

The Society of American Archivists and Graduate Archival Education: A Sneak Preview of Future Directions

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Abstract

The Society of American Archivists' approach to graduate archival education has changed in recent years. Guidelines for education have evolved to the point where the 1994 guidelines endorse master's programs in archival education. The SAA Strategic Plan offers strong support for graduate archival education and research, including archival education at the doctoral level. The 1994 guidelines will now be revised in light of the changes in graduate programs and archival work since they were written.

The Society of American Archivists has concerned itself with graduate archival education since its origin. Its emphasis on education has slowly but constantly grown, although its leadership in this area has not always been evident, because of the state of the profession in North America. Moreover, its role has consisted mainly of charging committees with the responsibility of examining the issue of graduate archival education and, later, of issuing guidelines for it, rather than of making a systematic effort to encourage the creation of programs, monitoring them, or even only nudging universities to respect the guidelines.

However, the SAA's approach is rapidly changing, thanks to an increasing number of full-time graduate archival educators and students within the SAA membership. To appreciate the significance of such a change, it is useful to make a brief excursus of SAA's attitude towards graduate archival education since the society was established in 1936.

The first SAA Committee on Training of Archivists issued a report in 1939 stating that archival training "might easily be grafted on to graduate instruction in American history" and recommending: "It is the historical scholar, equipped

now with technical archival training, who dominates the staffs of the best European archives. We think it should be so here, with the emphasis on American history and political science.”¹ Although the committee was interested in making a clear distinction between the archivist and the manuscript curator, who, unlike the former, could make some use of education in librarianship, it expressed its belief that an archivist only needed some knowledge of a few simple archival concepts, primarily taken from diplomatics and paleography, of history of archives and archival practices, and a practicum. History was to be the formative discipline on the grounds that appraisal must be based on experience in historical research, which makes one appreciate the value of documentary sources to scholars. As Terry Eastwood remarked almost fifty years later, “In effect, the committee proposed that archivists . . . be *educated* in history and *trained* in their professional craft in part by university study and in part by apprenticeship.”²

The SAA continued to discuss archival graduate education for the following thirty years and more, without accomplishing much more than keeping the debate alive. In the 1950s, a member of SAA’s Committee on Professional Standards and Training asked Ernst Posner: “Do you think it is worth while continuing the effort to do something? Or is it best annually to just make fine speeches and gestures with the hope that exposure and the mere passage of time will produce the qualitative achievement that we all must surely desire to a greater or lesser degree.”³

The SAA Committee for the 1970’s restated the position taken by the first SAA Committee on Training of Archivists by writing in its report that the archival field does not “constitute a sufficient intellectual discipline to merit a separate degree program,” that “because of the nature of the materials with which the archivist deals and because of the nature of his responsibilities with regard to these materials, the training necessary for an archivist should be firmly rooted in experience,” and that archivists’ “best interests as a profession are not served by attempts to develop separate degree programs in our colleges and universities for archives administration.”⁴ To support these claims, the SAA decided to issue guidelines for education programs that asserted the primary role of a practicum in archival training, part of a three-course sequence taught by practitioners.⁵ These guidelines did not provide any real standard or any direction in curriculum building or teaching approach. Not all members of

¹ Samuel Flagg Bemis, “The Training of Archivists in the United States,” *American Archivist* 2 (July 1939): 157.

² Terry Eastwood, “Nurturing Archival Education in the University,” *American Archivist* 51 (Summer 1988): 231 (emphasis in original).

³ Delores Renze, quoted in Jacqueline Goggin, “That We Shall Truly Deserve the Title of ‘Profession’: The Training and Education of Archivists, 1930–1960,” *American Archivist* 47 (Summer 1984): 253.

⁴ Philip P. Mason, “The Society of American Archivists in the Seventies: Report of the Committee for the 1970’s,” *American Archivist* 35 (April 1972): 210, 207, 209.

⁵ “Guidelines for Graduate Archival Education Programs,” *SAA Education Directory: 1978* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1978), 5–6.

