

"MYTHS OF THE ARCHIVES PROFESSION: A COMMON PRACTICE?"

John A. Fleckner, National Museum of American History
Smithsonian Institution

INTRODUCTION

I undertook this presentation to explore several ideas about the fundamentals of our enterprise as archivists. This was a concern of mine in 1981 when, Bill Joyce and I co-chaired the program committee for the annual meeting in Berkeley, California. We hit upon the phrase "the one world of archives" and used it as the theme of the introductory essay in the printed program. We liked the sound of the phrase, liked the sense it evoked, but labored hard and without great success to give it some content. Today I hope I can carry that effort a bit further, not presenting a coherent theory but touching on some ideas about our common grounds as archivists,

The merit of what I say should not turn on how well I can convince you of the myth (proving the existence of straw men is a trivial exercise) but on how convincing and significant the argument is for common ties, merits serious attention because to the degree to which we see ourselves as a profession – in the root sense of professing a common creed – we can address the supra-institutional goals and needs which are larger than the limits of our individual institutions or types of institutions. These include matters internal to the profession such as the education of archivists and matters external such as the status of our national archival institutions and the commitment and responsibility of governments to the preservation of our cultural heritage.

The thesis of my remarks is that archivists have exaggerated the differences among themselves based on the type of institution which employs them. (They have found other, exaggerated differences also.) Frank Burke puts it this way:

We often look with...disdain on our colleagues in other archival institutions and object to the minor differences that separate us rather than seeing possibilities in the major similarities we share.

This paper discusses one source of this unfortunate viewpoint and suggests, instead that we have far more in common than we often acknowledge. It also examines some of the implications of this for the organized profession and for archival practice.

THE PURPOSE OF ARCHIVES

Our overly narrow view of the purpose and role of an institutional archives is a major source of our misunderstanding. Without denying the value of an archives to administrative efficiency and long-term fiscal and legal protection of the parent institution, it is essential to see its relationship to some other, equally important, aspects of

organizational reality. In particular, archives are often created and supported because of their symbolic value. The importance of symbols and other kinds of shared values which constitute a "corporate culture" (to use a term rapidly entering our jargon) is nowadays gaining growing recognition in writings on the management and sociology of large organizations.

Archives, I believe, can have a role not only in symbolizing the corporate culture but in recording and transmitting it as well. This new literature suggests that corporate culture is a key determinant of organizational behavior and, ultimately, of the very success or failure of the organization. As we recognize the implications of these findings and the role for the archives which this suggests we have created identified a powerful integrating and unifying force - a sense of sharing a very important mission.

The thinking of Max Weber, the great German sociologist of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, is the most important single source of today's conventional wisdom about the nature of large, bureaucratic organizations. As Michael Lutzker has pointed out in the *American Archivist*, Weber contrasted modern bureaucracies with pre-modern ones which were characterized by "inefficiency, nepotism and other kinds of favoritism, corruption, and coercion." Together, these features produced administrative systems which were "wholly unsystematic, unpredictable, and highly idiosyncratic."

On the other hand, according to Weber, modern bureaucracies are based on well defined, hierarchical structures, with "fixed areas of jurisdiction, recognized division of labor, authority and responsibility, written regulations, policies and procedures, and fixed means for rewarding effort and protecting the office-holder." In other words, they are highly rational, closed systems.

The Weberian model has profoundly, and probably unconsciously, shaped the thinking of archivists about the purposes of an archives and about their own roles and functions. Why did England, France, and the United States establish national archival institutions, asked T. R. Schellenberg in his classic 1956 study, *Modern Archives?* "The immediate, and obviously the most impelling reason," he asserted, "was the practical need of improving governmental efficiency." (p.8) And what are the objectives of managing records? In a rational system characterized by "structure, rules, and precedents" (Lutzker) they are nearly self-evident: "to make the records serve the purposes for which they were created as cheaply and effectively as possible and to make a proper disposition of them after they have served those purposes."

Perhaps because the answers seem so obvious from the perspective of a rational organization bent on efficiency and productivity, archivists have not seriously studied why archives, in fact, are created and supported. For example, a manual on religious archives ignores the matter of why a religious organization should establish an archives and begins with a discussion of the place of an archives in the organizational structure.

