

**Society of American Archivists  
Council Conference Call  
February 6, 2017  
2:00 – 3:30 pm EST**

**Funding Request to Support DACS Principles Revision Draft  
(Prepared by Technical Subcommittee on Describing Archives: A Content Standard)**

The Technical Subcommittee on Describing Archives: A Content Standard (TS-DACS) requests that \$11,007 be expended from SAA's FY 2017 budget to support an in-person meeting on March 14-17, 2017, at the Lewis Walpole Library in Farmington, Connecticut, to prepare a draft revision of DACS Statement of Principles.

**UPDATE**

We are grateful to the Council for considering our previous request and for their clear and enthusiastic support for this endeavor. Our highest priority is to produce a complete draft of DACS principles by the end of our meeting. We have seen too many standards processes drag on, and we believe that the profession is ready for updated guidance and frameworks around description.

We believe that in order to accomplish this goal, we need to quickly leverage the work that was produced at the SAA Annual Meeting in Atlanta, we need to meet in person, and we need space and time to produce something excellent. We have brought together some of the best archivists working on description in the United States—most of us do not have time for rushed conference calls between our other job responsibilities. We believe that the strength of this meeting is the chance to have archivists' undivided attention, and for us all to benefit from sustained exposure to one another's ideas and energies.

Thanks to the generosity of the Beinecke and Lewis Walpole Libraries at Yale University, we have produced a plan that will ensure a positive, nurturing experience for all participants, which will in turn result in excellent work for the archival community at minimal cost to SAA.

**BACKGROUND**

The descriptive rules in DACS are based on a series of principles about the nature of archival holdings, the relationship between arrangement and description, the nature of archival description, and the creators of archival description. At the time that these principles were drafted, these principles were considered to be a set of generally accepted and foundational principles guiding archival description.

However, the principles that foreground DACS have not been revised since the first edition of DACS was released in 2004. DACS principles came out of a particular period of compromise born of work on the CUSTARD project, and had not been substantively amended from that group's work.<sup>1</sup> However, archival theory and practice have changed significantly since then. In light of recent discourse within the profession around diversity and inclusion, transparency of archival interventions, an international conceptual model for archives, and extensible processing for backlog management, the subcommittee thinks it prudent to discuss with the community the changing nature of both our theory and practice. The goal of this effort is to assess whether changes in archival theory and practice in the past twelve years are adequately reflected in the DACS principles.

Revising the principles in the next year will coincide with the International Council on Archives' (ICA) Expert Group on Archival Description (EGAD) putting forth Records in Context (RiC) that will tie together the four ICA standards. Indeed, DACS is the U.S. implementation of ISAD(G), and as the ICA standards evolve, so must DACS. TS-DACS work on revisiting the DACS principles will situate the particular U.S. instantiation of archival descriptive standards in conversation with this larger international perspective.

To evaluate the adequacy of the current DACS principles, TS-DACS gathered a group of experts representing diverse perspectives at SAA's 2016 Annual Meeting in Atlanta. Participants at this meeting came to resounding consensus that many of the principles do not speak to current thinking or practice in the field. As we discuss in more detail below, we concluded that the DACS principles do indeed need revision.

Building on the momentum generated at the Annual Meeting, TS-DACS proposes a four-day working meeting to be held in the spring of 2017 where leading experts in archival description, including members of TS-DACS, will gather again to build upon our conversations in Atlanta. We believe that four days, with prior preparation, is enough time to produce a full draft revision to the Statement of Principles that reflects evolutions in archival theory and practice. We will then share this draft widely within the archival community (in accordance with the normal DACS revision process) to provide an opportunity for all who use DACS to engage in the discussion about the proposed changes to the principles that guide our understanding of archival description.

## **DISCUSSION**

In June 2016, TS-DACS initiated a conversation with leading experts of archival description. Participants were asked to review one of eight principles in the DACS Statement of Principles addressing the following questions:

- a) How well does this principle reflect core archival values?
- b) Is this principle articulated clearly and concisely, without compromising any nuance it should contain?

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<sup>1</sup> Personal communication with Bill Landis, member of original DACS creation group.

- c) Does this principle reflect archival description as it is practiced (or as you feel it should be practiced)?

