Setting a Research Agenda for the Archival Profession

Introduction

The Society of American Archivists (SAA) requests $150,000 from the Institute of Museum and Library Services Laura Bush 21st Century Librarian Grant program to convene archives leaders from key sectors to establish a research agenda for the archival profession. A professionally facilitated two-day forum of archival experts, educators, community leaders, and grant makers will be charged with transforming the recently adopted SAA [Research and Innovation Roadmap](#)[1] into a research agenda and framework for its implementation and adoption. While the value of archives, among cultural heritage institutions, is undisputed, the absence of a coherent and strategic research agenda to focus the innovation of its practitioners is a disadvantage. In 2019, SAA Council commissioned the Committee on Research, Data and Assessment (CORDA) to establish a research agenda; they adopted the Research and Innovation "Roadmap" in August 2023. The Roadmap's seven themes, 31 topics, and 64 areas for future research comprise a strong foundation for prioritization. The prioritization process must be undertaken by leaders from academic, government, private and public organizations—not an SAA committee—if it is to be endorsed and adopted, pushing archival practice in critical areas. Pushing archival practice and shaping the professional development of the archival workforce is directly aligned with the Laura Bush 21st Century Librarian Grant Program's Goal 3, Objective 3 of "enhancing the training and development of training opportunities to build skills that will foster attitudes of discovery, cultivate critical and creative thinking skills, and facilitate experiential and self-directed learning opportunities." A research agenda will make clear where archivists must direct their professional training and attention, with support from the Laura Bush 21st C Librarian Grant program.

Project Justification

Archivists throughout North America are actively engaged in research, assessment, and evaluation related to the archival profession. A multitude of independent and SAA component group-based research activities are conducted every season and those research results and data subsequently appear in just as many venues and outlets. However, such research projects have rarely been coordinated or driven by any shared strategic vision and falls short of moving the profession decisively forward in an accelerated way.

Professional associations that act strategically often promulgate focused research agendas to spur their members to address knowledge and performance gaps. SAA began such a project by developing a Research and Innovation Roadmap from 2019-2023. While the Roadmap comprehensively addresses research opportunities, it does not prioritize them. A facilitated convening of archival experts, educators, community leaders, and grantmakers can turn the Roadmap into a strategic and user-focused set of research priorities that could guide SAA and other related associations, academic and professional research pursuits in the archival community for the next decade or more. SAA anticipates that a research agenda advanced through this IMLS-funded forum will be a decisive and watershed moment for the profession. Recent research efforts like OCLC's "Summary of Research: Findings from the Building a National Archival Finding Aid Network Project" published in May 2023 by Chela Weber, point to significant gaps between archival practice and user satisfaction. Studies, like A*CENSUS II, point to significant disaffection between archival workers, repositories, and library leaders. These studies suggest that a prioritized research agenda can drive the profession forward in meaningful and impactful ways.[2]

Project Work Plan

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[1] SAA Research and Innovation Roadmap:
https://www2.archivists.org/groups/committee-on-research-data-and-assessment/saa-council-approves-adoption-of-research-and-innov

[2] Archivists can look to allied professions like the Association of College and Research Libraries and the American Alliance of Museums as examples of how establishing research agendas can drive impactful shifts within a profession.

Phase One - Planning and Selection (Months 1-9): During the first nine months of the project, the CORDA core-project team will identify key participants in the SAA Research Agenda Prioritization Project (RAPP), select a venue, and determine a qualified facilitator. Participant breakdown, for RAPP, will consist of the following: 3 individuals from SAA (Executive Director, President, Vice President), 6 individuals from the CORDA core-project team, 1 facilitator, and 35 key stakeholders consisting of archival experts, educators, community leaders, and grant makers—totalling 45 participants. While key participants are being identified, the CORDA core-team will select a venue that accommodates a minimum of 45 forum participants, at low to no cost. The project team will also work over the course of the first year to select a facilitator that is capable of engineering a process that will yield priorities and investment, ideally someone that is well-versed in the archival profession.

Phase Two - Execution (Month 10-11): Approximately 10 months into the grant, we will convene a two-day in-person forum with approximately 45 participants to work alongside the facilitator in a structured discussion. The group will be charged with prioritizing the roadmap to create a strategic agenda and implementation framework.

Phase Three - Synthesis and Deliverables (Month 11-17): The CORDA-core team, in consultation with SAA leadership and the facilitator, will synthesize the facilitated two-day discussion and publish a Research Agenda based on the Research and Innovation Roadmap, communication and outreach plan for dissemination/adoption/awareness, and a framework for advancing strategic implementation.

Diversity Plan

In alignment with SAA's Work Plan on Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility,[3] this forum will bring together key stakeholders that represent a broad range of racial and ethnic backgrounds, specialities, gender identities, geographic locations, and institution types. The forum will help to create and endorse a research agenda that is representative of the diverse community and individuals that constitute our profession.

Project Results

We anticipate that the project will resolve the problems addressed in the Introduction and Justification in three ways. First, it will produce a prioritized and published research agenda for the archives profession, that is based upon the Roadmap. The agenda will provide clear direction on areas of vital importance, supporting archivists and graduate students seeking impactful research projects with a clear set of priorities capable of advancing the profession in terms of user outcomes and effective performance. The agenda will further promote the professional development and attainment goals of archivists at all stages of their careers. Second, the post-forum reporting will develop a communication and outreach plan to create a community-wide awareness of priorities, to disseminate the agenda, and to encourage its adoption and rapid uptake. Finally, the project team will produce and promote a framework for advancing the strategic implementation of the research agenda over the next several years. The greater overall result will be an archival profession that performs better in key respects, especially in service to its user communities, and an archival workforce that is working in a coherent fashion integrating the agenda and needs into all aspects of professional practice and self-directed learning opportunities.

Budget Summary

SAA requests $150,000 in financial support. This includes $30,000 in facilitator fees, and $22,275 in SAA staff support. Travel and meal costs are estimated at $95,625 for a two-day in-person forum for 45 attendees. $2,100 is requested for supplies, venue, materials, and equipment. This totals $150,000, and the negotiated indirect cost rate for SAA is 15% or $22,500.

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[3] SAA's Work Plan on Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility: https://www2.archivists.org/sites/all/files/0723-III-C-WorkPlanDEIA.pdf