Of course, we archivists do have a standard litany of "reasons for having an archives:" archives save money and time in storing and finding information, archives serve researchers? they preserve organizational history for public relations and commemorative purposes? Etc. These assertions function more as post hoc justifications than as concepts with explanatory power. We have not demonstrated that archives do save money, for example, or that their real or believed contributions to organizational efficiency are, in fact, the reason for their creation and continuation.

Likewise, our thinking about archival appraisal has been shaped by this relatively straight-forward and uncomplicated view of the nature of large organizations. In an overview of the essentials of an archives program, Paul McCarthy sums up the "traditional criteria" for evaluation records:

"Archives should preserve the significant records that document the institution's policies and procedures, the records documenting its legal establishment, operation and other records required by law, and its fiscal records.

The task is relatively easy Schellenberg seems to say, assuring us that:

by a judicious selection ... an archivist can capture in a relatively small body of records all significant facts on how the agency was created, how it developed, how it is organized, what functions it performs and what are the consequences of its activities." (Modern, p. 140)

Although Max Weber's thinking has been repeatedly challenged since its initial formulation it has remained the dominant intellectual tradition. The horde of recent MBAs armed with powerful calculators and backed by great information systems are the heirs of that approach.

Recent evidence, however, suggests that the dominance of Weberian thinking about the management of large organizations may have come to an end. The failings of the American economy and the remarkable performance of Japanese competitors, have spurred management theorists to re-examine their premises. The appearance on the best seller lists of In Search of Excellence: Lessons from America's Best-Run Companies may mark a turn in the tide of scholarly and public thinking about the fundamental nature of large scale organizations.

In Search of Excellence, written by management consultants Thomas Peters and Robert Waterman, examines sixty-two successful American corporations. The book identifies their common characteristics and weaves these findings into a theoretical statement about the nature of large organizations. The eight attributes of these successful firms are not startling. They include a bias for action, productivity through people, a simple management form, and lean staffing. What distinguishes the excellent companies is the intensity with which these attributes are held, believed, and acted upon. And the key finding, for our purposes, is that this intensity is the product of "a broad, uplifting shared

culture." (p. 51) As the authors conclude: "The dominance and coherence of culture proved to be an essential quality of the excellent companies."

The corporate culture is pervasive throughout the organization, The authors observe that:

While it is true that the good companies have superb analytic skills, we believe that their major decisions are shaped more by their values than by their dexterity with numbers... Their ability to extract extraordinary contributions from very large numbers of people turns on the ability to create a sense of highly valued purpose... Such high purpose is inherently at odds with 30 quarterly MBOs, 25 measures of cost containment, (and) 100 demeaning rules for production-line workers...

From this perspective, shaping the corporate culture is a primary function of top management. The authors quote British researcher Andrew Pettigrew:

The (leader) not only creates the rational and tangible aspects of organizations, such as structure and technology, but also is the creator of symbols, ideologies, language, beliefs, rituals, and myths.

Peters and Waterman give only passing attention to the transmission of corporate culture. They note "the dominant use of story, slogan, and legend... (which) convey the organization's shared values, or culture," but they ignore the role of formal, written corporate histories and of archives. (As management theorists they are more concerned with the content of the culture and its relationship to specific management techniques.)

Some of these concerns were addressed in a 1981 article in the Harvard Business Review entitled, "Present Value of Corporate History." George Smith and Laurence Steadman, also management consultants, recognize that disciplined analysis of a corporation's past can provide insights into corporate culture and strategy which will guide the firm into the future. For example, an historical analysis of the origins of one firm's traditional marketing policy demonstrated that it had been made under financial, legal, and technological conditions that no longer existed. This knowledge helped to overcome the defensiveness of managers who dismissed challenges to the policy by citing its past success.

Smith and Steadman also insist on the necessity of a corporate archives as a repository for recorded information from which informative history can be written. In calling for archives programs they point to a number of conditions which have contributed to "weakening of corporate memory," including mergers, acquisitions, appointments of outside top managers and directors, greater reliance on oral communication, and records management programs that destroy records rather than discriminately preserve them."

But Smith and Steadman recognize that to be valuable for the purposes

they envision – to be a “living archive” – a corporate archives program must do more than merely preserve important financial and legal records and “enrshrine” formal statements of policy, strategy, and public relations. In particular, they assert, the archives should document the decision-making process. They might well have added, following on their own and the Peters and Waterman findings on the importance of corporate culture, that the archives should imaginatively seek to record that “soft” side of corporate life which is the congerie of shared values, beliefs, and practices which give the firm its unique culture.

