appropriate role for the organization be to offer grant writing assistance or coordination of cooperative projects? Even larger institutions without robust IT departments will have limited capabilities.

Having already made a significant impact, SAA should continue to play an active role in assisting its members and encouraging its members to assist others with developing web content. EAD, DACS, and digitization standards have effectively improved the profession's ability to deliver information over the web. More emerging standards, such as EAC, will continue to provide guidance on information to make available, and SAA needs to continue offering support in this area. As a profession, we should always consider our potential users. Will they need special software? If so, can it be downloaded at no cost as with Acrobat Reader? If not, we may want to consider other alternatives. Will our users view the documents in the same way as intended? How do we ensure what we put on the web is accessible on multiple platforms and to diverse user groups?

Archivists should also be aware of user perceptions. How do we respond to people who think everything is online? RAO recommends that when we create online resources, whether it be exhibitions, finding aids, subject guides, indexes, digital surrogates, and other items, we need to make it clear that this is the tip of the iceberg and that even greater treasures await those who come to the archives in person. We may strive for expanding web content but the reality is that we are unlikely to digitize everything. If we digitize portions of collections, we should say why and contextualize what is available online.

Many of the articles which study user habits concerning finding aids point to the impact of GOOGLE and other search engines. Archivists should consider these tools when mounting finding aids etc. and ensure that our materials are accessible to OAI and other web tools. We also need to consider our users habits when designing sites so that they delve down to lower levels or come back again.

An important benefit of technology is that we can use it to reach new user communities. We can provide access to those unable to visit archives in person or target new user populations through online catalogs, exhibits, finding aids, digital surrogates, etc.

The impact of web products and email on workload is often overlooked but one that all institutions should consider. If we add content, do we have the resources to respond to the additional inquiries that we will receive? How do we explain to users that though email messages can be sent 24-7, most archives aren't open nights and weekends and that some inquiries cannot be answered quickly?

While archivists have been discussing appraisal and preservation of electronic records, we need to address methods for providing access to electronic records. Are we going to try to provide access in the document's native format or a PDF file? Can we provide access to data sets that are in proprietary software? Access is more complicated with electronic records as preservation and security issues are all interwoven. Do we need to set up security protocols that prevent users from altering electronic records? Do we keep preservation masters and use copies as with audiovisual materials? Are cooperative electronic records projects feasible?

Strategic Issue #2 Diversity

As we broaden our holdings to document all groups and aspects of society, we should endeavor to promote use of and access to our current holdings relating to these groups and topics. We should study our holdings and identify different research strategies and approaches that might interest a broader user base. Do we have any holdings that might be of interest to genealogists? To local historians? To people studying gender and ethnic populations? To members of these populations? We may need to contact other organizations that service these populations to learn more about their needs and to develop collaborative projects that meet the needs of these potential users. Can we use exhibits or public programs to target these groups and reveal to them potential archival resources? Can we develop lessons and other resources to bring archives into the classroom and the community? We should also consider creative ways of bringing potential users and materials together. The web can assist with this, but we should also consider "taking the archives" to these groups by bringing actual documents or surrogates to classrooms, community meetings, or other venues.

Strategic Issue #3 Public Support

To achieve public support, archives must expand their outreach programs. Outreach should target a variety of constituencies, including friends, users, resource allocators, colleagues, and the general public. A primary goal should be to explain what we do and why it is important to everyone. This could also be used as a way to recruit the next generation into our profession by showing that archives exist as a profession and offers stimulating and rewarding career opportunities.

Many archives are already designing education and outreach programs that are attempting to expand our user base. Many of these initiatives are targeting the K-12 user population. We should study these programs to see what is working and what isn't. Are there other populations such as college and university students or life-time learning programs that would benefit from similar programs? We should ally ourselves with teachers and other user groups to reach student populations at all educational levels. We should make sure that our outreach efforts to the schools target students of a wide range of backgrounds to make sure that we are reaching all members of our diverse society. And because middle school, high school and college students may still be formulating their adult careers, they are potential sources of new recruits for the profession, and outreach programs should specifically factor in discussions of career opportunities.

National History Day has enormous potential. All these students must use primary sources. Archivists could assist local teachers by providing instruction in archival research and/or developing special programs for classes to help them get started with their projects. SAA might consider offering an award at the national competition.

RAO encourages SAA to take advantage of the location and nature of its 2006 meeting to promote either a national Archives Week or Month. We feel that as Archives Week celebrates archives and our holdings that it is a perfect opportunity to promote public support for what we do.

We recommend that SAA study the approaches of other allied professions. ALA's "Visit your Legislator Day" is one program that SAA should consider. If we partner with other allied organizations such as AHA, ALA, COSHRC, NAGARA, and OAH, our potential impact would be even greater. As legislators respond to examples, we should start collecting stories which highlight our assistance to their constituents, such as how maps and documents provided the documentation needed to get a local historic house designated as a national landmark. As we create these initiatives, we must remember that advocacy should happen at all levels of government and throughout the year.

SAA should work more closely with our allied professions. They can help us make the case for what we do. Amateur and professional historians, genealogists, K-12 teachers, and historic preservationists benefit from our work. Let's get them to advocate on our behalf. Librarians and other information professionals have more experience lobbying. We can learn from their experiences.

Archivists need to learn how to alert the media to issues of concern and to promote the importance of what we do. In our profession, there are many people who prefer to work behind the scenes so we need to find ways to encourage and assist our colleagues to become advocates through workshops and other educational tools. Some ideas to explore would be lobbying and/or outreach workshops and the creation of a media tool kit. If SAA Council is interested in any of these ideas, RAO would be interested in working with others on such projects.