The responses were compiled in Google Drive and commented on by the committee as well as the experts group of participants prior to the SAA Annual Meeting.<sup>2</sup> In Atlanta, we held a half-day meeting where the experts and the committee engaged in a lively discussion concerning each of the principles and the aforementioned questions.

Each expert was given 10 minutes to present thoughts on their assigned principle, taking into consideration feedback generated in Google Drive. A short discussion followed. Overwhelming support was generated for a revision to a majority of the principles and in some cases a complete rewrite.<sup>3</sup> In addressing our three questions, it became apparent that the principles do not always reflect core archival values as they are today, are not clear, are not easy to teach, and (perhaps most damning) following these principles as written would not necessarily produce good and efficient archival outcomes.

The Statement of Principles was written in 2004, and they have not been revised since. Bill Landis, a member of the committee that wrote the Statement of Principles, provided historical context for the group. Understanding this context, it became apparent that in addition to revision, TS-DACS also wanted to prompt discussion on what may be missing from the principles. We encouraged committee members and invited guests to help us outline gaps in descriptive principles. These gaps fell into three main categories: transparency of archival interventions, consideration to the validity of our user's needs, and further guidance on describing creators, donors, and subjects of records.

While momentum has grown for a revision to the principles, the shape and direction of that revision has not yet fully formed. It is clear to us that more thought, dialogue, and work are needed. The ability to hold a face-to-face meeting about the DACS principles would provide participants the opportunity to step away from their day-to-day work and use dedicated time and space to have focused, in-depth discussions. Because we believe that these changes are needed soon, and because we do not desire to participate in a long, drawn-out process, the participants will also utilize the meeting to develop a complete draft of the revised DACS Statement of Principles. This will require dedicated, focused work, but we believe that TS-DACS and our set of invited participants are up for the challenge.

When asked to continue participation in the revision process, invited guest Mary Caldera described her desired outcome as “DACS principles that reflect the realities and ethical aspirations of today's archival practitioners and users.” TS-DACS could not agree more.

We expect to produce a draft revision of the Statement of Principles at the end of the four-day work meeting, revisions that do indeed speak to our practice as well as our ambitions. TS-DACS will lead a communication campaign that will aim to reach the widest possible audience of practicing archivists to engage community conversations about the revised principles. After

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<sup>2</sup> See text here: [https://drive.google.com/open?id=0B6OllzWqP\\_-nc3ZLLU13VnhTZEU](https://drive.google.com/open?id=0B6OllzWqP_-nc3ZLLU13VnhTZEU)

<sup>3</sup> See minutes of meeting here: <https://drive.google.com/open?id=1beVlojHKjkZ3UpFv6NvQqiH28a9PaaET7MihKDRbVls>

community input is considered and, as appropriate, incorporated into the draft, TS-DACS will send it to the Standards Committee for discussion and eventual approval by the Council.

### **DACS Principles Revision Participants**

The following individuals would be asked to participate in the revision meeting:

Maureen Callahan	Smith College	Co-Chair, TS-DACS
Adrien Hilton	Harvard University	Co-Chair, TS-DACS
Carrie Hintz	Emory University	Co-Chair, Standards
Elise Dunham	University of Illinois	Member, TS-DACS
Adriane Hanson	University of Georgia	Member, TS-DACS
Sue Luftschein	University of Southern California	Member, TS-DACS
Elena Perez-Lizano	State Archives of New Mexico	Member, TS-DACS
Cassie Schmitt	Orbis Cascade Alliance	Member, TS-DACS
Hillel Arnold	Rockefeller Archive Center	Invited guest
Mary Caldera	Yale University	Invited guest
Jillian Cuellar	University of California	Invited guest
Audra Eagle Yun	University of California	Invited guest
Gretchen Gueguen	Digital Public Library of America	Invited guest
Bill Landis	Yale University	Invited guest
Michelle Light	University of Nevada	Invited guest
Dennis Meissner	Minnesota Historical Society	Invited guest
Mario H. Ramirez	University of California	Invited guest
Dan Santamaria	Tufts University	Invited guest
Sandra Markham	Lewis Walpole Library	Host

### **Proposed Budget**

The Beinecke and Lewis Walpole Libraries at Yale have agreed to support this meeting by providing a meeting venue at the Lewis Walpole Library, covering all food expenses for participants, and hosting seven participants at Root House at the Lewis Walpole Library for no fee. We are deeply grateful for their generosity. In addition, a handful of participants have indicated that their employers are willing and able to support travel and lodging at the meeting.