These findings should be profoundly disturbing and challenging to archivists already hard-pressed by inadequate resources to meet their current reponsibilitties. Although the existence of corporate cultures is not a new discovery, in the past they could be dismissed as matters of interest to folklorists, anthropologists, and similar quasi-social science types but not vital to the nature of our organizations. If, instead, corporate culture is a crucial element in the long term success of an organization, then we must take its documentation far more seriously. And that, in turn, must challenge our pat appraisal formulas and our reliance on the rote comforts of formal records schedules. We cannot issue general schedules calling for permanent retention of records of beliefs, values, and myths.

The challenge in all this lies in the new importance it suggests for the corporate archives. The archives need not be, as one executive put it, “just a collection of dusty documents.” Instead it can be a symbol, repository, and bearer of the corporate culture. The archives is no longer merely the resting place for infrequently consulted, out of date information and a minor cost-saving administrative convenience.

There is considerable evidence that archives have not been intended exclusively to serve such minor and incidental roles and that in espousing such roles, and neglecting their larger purposes, archivists have sold themselves terribly short.

This was brought home most clearly to me in a meeting with a vice president of one of the nation’s oldest and largest advertising agencies. When I asked this senior executive why his firm was creating a corporate archives he replied without hesitation that his firm was an institution, not just another ad agency, and that imparting its way of doing business, its unique corporate culture, to its rapidly growing workforce, was a vital interest of the corporation. Yes, the materials would have public relations, nostalgia, and other values, but the contribution of the archives was to these much larger purposes of the firm.

To go beyond this single observation, one need only glance at the National Archives building sited grandly besides Pennsylvania Avenue and physically aligned with the nation’s great cultural institutions – its galleries, museums, and libraries – to know that it was not intended to function as a mere appendage to a government housekeeping agency. And in the creation of new archives across the country and throughout the world

— by nation states, ethnic communities, religious organizations, colleges and universities — we are witnessing not so much a passion for administrative efficiency, as an expression of a sense of “peoplehood,” of shared identity and purpose over time.

To return to the main theme of this presentation: If the role of an institutional archives is as much to document values and beliefs as to preserve a record of institutional activities and information, then institutional archivists share a very basic common purpose with all of the profession. This is nowhere better stated than in F. Gerald Ham’s 1974 presidential address to the Society which began with this assertion:

Our most important and intellectually demanding task as archivists is to make an informed selection of information that will provide the future with a representative record of human experience in our time.

Increasingly, our literature reflects the acceptance of this role. For example, the report of the Joint Committee on the Archives of Science and Technology, representing (among others) both insitutional archives and manuscripts repositories, calls for us to preserve a much fuller record in that field. The report argues;

The fuller record will preserve documentary evidence from more than the official perspective; it will incorporate a sociological view, capturing the routine and the revolutionary, the everyday and the profound. Unless archivists remain conscious of this objective, however, the bias of the technical literature will leave us without evidence of the context of research and development, and the people who conduct it, the jobs they do and the purposes they serve.

And in the field of religious archives, Robert Shuster’s article simply titled, “Documenting the Spirit,” issues a challenge and warning in the same vein:

Religious archivists must come to grips with spiritual enthusiasm because it is the motivating force that creates so many of the organizations, movements, and activities their archives document. (Religious) experience consists not only of what is done but also of why it is done and how it is perceived.

To summarize and conclude, then: As archivists we do share a common mission — to preserve a record of what has been done and to assure, as best we can, that that record documents why it has been done and what it means.

This is not a trivial exercise, but one close to the health and well being of our institutions and, thus, to the well being of society as a whole.

As individual archivists we must attend to this high responsibility and not lose ourselves in technical wizzardry and the grind of daily routine.

As an organized profession we need to address the issue of documentation far more directly and dilligently. How do we preserve the right record from the vast information-grinding mechanisms of modern organizations?

And, finally, we need to rise above the small differences which divide us to recognize, articulate, and promote the common ties which bind us and which are the source of the strength we need to meet our responsibilities and fulfill our common mission.

While our profession continues to grope for a definition of its purpose which will both unify and inspire its practitioners, we have made progress at a more mundane level in describing what an archivist does and how an archivist does it. Over the past ____ years, in a series of activities involving a variety of people, we have succeeded in preparing basic manuals on archival practice, describing standards for evaluation of archival institutions, establishing guidelines for archival education programs, creating strong regional professional organizations which bring us in closer and more frequent contact with many more colleagues than previously, and in agreeing upon standard data elements in archival information systems. In the latter instance we have been propelled by the logic of computer technology and the necessity it imposes on us if we are to reap its full benefits to us. In other instances outside funding sources enabled us to meet and talk and reach agreements. The net effect of all this is to give us far more of real substance to share as members of a common profession.