SAA supported them, some explicitly accusing SAA of cultivating a “workshop mentality” that leaves us—in the words of James O’Toole—“with an irresistible disposition toward practicality. In archival education, we have striven principally to communicate to students how to *do* it when it comes to archives. We have been less interested in teaching students to think like archivists than we have in getting them to act like archivists.”⁶ In 1988 the SAA education officer himself expressed his wish for a more rigorous standard when he reflected on the educational offerings as shown by the *SAA Education Directory*: “Although some diversity is both inevitable and healthy, the extremes of graduate programs strain the limits of such virtue.”⁷

As a consequence, the SAA Committee on Education and Professional Development (CEPD) established a curriculum subcommittee to develop a new set of guidelines, which was published in 1988. The 1988 Guidelines anticipated O’Toole’s accusation by stating: “The work of an archivist represents that of a profession, not a craft or applied vocation. Theory is not only just as important as practice but guides and determines that practice.”⁸ The Guidelines did endorse the three-course sequence, but only as a minimum requirement, as they called for more archival courses, for full-time tenure-track faculty, and for infrastructure and resources adequate to sustain a graduate archival program. However, they did not go so far as to endorse autonomous archival education.

Within the following couple of years, the Association of Canadian Archivists (ACA) decided to take the leap that SAA had not been ready for in 1988, that is, it issued guidelines calling for a two-year, full-time autonomous master’s degree in archival studies with “full academic status in the university.”⁹ The Canadian example generated the willingness on the part of the SAA CEPD in 1990 not only to revisit the issue of graduate archival education, but to make the guidelines for a master’s degree its only agenda item for the following three years. The resulting 1994 Guidelines represent the first formal recognition on the part of SAA of the discipline of archival studies and of the importance of an independent program of graduate archival education: “By means of these guidelines, the Society of American Archivists endorses the development of master’s degree programs of archival education.”¹⁰ From their very beginning, one notes the sharp contrast of the language of these guidelines with that used

⁶ James O’Toole, “Curriculum Development in Archival Education: A Proposal,” *American Archivist* 53 (Summer 1990): 463 (emphasis in original).

⁷ Timothy L. Ericson, “Professional Associations and Archival Education: A Different Role or a Different Theatre,” *American Archivist* 51 (Summer 1988): 304.

⁸ “Society of American Archivists Guidelines for Graduate Archival Education Programs,” *American Archivist* 51 (Summer 1988): 380.

⁹ *Guidelines for the Development of a Two-Year Curriculum for a Master of Archival Studies* (Ottawa: Association of Canadian Archivists, 1990), 9.

¹⁰ *Guidelines for the Development of a Curriculum for a Master of Archival Studies Degree* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1994), 2.

by the Committee of the 1970's to dismiss the need for dedicated archival education: "The importance and complexity of archival work requires that an individual entering the profession receive a strong archival education, which must be coherent, autonomous, and based on archival knowledge."¹¹ However, the 1994 Guidelines were not followed by a concerted plan of action aimed at encouraging universities to establish autonomous graduate archival programs. In fact, it appeared that the SAA was not even interested in monitoring the development of any existing graduate programs or in developing an accreditation process independent from that the American Library Association used to accredit programs in library and information science.

But, once again, the external world was going to nudge the Society of American Archivists into action. To meet the need of a market more and more concerned with the issues raised by such topics as electronic records, freedom of information and privacy, and accountability, etc., several small concentrations in archival studies within library, and in one case history, programs began showing aspirations of development and sought support from SAA. The presence of a significant number of archival educators in the SAA Council also helped to direct again the attention of SAA towards graduate archival education. This momentum occurred in connection with the redrafting of the Society of American Archivists' strategic plan, which started in June 1999 and is nearing its conclusion.

In the text of the new SAA strategic plan, as first drafted by the SAA Council and presented to the SAA leadership at the 1999 annual meeting in Pittsburgh, education is one separate goal, the opening sentence of which reads: "SAA should provide opportunities for professional and disciplinary growth by promoting graduate education and research."¹²

The rationale for this goal includes statements such as: "SAA . . . recognizes that the development of doctoral education is critical to the development of future generations of graduate archival educators and of a research and theoretical base in archival science;" and "SAA must take responsibility for defining and communicating the profession's intellectual foundation, standards, methodologies, ethics, and values by encouraging the development of graduate programs, research, and publications." The objectives identified for the accomplishment of the goal are revealing of an entirely new approach to graduate archival education. Among them, the most significant are:

- SAA will promote a range of disciplinary and theoretical approaches, and national and international practices in graduate archival education to better serve the evolving and diverse needs of the archival profession;
- SAA will explore the feasibility of accrediting graduate archival programs as the next step in developing rigorous professional archival education;

¹¹ *Guidelines for the Development of a Curriculum for a Master of Archival Studies Degree*, 2.