With these defrayed expenses, the estimated cost for remaining participants' travel and lodging is \$11,007. This does not include the possibility of shared ground transportation or a possible negotiated lower rate for hotel accommodations.

A detailed budget is available here:

<https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/17vfKNLMNFgR0Ix-YOvcb-glirmeKRMoiihOsOEBTHAQ/edit?usp=sharing>

## **RECOMMENDATION:**

**THAT funding in the amount of \$11,007 be approved from SAA's FY 2017 budget to support a four-day in-person meeting for 17 attendees to revise the DACS Statement of Principles.**

**Support Statement:** The Statement of Principles in DACS have not been revised since 2004. Given the changes in evolving professional practice including shifts away from physical arrangement, changes in technology, new discourse around diversity and inclusion, and a call for increased transparency of archival intervention, the principles are due for a substantial review. These revisions will also take into account the International Council on Archives' emerging Records in Context (RiC) Conceptual Model for archival description to help align U.S. and international approaches to archival description. TS-DACS proposes to convene a group of experts in archival description for an in-person meeting to draft a revision of the principles and to foster a dialogue with the archives community regarding the proposed revisions.

### **Relation to SAA Strategic Plan:**

Revising the DACS Statement of Principles cuts across all four strategic goals outlined by SAA for 2014-2018, but the project is particularly aligned with the following:

**1.3 Provide leadership in ensuring the completeness, diversity, and accessibility of the historical record.** As part of the discussion on revising the principles, the committee and the expert's group considered areas where the principles were lacking. These gaps included: transparency of archival interventions in arrangement, description, and appraisal, considerations to the validity of our user needs, and further guidance on describing creators and donors. We wish to deploy the great body of archival thinking since the Statement of Principles were composed that addresses diversity, inclusion, and accessibility (or lack thereof) in the profession, in records, and in users. We believe that our description of archives (and the principles that govern that description) can be a mirror to ourselves as professionals. This revised set of principles will reflect our professional mission to collect, steward and serve the full diversity of human experiences.

**3.1. Identify the need for new standards, guidelines, and best practices and lead or participate in their development.** With the publication of More Product, Less Process in 2005, and the adoption of archival management systems and electronic record access systems, practice across the profession has changed dramatically since DACS was first composed.<sup>4</sup> A greater value has now been placed on providing programmatic access to all materials rather than detailed access to few materials. This change prioritizes the role of aggregation in archival description, which, as the experts group discussed, is imperfectly and confusingly described in DACS Principle 7. We believe that this is an area ripe for further examination, a place where DACS could guide the field rather than merely comment on it.

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<sup>4</sup> Meissner, Dennis, and Mark A. Greene. "More Application While Less Appreciation: The Adopters and Antagonists of MPLP." *Journal of Archival Organization* 8, no. 3-4 (July 1, 2010): 174-226. doi:10.1080/15332748.2010.554069.

Related, Records in Contexts (RiC) makes it clear that archival description can and should go beyond a hierarchical presentation in order to more meaningfully represent complex relationships between creators, records and the institutions that house them. A linear output much like we see with EAD will in the future be only one of many contexts in which archival collections are discovered and interacted with. The underlying foundation of the Statement of Principles in DACS implicitly, and at times explicitly, rests on a hierarchical model. It is important that the U.S. archival community keep apace with newer technologies that allow for myriad conceptions of our descriptions. TS-DACS can lead the archival community by taking on a principles revision.

**3.2. Foster and disseminate research in and about the field.** Through the documents and discussion generated at the Annual Meeting, we have made a contribution to archival theory. This will be condensed and consolidated in the revised principles. However, following the discussion in Atlanta, it was clear that the profession would benefit from access to this material, as it represents an exploration of current trends, teaching, learning, and thinking. We envision a possible special issue of an archival journal examining these shifting ideas. Alternatively, a white paper that included the extrapolated content from the work meeting would present to the larger community vital information about the field.

**Fiscal Impact:** TS-DACS requests \$11,007 for full funding of a four-day work meeting. The estimated staff time associated with handling logistics and reimbursements will be approximately 20 hours.