I recently have had the opportunity to serve on a task force to carry out a similar, though much smaller scale undertaking. Our group of three -- Trudy Peterson of NARS, chair, Jim O'Toole of the Archdiocese of Boston, and myself -- was asked by the SAA Council to draft a definition of an archivist for its consideration. The request itself is significant because it reflects, I believe, an assumption that being an archivist is more than having a job with the title and that there exists within the profession sufficient consesensus about what that "more" is to make worthwhile the effort of both the Task Force and the Council to reach a definition.

A second integrating and unifying force is the one which is coming, perhaps too slowly, from (our) the progress we have made in agreeing on what an archivist does and how an archivist does it. We have produced, in a series of discrete actions, a result which is larger than the sum of the parts. We have made the bold assumption that there is a profession and almost in a leap of faith prepared guidelines, standards, manuals, etc, which both reveal and create a consensus among us on how we do archives. We will review and debate and revise each of these statements but only gradually do we realize that the very fact of their existence has propelled us far ahead (created the basis in substance for) toward a common, shared professional identity.

From Common Practice to Common Goals

By Jennifer Johnson, Cargill, Incorporated

In his 1983 article, "Myths of the Archives Profession: A Common Practice?," John Fleckner highlights the role of institutional archivists, while also noting that their contributions to the profession have been misunderstood by their colleagues in the field. He encourages readers to think broadly about why archives exist within organizations. He focuses on corporate culture as "a key determinant of organizational behavior and, ultimately, of the very success or failure of the organization" (p. 2) and by extension the archives¹— directly tying the success of the archives to the success of the parent organization. The value an archives contributes to its institution is more than the records it collects and may include documenting the decision-making processes and the "congerie of shared values, beliefs, and practices which give the firm its unique culture" (p. 5). Fleckner's ideas challenged the state of archival work at the time—i.e., how records were typically collected and appraised and organizational work was usually documented. His underlying challenge for archivists was to think differently about their value to their institutions. Ultimately, Fleckner defends the inclusion of institutional archivists in the archives profession, stating "If the role of an institutional archives is as much to document values and beliefs as to preserve a record of institutional activities and information, then institutional archivists share a very basic common purpose with all of the profession" (p. 6).

Fleckner's goal was to encourage archivists to "rise above the small differences which divide us to recognize, articulate, and promote the common ties which bind us and which are the source of the strength we need to meet our responsibilities and fulfill our common mission" (p. 7). For Fleckner, archivists' common creed or mission was "to preserve a record of what has been done and to assure, as best we can, that that record documents why it has been done and what it means" (p. 7). Fleckner identifies all the ways in which archivists have worked to establish themselves as a profession and argues that through these actions archivists have succeeded: "We have made the bold assumption that there is a profession and almost in a leap of faith prepared guidelines, standards, manuals, etc., which both

¹ Fleckner's use of "corporate" is similar to the current definition of "corporate body" in the Society of American Archivists' *Dictionary of Archives Terminology*, which is "an organization or group of individuals with an established name that acts as a single entity." Thus, the corporate culture he discusses applies not only to businesses and corporations, but also to academia, religious organizations, and any number of other archival institutions. Society of American Archivists, *Dictionary of Archives Terminology*, "Corporate Body," <https://dictionary.archivists.org/entry/corporate-body.html> (accessed March 15, 2023).

reveal and create a consensus among us on how we do archives” (p. 9). Fleckner argues that archivists then needed to take the next step to use the profession’s common mission to “address the supra-institutional goals and needs which are larger than the limits of our individual institutions or types of institutions” (p. 1).

As a corporate archivist, I find Fleckner’s defense of institutional archives interesting. From my point of view in 2023, it is difficult to envision a time when the roles of institutional archivists were so limited or when they were overlooked as contributing members of the profession. As Fleckner notes, “Our overly narrow view of the purpose and role of an institutional archives is a major source of our misunderstanding” (p. 2). This implies that at one point institutional archives were not viewed as sharing a common purpose with the larger archival profession.