¹² Society of American Archivists, *Report on Membership Forum Feedback to Proposed SAA 2000 Strategic Plan Goals and Objectives* 10 April 2000. <http://www.archivists.org/governance/feedback_strategic_plan.html>.

- SAA will sponsor a summit examining the role, nature, and needs of archival education and research at the doctoral level;
- SAA will promote professional identity among archival graduate students by supporting the growth of student chapters.
- SAA will maintain a listserv for student chapters to facilitate the exchange of ideas and allow for networking among students, provide meeting space for student chapters at the annual meeting, and offer a 'Student Chapter of the Year' award.
- SAA will also maintain a discounted dues structure for student members;
- SAA will support archival educators by sponsoring an education and research forum that will hold regular meetings and juried scholarly research sessions, as well as regularly producing a refereed publication relating to archival education;
- SAA will target diverse populations by disseminating information about archival graduate programs, costs, and opportunities for financial aid; conducting career outreach activities with undergraduate programs; providing mentoring opportunities for minority students; building a core of literature addressing diversity issues in archival administration and collection development; and promoting graduate research into diversity-related issues.¹³

The first initiative taken by the SAA Council to accomplish these draft objectives has been to ask CEPD to revise the 1994 Guidelines in light of the changes in archival graduate programs and the character of archival work that have occurred since they were first issued. The CEPD has done some information gathering and has established a group composed of its own members and representatives from the Archival Educators Roundtable that has begun to work on the revisions. The focus of the existing guidelines on a dedicated Master's Degree in Archival Studies will be re-examined as will the components of a program of graduate archival education. This group is working on a two-year schedule.¹⁴

What assurance do we have that this revision of the 1994 Guidelines will be different from all previous similar initiatives, that it will be followed by a concrete effort to foster implementation, to lobby universities, to reward programs that attempt to deliver the recommended curriculum, and to encourage graduate archival educators to develop their thinking about professional education? None, really, because it is quite clear that the emphasis of SAA has tended in

¹³ Society of American Archivists, *Report on Membership Forum Feedback to Proposed SAA 2000 Strategic Plan Goals and Objectives*, The initial reaction of the SAA leadership to these objectives, recorded at the Leadership Forum two days after the delivery of this opening speech, was overwhelmingly positive. The only critical remarks related to the accreditation of graduate programs, as "evaluation" was considered a more realistic line of action, and to the actual phrasing of a couple of objectives to make it consistent throughout the document. The draft strategic plan has yet to be presented to the membership at large.

¹⁴ E-mail sent by Susan Davis, co-chair of CEPD with Danna Bell-Russel, to the SAA Leadership listserv on December 16, 1999.

the past to shift with changes in the composition of its Council and with the beliefs of its president. In the past, SAA has also firmly stood by its strategic plan: if the objectives in the final plan remain, at least in substance if not in the same form as those that appear in the draft, I am confident that the Society will work hard at accomplishing them. Among all the statements that appear in the present draft, the most important is that regarding doctoral education. Although only one objective touches upon the issue, and does so in passing, the rationale stresses the critical role of doctoral programs in the development of graduate education and of archival science. This is quite revolutionary for an association that, thirty years ago, still believed that there was nothing substantial in the body of archival knowledge, and that, therefore, dedicated graduate archival education was not needed. The emphasis of the drafted strategic plan on doctoral education is evidence of the fact that SAA acknowledges:

- the high degree of complexity reached by archival work,
- the consequent need of conducting critical inquiry into the conceptual and theoretical aspects of the archival discipline,
- the impossibility for practicing archivists to undertake it within their own institution, and
- the requirement for those who conduct it in academia of having been trained in archival research and have experienced diverse methodologies and research design.¹⁵

The SAA has come a long way since it first began investigating the issue of graduate archival education. The important role that it attributes to this conference of graduate archival educators is the most eloquent expression of its new belief that the future of the archival profession and its ability to care for our documentary heritage depend on its stronghold in academia through a large array of graduate and doctoral archival programs based on educational standards formally recognized by professional associations worldwide.

¹⁵ See Luciana Duranti and Anne Gilliland-Swetland, "Archival Doctoral Education: An Issue and a Challenge for the Archival Profession," *Archival Outlook* (July/August 1999): 4, 23.