

**The Society for American Archivist's (SAA) Impact on Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion in  
American Archives.**

**Background and Research Purpose (RPC 1)**

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The Society of American Archivists, or SAA, is currently the largest professional organization servicing archives and archivists in North America. Founded in 1936, it was the first organization of its kind. It currently represents more than 6,200 professional archivists and students interested in archival work (*Who We Are*, 2021). These members come from a variety of different backgrounds and institutions, including state and local governments, universities, museums, and libraries across the nation. Their mission statement is a declaration of dedication to promoting the “value and diversity of archives and archivists” (*Who We Are*, 2021). However, in the first several decades since the SAA’s inception, the officers and councilors within the organization were predominantly white and male, despite appointing Margaret Cross Norton as their first female president in 1943 (Adkins et al., 2020). However, the organization has elected fellows of color who have held significant roles in the organization. One such figure is Harold Pinkett, the first African American archivist to work in the National Archives, who dedicated much of his work to “mentoring future archivists of color” (Adkins et al., 2020)

The SAA’s first real push for diverse representation began in the 1970s. Several committees came into fruition, such as the Archivists for Action group and the Committee on the Status of Women, who encouraged the SAA to adopt official positions on social issues and nondiscrimination. Intersectional discrimination was also a frequently addressed issue, as the SAA was aware of tensions that arose from feminism that solely focused on white women (Poole, 2017, pp. 325–326). From 1981 to 1987, the SAA developed a task force and Minorities Roundtable that worked “to recruit underrepresented groups into the archival profession” (Poole, 2017, pp. 325–326). Despite these efforts and the adoption of core values dedicated to diversity and inclusion (Society of American Archivists, 2020), evidence of diverse representation is still not seen within the archivist workforce. In 2017, The Women Archivists Section conducted a

salary survey in which respondents were asked to identify their race. The results showed that 88% of respondents were white, 3% were African American, 3.6% were Latinx, 2% were Asian, and 3% identified as multiracial (Israel & Eyre, 2017, pp. 7–9). However, these respondents only made up 28% of the SAA membership body, which consequently evoked interest and discussion in formulating a new form of census for the organization that would provide more large-scale data on SAA members and pinpoint where inclusion efforts should be redirected (Adkins et al., 2020).

While diversity within the archives workforce has been a desired outcome of SAA initiatives, little discoverable research has been found examining the impact of the organization on diversification of the workforce within the field. It is this gap in research that our study hopes to encourage further examination of. Many articles have been published about diversity in archival collections, through the creation of reparative archives (Hughes-Watkins, 2018), queering archives (Kuzawa, 2015), and employing feminist ethics of care within archives as caretakers of the diverse historical record they hold (Caswell & Cifor, 2016).

In addition to diversification efforts, the SAA has fostered discussion on “cultural competency” (a process oriented framework for self-evaluating cultural values and biases) within the organization and the field of archives and cultural heritage institutions as a whole since at least 2016, and while archivists are increasingly engaging in cultural competency and humiliation practices, this concept is still most frequently discussed in specialized libraries, ethnic or identity affiliate groups, and management (Engseth, 2018). In addition to being a stated value of the SAA, diversity and inclusion is essential for archival organizations to integrate into all of levels of archives, including collections because of the potential for archival descriptions and holdings to both empower and cause harm to communities (Tai, 2020). And while it is

beneficial that this attitude and framework for advancing social justice is spreading throughout the field, it is still most helpful for the dominant cultural majority, of which the archival workforce remains largely reflective (Banks, 2006; Engseth, 2018). Beyond case studies, it would benefit the field to understand how, if at all, the SAA has influenced the professional understanding and practice of cultural competency, in addition to diversification.

Outside of archives, Moon & Christensen (2020) found in a study of federal employees that racial diversity has a significant positive relationship with organizational performance. We can extrapolate from this research that archival organizations may also have improved performance with a more diverse workforce. Diversity initiatives should not be driven by workplace productivity or performance, but organizational boards or management with apprehension about shifting workplace dynamics can see that staff with diverse backgrounds and experiences enrich their collections and the workplace environment. It is this enrichment of the archival field of practice that we hope our research will contribute to through the increased understanding and evaluation of institutional diversity initiatives, practices, and attitudes.

The disconnect between the efforts of the SAA to advocate for diversity and inclusion and the make-up of the archival workforce warrants a closer examination. A look into specific initiatives made by the organization and their effects on recruitment and retention of underrepresented populations within archives could provide valuable insight into how this decades-long issue could be effectively addressed. The importance of diversity, especially in a field such as archival work, is paramount to ensuring the integrity and preservation of cultural collections not only on a national scale, but a global one. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to examine the diversity, equity and inclusion efforts of the SAA and determine their effectiveness in expanding the diversity of the archival workforce through employee evaluation.

By collecting both quantitative and qualitative data from institutional members of the SAA in regard to inclusivity efforts and their effects on the ability to reach out to underrepresented populations and cultivate an interest in archives, areas of success (as well as failure) can be pinpointed, and these best practices can then be adopted by other institutions. Over time, the SAA will be able to fulfill their mission of creating a safe, inclusive environment within the archival workforce, where minority archivists can thrive and provide contributions to the field that have the potential to positively change the world of archives as a whole.

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