Fleckner’s article was written forty years ago. What was the state of the profession at the time? The Society of American Archivists (SAA) had recently published the first Basic Manual Series, “illustrating the ways in which archivists defined and classified their core concepts”²; there was debate in the archival literature about defining archival theory³; and the Academy of Certified Archivists had not yet been founded.⁴ In fact, SAA had only just convened a study group to define an archivist, or the “qualifications [that] characterize and distinguish an archivist from every other professional,” on which Fleckner served, in response to “concerns over the status of the archival profession increasingly . . . brought to Council”; the proposed definition appeared in the January 1984 issue of SAA’s newsletter.⁵ The early 1980s was a time when archivists were debating and seeking clarity in defining what exactly an archivist was.

Within this context, Fleckner defends institutional archives and their role in supporting institutional culture. As he writes, archives “can have a role not only in symbolizing the corporate culture but in recording and transmitting it as well” (p. 2), and they “can be a symbol, repository, and bearer of the corporate culture” (p. 5). My fellow institutional archivists may feel as I do—that this is obvious; the arguments Fleckner made as to the necessity of institutional archives and the

² Peter Gottlieb and David W. Carmichael, eds., *Leading and Managing Archives and Manuscripts Programs* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2019), vii.

³ Frank G. Burke, “The Future Course of Archival Theory in the United States,” *American Archivist* (Winter 1981): 40–46; Harold T. Pinkett, “American Archival Theory: The State of the Art,” *American Archivist* 44, no. 3 (Summer 1981): 217–222; Lester J. Cappon, “What, Then, Is There to Theorize About?,” *American Archivist* 45 (Winter 1982): 19–25; Michael A. Lutzker, “Max Weber and the Analysis of Modern Bureaucratic Organization: Notes Toward a Theory of Appraisal,” *American Archivist* 45, no. 2 (Spring 1982): 119–130; and Gregg D. Kimball, “The Burke-Cappon Debate: Some Further Criticisms and Considerations for Archival Theory,” *American Archivist* 48, no. 4 (Fall 1985): 369–376.

⁴ The Academy of Certified Archivists was founded in 1989. See Academy of Certified Archivists, “About,” <https://www.certifiedarchivists.org/About> (accessed March 15, 2023).

⁵ “Archivist: A Definition,” *The Society of American Archivists Newsletter* (January 1984): 4–5, http://files.archivists.org/periodicals/Archival-Outlook/Back-Issues-1973-2003/saa_newsletter_1984_01.pdf (accessed March 15, 2023).

documentation of organizational culture are key to my role and that of most institutional archivists today. In addition to documenting corporate philosophies and practices, I capture the strategic decisions of the company I work for, document the major legal transactions and financial welfare of the institution, preserve images and records, make records and heritage information available to my colleagues, and promote the archives at every opportunity, all of which are the common activities of an archivist. I also act as historian and interpreter of the corporate heritage. I pay attention to the corporation's stated values, and how they have been demonstrated and exhibited throughout the corporation's history. When I give a corporate orientation presentation, I tie it to the corporation's values and strategy and address the key messages that are important to the business today. I make heritage relevant, demonstrating how the past influences the present for new and current employees. Institutional archivists today certainly bridge the traditional work described by Fleckner of collecting administrative, legal, and fiscal records, as well as documenting corporate values, belief, and myths. One cannot support and explain the culture of an institution without records and evidence.

One reason I engage in these activities is to address the age-old question of how corporate archives remain relevant. My perspective and focus are entirely on demonstrating the archives' value within a business-to-business, private, family-owned corporation, with few legacy brands sold directly to consumers. I make this distinction because other business archivists can explore different avenues to remain relevant within their organizations and may have ways to contribute to their institutions' bottom line. My archives exists within the nonrevenue generating portion of the company, so I need to demonstrate the archives' usefulness to the institution in ways other than its contribution to corporate profits. I also need to find ways to align with the corporate strategy because I do not work directly with our customers. It is most beneficial for my archives to focus on engaging employees and enhancing the corporation's purpose, brand, and reputation, all of which contribute to the culture of what makes our organization unique. As Paul Lasewicz wrote, "intangibles such as reputation, identity and brand can positively influence customer perceptions."⁶ My work falls into this space of intangible and indirect influence through our employees.

A special 1982 issue of *American Archivist* focused on business archives.⁷ As Elizabeth W. Adkins nicely summarized, this series discussed the "ways in which business archives and archivists could be invaluable assets to their employers."⁸ The articles are practical explorations of how to demonstrate value to managers, who to partner with in an organization, which areas to document, which assets to promote, and how internal users could benefit from incorporating archival corporate records

⁶ Paul Lasewicz, "The View from the Ivory Tower: The Academic Perspective on the Strategic Value of Corporate History and Heritage," in *Crisis, Credibility and Corporate History*, ed. Alexander Bieri (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2014), 110.

⁷ *American Archivist* 45, no. 3 (Summer 1982).

⁸ Elizabeth W. Adkins, "The Development of Business Archives in the United States: An Overview and a Personal Perspective," *American Archivist* 60 (Winter 1997): 16.

and heritage information in their work. There is little discussion of brand, reputation, or engagement, yet a key theme is the need for corporate archives to demonstrate their value. This remains an emphasis of corporate archives today, but business archivists use new and different terms to describe it. Documenting and sharing corporate culture are articulations of how corporate archives demonstrate their value.

The recent SAA publication *Managing Business Archives*⁹ reflects this with multiple chapters discussing the value of corporate archives and the multiple roles corporate archivists have:

For a corporate archives, value is created by the rapid provision of credible, relevant, and readily accessible information that improves the work products of these constituents—product design, intellectual property, reputation and branding, storytelling, organizational culture, litigation, and constituent relationships (clients, media, alumni, etc.). In most cases, it will be the archivist’s responsibility not only to find facts or specific documents wherever they may be found but also to package information into an authentic, accurate, and accessible end product. In other words, corporate archivists are expected to holistically weave physically disconnected but thematically related informational elements found throughout the archives into a coherent narrative value.¹⁰

The structure of the book is also very telling. Each chapter follows the domains established in the Academy of Certified Archivists’ Role Delineation Statement for Professional Archivists, which define the “the commonly accepted duties and responsibilities that professional archivists perform in the course of their work,” such as selection, appraisal, and acquisition; arrangement and description; and reference services and access.¹¹ “Each chapter [of *Managing Business Archives*] delves into the application of each domain in depth and discusses how the archival principles are applied”¹² in a corporate environment. The role of the corporate archivist is grounded in the “recognized” principles of archival theory. These agreed upon practices are part of our shared professional identity. The work of the corporate or institutional archivist is bound to the tenets of common archival practice while acting within the structures that makes these institutions unique.

Fleckner also states “that archivists have exaggerated the differences among themselves based on the type of institution which employs them” (p. 1). If you look at the plethora of member sections within SAA, archivists may not feel that we have

⁹ Sarah A. Polirer, ed., *Managing Business Archives* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2022).

¹⁰ Paul Lasewicz, “Arrangement and Description: Balancing Use-Based Arrangement and Description,” in *Managing Business Archives*, ed. Sarah A. Polirer (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2022), 43.

¹¹ Academy of Certified Archivists, “Role Delineation Statement for Professional Archivists,” <https://www.certifiedarchivists.org/role-delineation> (accessed March 15, 2023).

¹² Polirer, *Managing Business Archives*, 1.

come very far in forty years. SAA Council has been assessing the health and structure of member sections through the work of the SAA Sections Health Assessment working group. As stated in its November 2022 report to SAA Council, “The large number of affinity groups (specifically, [45] sections) in the Society presents a challenge to the SAA Council and staff in terms of responsiveness to elections, assistance with governance, fiscal oversight, and other support. This has been a recurring issue in the Society for many years, exacerbated by ongoing concerns about member involvement in section leadership, as well as active member participation in these sections.”¹³ In its call for annual reports for 2020–2021, SAA Council asked SAA sections to respond to the following questions:

1. SAA is exploring programming and topical affinities between sections. Does your section share issues or scope overlap with other sections? If so, which sections?
2. If your section were to be part of an umbrella of affiliation with other sections, how would you describe the overarching theme of that umbrella?
3. Do you have any concerns or questions about the potential for your section to merge or affiliate?¹⁴

The responses to question three were the most revealing. While some sections could see benefits in affiliating with others, only eight out of forty-five had no concerns, qualms, or questions about merging with another section.

Aside from the important issues that SAA Council raised about section structure, archivists do not mind defining themselves by institution or interest and are often happy to do so. Has this impeded our ability to define and identify ourselves as archivists, or to define our profession? Have we simply discovered that archivists are multifaceted and that dividing ourselves by institution type or area of interest helps us address questions of importance to our work? In my experience, archivists do not view this structure as exaggerating the distinctions among ourselves, but rather recognize that different institutions and activities have unique issues and require unique responses. Archivists seem to have reached a point where our differences do not divide us so much as provide communities of support with which to address our concerns together.

I am sure archivists today would agree with Fleckner’s conclusion that we have forged a common profession. We have standards; we have educational programs; we have member organizations; we have publications and peer-reviewed journals;

¹³ Joyce Gabiola, Jasmine Jones, Dominique Luster, and Lydia Tang, *SAA Sections Health Assessment*, Society of American Archivists, Council Meeting, November 1, 3, 2022, Virtual Meeting, Agenda Item V.B., 1, <https://www2.archivists.org/sites/all/files/1122-V-B-SectionHealth.pdf> (accessed March 15, 2023).

¹⁴ *2020–2021 Section Annual Reports (Compiled)*, Society of American Archivists Council Meeting, November 10, 12, 2021 Virtual Meeting, Agenda Item VI.S. https://www2.archivists.org/sites/all/files/1121-VI-S-SectionAnnualReports_1.pdf (accessed March 15, 2023).

and we have advocacy efforts. And yet, how many of us regularly explain what an archives is? How many of us respond to the exclamation, “I didn’t know we have an archives!” How many of us are corrected on the pronunciation of archivist after we introduce ourselves: “Oh, an ‘arch-EYE-vist,’” rather than the more recognized pronunciation, “AR-kə-vəst.”¹⁵ All of these happen to me on a weekly basis. Public awareness of archives and archivists remains low, despite recent news stories of current and former US presidents retaining classified documents in their personal dwellings and the involvement of the National Archives and Records Administration in retrieving the classified material.¹⁶ As Alexandra A. A. Orchard, Kristen Chinery, Alison Stankrauff, and Leslie Van Veen McRoberts concluded in their 2019 *American Archivist* article, “public perception of archivists and the profession is often nonexistent or negative, rooted in stereotypes promoted through books and movies.”¹⁷ It appears the public perception of our status as a profession is not as clear as our own.

Orchard et al.’s article also addresses the archival mystique, or “the duality of being a demographically female-dominated profession while women archivists still face traditional gender limitations.”¹⁸ In the recent A*CENSUS II survey, seventy-one percent of survey respondents were women,¹⁹ an increase from the first A*CENSUS where sixty-five percent of survey respondents identified as women.²⁰ The feminization of the profession is not slowing. The public appears to have little recognition of our profession, but should they look it is obviously women-dominated. Do archivists give the impression that our jobs are “women’s work” and all the negative connotations that come with that phrase? What’s more, we must also contend with vocational awe, “the set of ideas, values, and assumptions librarians have about themselves and the profession that result in beliefs that libraries as institutions are inherently good and sacred, and therefore beyond

¹⁵ Society of American Archivists, *Dictionary of Archives Terminology*, “Archivist,” <https://dictionary.archivists.org/entry/archivist.html> (accessed March 15, 2023).

¹⁶ Devlin Barrett, Jacqueline Alemany, Perry Stein, Josh Dawsey, Ann E. Marimow, and Carol D. Leonnig, “Skepticism Before a Search: Inside the Trump Mar-a-Lago Documents Investigation,” *Washington Post*, December 21, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2022/12/21/trump-doj-garland-mar-a-lago-january-6/> (accessed March 15, 2023); Jamie Gangel and Jeremy Herb, “Archives Says it Has to Consult Justice Department Before Providing Biden Document Info to Congress,” *CNN*, January 18, 2023, <https://www.cnn.com/2023/01/18/politics/national-archives-biden-documents-comer/index.html> (accessed March 15, 2023).

¹⁷ Alexandra A. A. Orchard, Kristen Chinery, Alison Stankrauff, and Leslie Van Veen McRoberts, “The Archival Mystique: Women Archivists Are Professional Archivists,” *American Archivist* 82, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 2019): 73.

¹⁸ Orchard et al., “The Archival Mystique,” 54.

¹⁹ Makala Skinner and Ioana G. Hulbert, *A*CENSUS II All Archivists Survey Report*, ITHAKA S+R, August 22, 2022, 6, <https://sr.ithaka.org/publications/acensus-ii-all-archivists-survey-report/> (accessed March 15, 2023).

²⁰ Victoria Irons Walch, “Part 3. A*CENSUS: A Closer Look,” *American Archivist* 69, no. 2, (Fall/Winter 2006): 329, 331.

critique.”²¹ While vocational awe was originally used to describe librarianship, it easily translates to archives. Fleckner himself hints at this awe when he writes that there is “an assumption that being an archivist is more [emphasis added] than having a job with the title and that there exists within the profession sufficient consensus about what that ‘more’ is” (p. 8). The idea that archivists are privileged to hold the role of keeper of unique original records and the lack of public recognition adds to the air of mystery. The idea that we should do this work because of passion, or out of a sacred duty, has ramifications when it comes to salaries, diversity, and professional development.

Fleckner states that as a profession we will be able to address the supra-institutional issues that archivists face. Archivists do not let our institutional divisions affect our ability to collaborate or form communities, and institutional archives and archivists have solidified their place in and contributions to the profession. We have built upon our predecessors’ work since the 1980s and succeeded in creating a professional identity. Yet, we have new supra-institutional goals and needs to address. Public advocacy is one. As Orchard et al. concluded, “Archivists must educate and advocate about archives as ‘people’s work,’ just as archives is, and they should expand to become more so, about ‘people’s history.’”²² Being a profession of women also has ramifications. The annual McKinsey report, *Women in the Workplace*, notes several headwinds that women continue to face in their places of work: slower advancement to leadership, increased workload but lack of recognition, and lack of flexibility, all of which increase for women of color.²³ Additionally, we are all recovering from a global pandemic and the ramifications it has had on our health, mental stability, and personal and working relationships, not to mention our relationships to work itself, our offices, and our institutions. As noted by Elvia Arroyo-Ramírez, Jasmine Jones, Shannon O’Neill, and Holly Smith in 2021, the workplace needs rethinking, and not everyone has positive experiences in their daily work lives: “As practitioners in this field, we have inherited a professional and institutional culture of toxic ambition that . . . does not provide enough person-drive care—paltry benefits, stagnant wages, policies that attempt to place the institution above all else in our lives.”²⁴

The benefit of having a professional identity, as well as the established structure, theory, and support that go along with this identity, gives archivists the backing to face these issues as a group. We have the ability individually and as a profession to

²¹ Fobazi Ettarh, “Vocational Awe and Librarianship: The Lies We Tell Ourselves,” *In the Library with the Lead Pipe*, January 10, 2018, <https://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2018/vocational-awe/> (accessed March 15, 2023).

²² Orchard et al., “The Archival Mystique,” 81.

²³ *Women in the Workplace, 2022*, McKinsey & Company, <https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/diversity-and-inclusion/women-in-the-workplace> (accessed March 15, 2023).

²⁴ Elvia Arroyo-Ramírez, Jasmine Jones, Shannon O’Neill, and Holly Smith, “An Introduction to Radical Empathy in Archival Practice,” in “Radical Empathy in Archival Practice,” eds. Elvia Arroyo-Ramírez, Jasmine Jones, Shannon O’Neill, and Holly Smith. Special issue, *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies* 3, no. 2 (2021). DOI: [10.24242/jclis.v3i2.171](https://doi.org/10.24242/jclis.v3i2.171).

improve public awareness, transform paths to leadership, establish fair salaries, increase diversity, and create flexible workplaces. In 2016, Michelle Caswell and Marika Cifor introduced a new ethic of care to the archival field, discussing “four interrelated shifts in archival relationships based on radical empathy.”²⁵ Holly Smith built on this idea, outlining in her 2018 article the “idea of a fifth affective relationship—that of archivists to each other. Archivists must consider how we empathize and communicate with each other. Our multi-layered and intersectional identities can be just as complex as the records we steward and we must be cognizant of how we support, challenge, and advocate for each other professionally and personally.”²⁶ Fleckner grounded his view of archival professional identity in our work and our common mission, “to preserve a record of what has been done and to assure, as best we can, that that record documents why it has been done and what it means” (p. 7). The next step is to ground our professional identity in the person to assure, as best we can, that every archivist has what they need to be successful, supported, and sustained wherever they may work.

²⁵ Michelle Caswell and Marika Cifor, “From Human Rights to Feminist Ethics: Radical Empathy in the Archives,” *Archivaria* 82 (2016): 24.

²⁶ Holly A. Smith, “Radical Love: Documenting Underrepresented Communities Using Principles of Radical Empathy,” *Journal for the Society of North Carolina Archivists* 15 (2018): 5–6.